



Pulphead

John Jeremiah Sullivan

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In *Pulphead*, John Jeremiah Sullivan takes us on an exhilarating tour of our popular, unpopular, and at times completely forgotten culture. Simultaneously channeling the gonzo energy of Hunter S. Thompson and the wit and insight of Joan Didion, Sullivan shows us—with a laidback, erudite Southern charm that's all his own—how we really (no, really) live now.

In his native Kentucky, Sullivan introduces us to Constantine Rafinesque, a nineteenth-century polymath genius who concocted a dense, fantastical prehistory of the New World. Back in modern times, Sullivan takes us to the Ozarks for a Christian rock festival; to Florida to meet the alumni and straggling refugees of MTV's *Real World*, who've generated their own self-perpetuating economy of minor celebrity; and all across the South on the trail of the blues. He takes us to Indiana to investigate the formative years of Michael Jackson and Axl Rose and then to the Gulf Coast in the wake of Katrina—and back again as its residents confront the BP oil spill.

Gradually, a unifying narrative emerges, a story about this country that we've never heard told this way. It's like a fun-house hall-of-mirrors tour: Sullivan shows us who we are in ways we've never imagined to be true. Of course we don't know whether to laugh or cry when faced with this reflection—it's our inevitable sob-guffaws that attest to the power of Sullivan's work.

Pulphead Details

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From Reader Review Pulphead for online ebook

Gabe says

Wildly uneven. There are 14 essays in the book. By my count, there are five excellent essays (including one bonafide genius essay), three good essays, and six essays that did nothing for me, including one essay that, after I'd finished the book and was looking back over the table of contents, I couldn't for the life of me remember reading. That genius essay I mentioned is "Violence of the Lambs," which is principally about the increase in unexplainable animal attacks in recent years. Stingrays have started leaping into boats and stabbing people in their hearts. Chimps have figured out how to craft spears, sharpening the blades with their teeth and killing bush babies with them. Sullivan talks with eccentric professor Marc Livengood, who has been charting and recording these strange events. The essay's tone becomes increasingly scattershot and paranoid, and ultimately culminates in a way that turns everything on its head. It's the book's best moment, and is reason enough alone to read "Pulphead." The essays I found most engaging were the ones that made Sullivan himself stake a personal claim. "Peyton's Place" is about a TV show using his house as a filming location and how it affected his family. "Mr. Lytle: An Essay" is about a disaffected, young Sullivan moving in with an old man legendary in letters, and about how it shaped Sullivan as a writer when he hadn't yet found his way. And "Feet in Smoke" is the most moving piece in the collection; it's about Sullivan's brother's electrocution and resuscitation, and the one month that followed in which he became slowly more coherent as his brain pieced itself back together. The less successful essays here, though it's clear Sullivan is just as engaged with his subjects, are the ones that distance through topic. I'm not against reading about blues musicians or the last living member of the Wailers, it's just I have to be convinced that this is something worth reading about, because these are topics that I wouldn't actively seek out. Sullivan doesn't succeed in translating his interests for me in a number of these essays, and that's my biggest issue with his collection: he's great, even exceptional, at giving you an added appreciation for subjects you already find engaging, but he's not able to make the reader appreciate something they hadn't previously considered. You can write about "The Real World" for as long as you want, but unless you do something really, really different and special with it, I'm going to have a hard time keeping up with you. Still, I really enjoyed more than half of these essays, and the highs of those were more than enough for me to recommend "Pulphead."

Kinga says

There is this strange thing with the US and its culture. We all know all about them and they know not a thing about us. If two people from different countries or even continents meet up, the conversation often gyrates around American (usually pop) culture. It's the common ground. When I moved to America for a year when I was 18, I didn't suffer a severe cultural shock (although I was a little frightened by the size of hamburgers). I knew the TV shows those kids watched, the music they listened to, and the celebrities they admired.

This phenomenon is sometimes bad, especially because it is not reciprocal, but at least I could read Sullivan's collection of essays without having to google everything. If this was, for example, 'Pulphead: Dispatched from the Other Side of Poland', it would need extensive footnotes for anyone outside of Poland to be able to understand it. That, of course, would ruin the narrative.

And the narrative in 'Pulphead' is nothing short of amazing. It's not only my opinion, many reviewers agree, so much that they hope he will start writing literary fiction (which is understood to be a somehow more sophisticated form). To that Sullivan says:

"That genre snobbery conceals a deeper stupidity. If you look back to Defoe and that early-18th-century period when the genres as we know them were being extruded, you find it gets messy. The categories people

like to play with when doing that hierarchy of genres don't exist; they don't hold up to investigation, they're all feeding into each other and borrowing techniques from one another."

Here I suppose the cultural differences kick in for me. In Poland, it's the 'reportage' that seems to be the ultimate literary form (just think *Kapu?ci?ski*), taken most seriously. Sometimes you can even get the impression that fiction is considered a pastime suitable for schoolgirls only. There are literary journals which only deal with essays, interviews and poetry, as if fiction was not good enough.

I suppose I should start reviewing the actual book now, because I feel I'm getting side-tracked here. So what does Sullivan actually write about? To be honest – anything. He shares insightful personal stories, like the one about his brother, who after being electrocuted, spent two months in a sort of a bizarre daze. Or the beautiful story about a family trip to Disneyworld. At other times he goes on exploring some extremely niche subject distilling it to the point the average reader will actually give a damn, be it a story of deciphering obscure blues lyrics or exploring Native American cave paintings.

He likes to hang out with all these people that we only know as caricatures, like the Christian rock fans (rocking on for Jesus), the Tea Party members, or The Real World cast offs. I will come clean here and say I did have to google The Real World, as somehow for the past 30 years I have lived in a Real-world-free-world. Don't ask me how, I don't know myself – that thing is huge! It might be because each time anyone mentioned the Real World I assumed they were talking about the actual real world. It's also probably because I absolutely hate reality tv. And this is not me being snobbish, because, we all know well, I will happily admit to many questionable entertainment choices, it's just reality shows I can't stand. Reality TV, let's be honest, is just stupid people talking. And I know, as an aspiring novelist, I should probably pay more attention to them, they might just tell me something that smart people haven't noticed, but I can't bring myself to watch it. It's too tiring. But that, again, is beside the point.

Sullivan often goes back to Indiana, the state where he grew up, to investigate some little known facts from the lives of famous musicians who are also Hoosiers (that means someone from Indiana. I learnt a new word! But maybe it's offensive, I don't know. Better don't use it in public.), and that is Michael Jackson and Axl Rose. And let me tell you, the piece on Michael Jackson, was the best piece on Michael Jackson I've ever read and I've read many because when he died I was working in a boring job.

Recently, I decided I would accompany my reviews with cooking, because why not? Everybody likes a little bit of food porn, right? So for 'Pulphead' I decided to cook something typical of Indiana, as that state features so heavily in the book. I'm not going to pretend I hold American cuisine in a great esteem but I'm not dismissing it either. They must've come up with some good corn-based dishes in all those years. Apparently the most classic thing for Indiana is its Pork-tenderloin Sandwich. It's basically a pork schnitzel bigger than a human head, deep fried and stuck in a hamburger bun. So not exactly ground-breaking, but decent comfort food. As a Polish person I shouldn't have anything to say against pork schnitzel as it's our Sunday classic. I used this recipe (some REAL Hoosier said it was authentic) <http://www.foodnetwork.com/recipes/fo...>, although I didn't use Wondra instant flour (wtf is that anyway?). It's funny how so many American recipes list ingredients that need a trademark next to them. Just look at this baby!

I was defeated in the end and didn't finish it, but I put up a good fight! (That marinade actually truly kicks ass, I think buttermilk and garlic is the secret. Also I didn't deep fry it, deep frying scares me.)

* Please note, I'm reviewing here the UK version of Pulphead which has apparently been slightly amplified.

Alan says

one for the plane going over to the States. I thought I'd better read something American, and this has been on my to read list for two years and finally came in at the library.

One measure of a non-fiction book could be what it makes you go and do. After (or during) this one I was looking up Native American cave paintings in Tennessee, downloading Joe Higgs' *Life of Contradiction*, listening to Billie Jean and contemplating Disney's attempts at whitewashed utopia. The book is full of fascinating essays*, ranging from the writer's teenage 'internship' with Mr Lytle, the 92 year old survivor of the 30s Southern Agrarian literary movement which included Robert Penn Warren and Allen Tate (there was a homo-erotic element to it: Lytle says Tate propositioned him once, "*but I turned him down. I didn't like his smell... he had the stale scent of a man who didn't take any exercise*") to a beautiful and sympathetic essay on Michael Jackson. It was the perfect book to read while in America, written with style, skill, knowledge, generosity and enthusiasm. The essay on the cave paintings was breathtakingly good, you felt his awe as he entered the caves to see some that were 8,000 years old. Similarly his essay on old blues singers ('Unknown Bards') in which he proudly deciphers a word on an old recording (*I'd contributed a speck of knowledge, a little ant's mouthful of knowledge*) and delights in hearing how to unwarp a record (place between two pieces of glass in gentle sunlight). In another he smokes dope with Bunny Wailer, the last member of Bob Marley's group, and hallucinates: *Strange things were happening to Bunny's face as he spoke. Different races were passing through it, through the cast of his features – black, white, Asian, Indian, the whole transnational slosh that produced the West Indies*. He loves reality TV and follows a star Miz – *a guy who's given me so much joy over the years* - on his nightclub circuit. You (the reader) go with the flow as he signs breasts and dances (grinds) with fans. He is surprised at how much he enjoys a Christian rock festival (OK not so much the bands as a bunch of guys he stays with). The book even made me – momentarily – sympathise with the Tea Baggers** ('American Grotesque'), that's how good it was. However there were two niggles - one was the editor's note at the end of the piece on the increase in animals attacking humans ('The Violence of the Lambs'): *Big parts of this piece I made up. I didn't want to say that, but the editors are making me, because of certain scandals.. I made up Marc Livengood* (a major character in the essay). *I made up the trip to Nairobi*. Then there was the bit where Bunny Wailer distances himself from the author. Both made me wonder about overall veracity...

*I read all except the one on Axl Rose

**.. not for long. I was in Washington and saw a march by the 'American Spring' go by complaining about Obama's healthcare programme. There were about 30 of them, doing the military style chanting, as we sat in the Hirshhorn Sculpture garden. Earlier I had been approached by several beggars in the Chinatown area as I waited for my daughter, three of them said they couldn't afford their medications. One, a former policeman, showed me the scars from his surgeries for the bone disease he had. Another, clearly mentally ill, cried and grasped my daughter's arm and said she wanted to be normal: again she didn't have the 8 dollars needed for her medication. OK, they might be scamming me, an obvious tourist. But just before I came to America I watched 'Breaking Bad' – a teacher can't afford his healthcare and turns to drug production to finance it, and then later a policeman is in the same situation. A teacher and a policeman! Yes, it's fiction, but surely the point is made – only the (comparatively) rich can afford specialist healthcare. Thank God for the NHS.

Todd says

I wanted to give this guy five stars, but the two stories in the middle were snoozers and a few of the endings were rushed and, accordingly, awful. Of the latter, the ending to the essay about Axl Rose—such a good essay—was so disappointingly bad that I almost didn't like the essay.

What I like most about this guy is that he isn't a sarcastic, cynical prick. After having just read a few stories by George Saunders, I appreciate this fact and Sullivan even more.

Three things:

(From the first essay, about Creation) "...I've been to a lot of huge public events in this country during the past five years, writing about sports or whatever, and one thing they all had in common was this weird implicit enmity that American males, in particular, seem to carry around with them much of the time. Call it a laughable generalization, fine, but spend enough late afternoons in stadium concourses, you feel it, something darker than machismo. Something a little wounded, and a little sneering, and just plain ready for bad things to happen" (16-17).

In Manhattan and Brooklyn, I felt this at nearly every bar. In Michigan, I can sometimes feel it at the supermarkets. It's bad and it's spreading, and Sullivan was right on the money about it being a wounded, dark feeling.

(From the essay "Lytle: An Essay") "Confusion to the enemy" (63).

This has nothing to do with Sullivan because it was Lytle's toast, but what a perfect toast it is.

(From "The Final Comeback of Axl Rose") "What Axl does is lovely, I'm sorry. If I could, I would be doing that as I walk to the store" (132).

Yes!

A great writer; fun to read; makes the bizarre, mundane, and already-written-about into fresh and exciting stories.

Gus Sanchez says

When an essay on a Christian Rock festival starts off a bit slowly, then suddenly sneaks up on you, you know you've got a skilled essayist grabbing your attention. The first few essays from John Jeremiah Sullivan's collection of essays, *Pulphead*, do exactly that: keep your attention focused on his narrative shifts and vivid descriptions, all the while aware that the subject matter may or may not be of interest

Halfway through, however, he lost me. The last 3 essays were no longer exercises in narrative strength, but instead a collection of thoughts and ideas that lacked cohesion. And it's not as if the subject matter was of no interest; far from it, actually. Sullivan seems to go on and on and on, without providing the reader a much-needed payoff. Essays that lack compactness should reward the reader, and they never seem to.

A shame, really. I was greatly looking forward to reading this collection. Still, Sullivan's a skilled essayist, but in this case, his essays are often overblown with way too many unfocused ideas, and a narrative pretension that suggests his literary ambitions are getting in the way of his true talents.

Lealdo says

Deixando devidamente registrada a leitura desse livro, que aconteceu em 2014. Quase todos esses ensaios sobre formas de cultura - "alta", "baixa", música (Axl Rose, Michael Jackson, um festival de rock cristão),

literatura (só um, e trata-se na verdade da vida de um escritor sulista americano específico), TV, arte rupestre americana - são fantásticos, com o melhor de todos talvez sendo o sobre reality shows, ou o sobre MJ. Ao menos são os que, dois anos depois, mais me vêm e vêm à mente.

Uma das maiores qualidades aqui é que, apesar de JJ Sullivan obviamente ter um lastro cultural vasto, toda a escrita é repleta de humanidade e humildade. Nenhuma referência é trazida gratuitamente, e o autor nunca se põe como superior, seja com quem interage (os cristãos roqueiros que não reconhecem mas elogiam uma canção de Neil Young - "beautiful song, dude") ou com nós leitores. Talvez utilizar a sua inteligência e repertório para explorar a cultura, em toda variedade, como essência humana, ao invés de apenas fazê-la de instrumento de autoelevação, seja a razão pela qual John é um autor, que viaja, conversa, ouve, lê e escreve, e não mais um acadêmico.

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Li na versão em português que saiu pela Cia das Letras, e a tradução me desceu quadrada, em especial quando se quis adaptar alguns coloquialismos do autor. Noutra ocasião, tive a chance de ler um ensaio incrível dele no original, não presente aqui, que é uma das melhores obras de não-ficção que tive o prazer de devorar, numa sentada de fim-de-semana, na vida (<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/20...>). A prosa dele, nesse caso, seja culta ou oral, desceu como vinho seco e recheou o estômago.

Portanto, projeto: reler esse livro em inglês para dar as devidas cinco estrelas.

(ah, o relato breve sobre salvar uma viagem à Disney procurando formas de fumar maconha escondido nos parques é tão bom quanto parece)

J. says

John Jeremiah Sullivan's essays have featured in the Paris Review, New York Times and G.Q. This is an eclectic mix of light and deep pieces. Sullivan speaks to the tenuousness of pop culture. He wants to hold onto things that little bit longer. For example his piece on the writer Mr. Lytle is an elegy and an attempt to hold him in the world a little bit longer.

He doesn't like journalists who give a clear judgement, he says he 'likes seeking out places of ambiguity and crawling around in them'. Sullivan appreciates that his version of a subject is one among many. Pulphead includes a lot of musical pieces. His pieces are part of a project of redemption, trying to give resonance to musicians who may have slipped out of the public conscience a little. He also attempts to offer a different perspective on someone who has been interviewed multiple times i.e. Bunny Wailer, Michael Jackson, Axl Rose, John Fahey.

Erudite pieces are placed with idiomatic pieces, reality television beside a piece on Rafinesque, an early 19th Century French naturalist and anthropologist.

On his writing method he told the guardian "The initial research will be very indiscriminate," he says. "I do a lot of reading, buy a stack of books and read and digest them and then I start doing phone interviews and archival research and then the travelling. All these things feeds into a mill and it's all part of a globular manuscript and then I start trying to listen to how the material is talking to itself – a stray detail in a memoir may connect to something I saw while reporting: little crystals are formed."

His work is of a good standard, it's thoroughly researched and warmly told. He's a strong narrator and very

empathetic. My favourite essays were the ones where he put a lot of himself into the essay but I can appreciate that for the most part he is trying to place himself so that he can maintain skepticism and put the subject firmly in the centre. I thought 'Peyton's place' about the taking over of his family house by a television crew, or the piece about his brother's electrocution or his apprenticeship with Mr. Lytle spoke to me more because he was personally involved. Sometimes it's better if the writer stays out of the piece Sullivan is an essayist not a columnist. For example in the essay about the mtv series 'real world' he can keep 'the Miz' at the centre but also laugh at himself and his love of reality tv and at the same time capture the exuberance of youth.

He is planning to write about Cuba, Rio and Ireland. Indeed he mentioned 'Irishness' in passing a few times. I'm giving this a mediocre mark, although I found this an interesting mixed bag some subjects didn't grab me and I put this book down half way through and took it up again a few months later. Still I would be interested in anything else he produces.

Benoit Lelièvre says

The good about PULPHEAD is really great and the bad about it is not exactly bad either. It never is boring, stupid or offensive. It's just that it starts with such a bang and awed me with the profound and moving vision John Jeremiah Sullivan has of America, so when the collection abruptly stops doing that a little bit past halfway through and start talking about 19th century botanists and cave paintings, I've gradually lost interest. Not that these subjects are not interesting, but they don't have an anchoring point for the contemporary reader that is not already interested in these subjects. It doesn't connect the dots anymore like Sullivan brilliantly does in the first half.

I believe I know why that is. There was probably not enough material for someone's taste and extra essays that didn't belong to the project were attached. PULPHEAD is both fantastic and frustrating for that reason, but it sure is worth a read.

Hank Stuever says

No need to add much of a review, since Goodreaders have already done such a fine job of articulating the same thoughts I had while reading "Pulphead": There IS an uneven-ness here. There IS a desire to reach for a red pen and help John Jeremiah's prose find a quicker way to get at what John Jeremiah is trying to say. (I wonder: Does he really go by John Jeremiah? Do friends leave phone messages for "John Jeremiah"? Do baristas call out "John Jeremiah" when his coffee is ready?) And, most notably, there is a brilliance here, evident in at least one section or passage in every essay in this book (and his essays elsewhere). It loops and loops and loops, one digression after another, circling and circling, looking for a clear patch on which to land. He's not the first nonfiction essayist to come at things this way, not the last, but certainly doing it much, much better than most. I wish I could enjoy his work as much as others have. It certainly gives readers (and writers) plenty to think about.

Jamie says

This is really as good as everybody says. Really, really.

Oriana says

Spied twice in one week on CoverSpy, called a badass by an FSG staffer, and listed on Flavorpill's 25 Greatest Essay Collections of All Time. Why haven't I read this already??

Well, because I forgot all about it. I wrote the above in 2012, when the book came out, and since I didn't rush out to buy it right away, it vanished entirely from my brain. So much so that when I was at a friend's house scanning her shelves for something to read on a flight and she suggested this one, I said, "What, isn't that a memoir about a soldier at war??"

"No you dope," she said gently. "That's *Jarhead*."

I mean DUH.

Anyway! I am certainly very late to the party in saying that John Jeremiah is a stellar writer, but oh la he surely is — sharp and piercing and incisive and shivery, whether his sights are sets on an obscure-to-the-point-of-veritable-nonexistence blues caterwauler, his older brother's near-death experience, or the history of a Native American death cult as told through cave drawings.

And yet this book, not even 10 years old, already feels like a sweet lovely relic of a more innocent but less enlightened time, when it was a given that everyone used AOL, when the word "trannie" was tossed about willy-nilly, when bitter old closeted white Southern literary titans took in rugged young white Southern literary mentees to groom and possibly prey upon sexually, when a writer could spend weeks or months and a very healthy travel stipend on just one longform magazine article that probably wouldn't even be the cover story.

I wonder what John Jeremiah is writing now, and for whom, and whether he is still talking so casually about being groped by his old gay mentor "like a chambermaid," with all the sexism and cultural blindness and obliviousness to power that a metaphor like that suggests. I hope he's a little more enlightened now, has been able to adjust with the times, because he's a crushingly stunning tale-teller. He can describe a YouTube clip of Michael Jackson or a live performance by Axl Rose so thoroughly and with such attendant emotional depth that you wouldn't dream of hunting it down to watch because you've pretty much already seen it. He explains a geological plateau and a sharecropper's dancehall and the streets of Trench Town with such precision that you'd never think to Google, because you already know it all, basically as if you'd experienced it yourself.

I loved this so much, is what I'm saying. This is a great moment for essays and these essays are great for really any moment. Now to find and figure out how to (gently) stalk John Jeremiah so I can keep reading whatever bursts forth next from his splendid imagination.

David says

This winter I've been reading a lot of nonfiction collections, hitting a lot of "big names" along the way - Updike, Hitchens, Schama, Didion. John Jeremiah Sullivan was someone I had never heard of until I stumbled across this collection in the bookstore, but I'm happy to report that his writing has an idiosyncratic charm that puts him right up there with the big guys.

As with any collection of essays, there are a few duds in this collection. Sullivan's pieces on Axl Rose and on Michael Jackson seemed meandering, a little self-indulgent, with no obvious point. But these are the exceptions. They are more than offset by the essays "Upon This Rock", "Lahwineski: Career of an Eccentric Naturalist", "Mr Lytle", in each of which Sullivan takes a topic about which I had no prior knowledge or interest and writes about it in a way that is spellbinding. Besides a fluid, unassuming writing style, Sullivan's gift is to write about obscure topics in a way that engages the reader's interest and sympathy.

Reading the jacket cover for "Pulphead", I see comparisons to the essays of David Foster Wallace. This seems partially correct to me -- Sullivan has the same ability to take the most unlikely subject and make it fascinating to the reader, and like DFW, he writes with great empathy and without condescension. He does not, however, display the self-consciousness that plagued DFW, nor does his writing suffer from the kind of stylistic tic that can result when an author worries too much about the impression he may be making. He does not match Foster Wallace's brilliance, but he is definitely smart and compassionate enough to merit your attention.

John Jeremiah Sullivan is an author worth looking out for. This is an excellent collection.

Tuck says

nice new voice of essays dealing mostly with the weirdness of low class usa. christian rock festival ; big brother's near death experience ; author apprenticing himself to andrew lytle (sewanee review) ; driving around after katrina ; 'real life/road rules" aftermarket business ; tea party marches, and on and on. things to like about jjs: smart, includes interesting details in his narrative (rafinesque became really fat after getting a job at transylvania university) ; looks in to interesting phenomenon and what "real people" are doing (doing long interviews, ultimately complete failures, with axl rose's childhood running buddy), went to the basque country, is a liberal, of sorts. things (i didn't like anyway) not to like about jjs: sometimes TOO wordy and seems to just be showing off (one tree hill star hilliare (sp?) we are told is nice, we are told this lots and lots of times, but she didn;t seem that nice, he takes sides, at times as a conservative, at times as a liberal, just to create tension in story when really the story has enough tension already without that yoyo affect, he gave up on the census worker autolynching story and just left it drop that cops said the guy ducked taped himself naked to a tree and wrote FED on his chest and then stuck a gag in his mouth and suffocated. end dot. really? end dot? anyway, exciting to read a new, good essayist.

Elaine says

Let's get one thing out of the way. John Jeremiah Sullivan can write. Really well. About almost anything. So, already, that makes this compilation of long form essays worth exploring. But then there's the way that (for someone of our generation), he captures the zeitgeist of our youth so well, especially the guilty pleasures. There are a lot of moments where I said "wow! I was at that Axl Rose show at Hammerstein Ballroom that night he made his come back!" "wow, I loved The Real World, and Mike Miz and Cheryl and The Challenge" (and also, wow! we all loved Michael Jackson, even when we didn't). So, yes, he's a good pop culture journalist -- probably among the best writing today.

But, unlike many Goodreads reviewers, those were not the essays that captivated me the most. I was most fascinated by the essays that featured Sullivan the Southern boy, very localized in a part of the mid-Southeast, and very focused on Southern history and culture that is always already -- JUST - beyond our grasp. This deep sense of place, history, and the ephemerality of reality, of knowledge, is on its best display

in two seemingly paired masterworks (and I know I'm in the minority here), Unnamed Caves and Unknown Bards. Unknown Caves introduces us (me, at least) to an entire world of cave art in the Southeastern US ranging in age from 8,000 (no typos) to 800 years old, in other words, pre-Columbian elaborate artifacts of an intensely intricate and incredibly ancient succession of cultures that will always be pretty mysterious because they had no written language. And then he introduces you to the rednecks who loot these sites, continuing what has been going on since the Spanish, so that some guy in the backwoods has all these incredibly unique artifacts of a culture you've never even heard of. Seriously, you know this s*it happened in Greece, and China, and Mexico, but it's happening in your own backyard. History happened here, and we aren't protecting it. This is one of those essays that has you hanging on every word, wanting to learn more – everything – about the world he's exposing you to, about the knowledge that you are only glimpsing through his eyes.

The same for Unknown Bards, about the obscure early roots of blues, about the attempts to understand, to follow, to preserve some 100 year old recordings that glimpse at a culture almost as impossible to reach as the Woodlands cave artists of the Unknown Cave. So too, Mr. Lytle, where Sullivan serves a very particular internship at the feet of a 92 year old Southern writer who knew Penn Warren and had one foot in the Confederacy.

In other words, for me, Sullivan is at his best where he's getting very granular about something I had no idea I wanted to know about. (I even loved the essay about the barmy genius French-Sicilian polymath naturalist of the 19th century, which no one else on GR seemed to like). Partly, that's because, as with pop culture, he shares some of my obsessions: the ephemerality and relativity of time and history. He's very keen on what we can never know, and how closely we missed knowing it. It's a very compelling perspective, and provokes a lot of thought, especially in this age where Google and Wikipedia can delude you into thinking that everything is known or knowable. Sullivan will remind you that, even though we might only be a handful of generations from the Civil War on the one hand, on the other, we will never know what a blues singer a scant century ago – of whom perhaps a single copy of her song survives – meant by one slurred word.

At one point, in one of his many meditations on time, Sullivan notes that you can be certain that there are a few big bloopers in currency right now, ideas that in a few hundred years will seem obviously, demonstrably, scientifically wrong – and that we can have no idea what those are. It's the way he looks at things, coupled with a thirst for knowledge, and I love it. Love it.

So why not a 5? Because there are a few duds in here, and a few off moments. I found American Grotesque, where he tries to get in the heads of the Tea Party, flat, and there were other off moments as well. But this was awfully close to a 5.

Jake Goretzki says

It's always a good sign when you're reading a piece of non-fiction to find yourself adding titles that the writer mentions to your Amazon wish-list. Or when you realise that there's a whole subject area that you could just do with reading around more in general (in my case, Disney and – bizarrely – the Blues).

This is a rich, thoughtful immersion in a choice spread of subjects including pop culture, history, politics, environment and music. Oh, and one sort of (very promising) semi-SF riff. I'm not sure how closely they address 'the other side of America' of the title (bar the excellent chapters on Christian rock, the 9/12 movement and Disney), but they're still very good. Think of them as smart documentaries.

It's gonzo, of course, but it's not yawnsome stoner or contemptuous – it's actually very generous to the subjects and intellectually curious. Neither is it redneck-neo-con freak show erotica for Guardian readers. It delivers its verdicts very deftly too (as an example, Disney is awful (obviously), but it's really damned by the fact that one of the kids in the writer's brood finds hiding under ponchos in a rainstorm the best ride).

The writing is also nicely relaxed and unaffected, best summed up by this refreshing line: "If I were to try to convey to you how loudly he shrieked this, you'd think I was playing wordy games". Oh, were more writers to do that.

It's also funny in plenty of places, in a way that blurb will no doubt soon enough mislabel as 'outrageously funny' but is actually plain high quality, dry wit: describing the inability to get the camp appeal of teen soaps as being like not being able to hear high pitches after a certain age; reporting the (white) ethnic make up of a 9/12 crowd as 'approximately 100%'...and so on.

Very enjoyable.

Drew says

Non-fiction essays. Excellent writer. Humorous--sometimes I laughed out load. Contains life wisdom. The author is a person I would like to know. He has a wide range of interests, especially music and performers. I read some of the essays aloud to Elizabeth. I'll continue to read his work. Thank you, Brandon, for recommending this book.

M. Sarki says

<http://msarki.tumblr.com/post/1449817...>

This morning on the *CBS Morning Show* Charlie Rose was reporting on an exotic animal compound in Oklahoma City and how dangerous to humans it could be since it is situated in the heart of the country's Tornado Alley. There are over one hundred lions and tigers fenced in together in this so-called largest rescue reserve in the nation. The compound's owner expressed his displeasure in the government's possible cracking down and limiting of these types of operations, and he threatened another Waco of unprecedented proportion if he is restricted in any way. Given that just yesterday I had read the second-to-last essay titled *Violence of the Lambs* in this John Jeremiah Sullivan book, *Pulphead*, I was left with a confused feeling over which animal to be most afraid of. And I do include humans in my category of animals. Even though Sullivan admits to having "made up" the people quoted in this essay, his examples of animal attacks on humans are accurately documented. Add to this the video I was directed to watch today on Yahoo.com where a hooked 40 lb. barracuda aggressively jumped into these fishermen's boat off the coastline of St. Augustine, Florida and almost did great bodily harm to the two men in it. So now I am thinking that maybe Sullivan just might be on to something. The bottom line message in the *Lamb* essay is for everybody who hasn't visited lately with a loved-one, relative, or friend should get right to it posthaste, or at least within the year, as it is possible that the new Armageddon will be "on" and going strong. The people behind this idea say this will be a war between humans and all others not like them. That means your little dog Benji could be choosing to partner up with the wolves over you and your tasty jerky biscuits. Of course, all this may or may not be true, just like global warming, but there have been violent attacks and icebergs melting at discouraging levels lately in degrees not ever seen or recorded ever before.

As I was reading this *Violence of the Lambs* essay I was anxiously commenting to my wife the many "facts" and concerns these "made up" people were having. I did not know at the time that these people were made up and I learned at the end of the essay that disclaimers had been made. Nonetheless the essay gave me cause to consider these speculated outcomes. My own dog, a loving ten-month old English Retriever pup tries repeatedly to lick me to death so I attempted to imagine young Robert Earl ultimately turning on me. I suppose if I for recreation still ingested LSD I could get somewhat close to these wild ideas with my thinking and believing, but so far it just doesn't make sense that R.E. would turn on me or his mother, my wife. But the essay was quite interesting, as the majority of the other essays in the book proved to be captivating as well.

It is quite hard for me to understand any outside negativity about this book as a whole. The *Axl Rose* essay and the one about that fellow *Miz* and *The Real World* were of no interest whatsoever to me, but not enough to discount the entire book. I merely skipped over them. I would think my disinterest in these two similarly juvenile subjects has something to do with my advanced age though if Sullivan really were as good as David Foster Wallace then he could have won me over anyhow. But still, not bad reading here. I made my way through the first nine of the total of fourteen essays in the book until I got sidetracked by Sullivan's masterpiece memoir *Blood Horses: Notes of a Sportswriter's Son*.

I picked up a copy of this book from my local library purely based on the strength of his *Pulphead* essays figuring I could take a peak and then send it right back if it was a bore or poorly written. It was not. I started reading it and discovered I could not stop. Three days later I was writing about the memoir and would soon be back to reading the remaining five essays in *Pulphead*. For sake of clarity allow me a brief remark or two over each collected piece in Sullivan's latest book.

1. *Upon this Rock*: I did not enjoy this essay all that much but I labored through it waiting for the proverbial foot to drop about Sullivan's own religious beliefs. Though I have had my own run-ins with the Lord and his servants, I exercise extreme caution when dealing with even ex-"born again" Christians. Portions of the essay were interesting but I could have done without it. Much of it hits too close to the bone, especially when it rubs me the wrong way about our land of the free. There are a lot of kooks following and worshiping Jesus these days. This writing assignment of Sullivan's covers an Evangelical Music Festival in Pennsylvania called *The Creation Festival*. Not exactly a supposedly fun thing I will never do again. Many critics have named this essay their favorite, but not I.

2. *Feet in Smoke*: This is a short essay relating a story about his older brother Elsworth's near death from electrocution via a microphone. If not my favorite essay in the book, it has to be close.

3. *Mr. Lytle: An Essay*: Sullivan attended The University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee and Sullivan inhabited a room in the basement of the home of the university's aging icon, the writer Andrew Lytle. I found this essay to be the very best, and the most enlightened and interesting of all of them. There is plenty of dialogue and Sullivan does a great job of telling his tale.

4. *At a Shelter (After Katrina)*: I could take or leave this one. I can't even think of anything worthwhile to say about it.

5. *Getting Down to What is Really Real*: This is the *Miz* essay, *The Real World*. Nothing of note at all for me here and I mostly skimmed the pages looking for something that might grab my attention. Keep in mind I am an addict, therefore I am inherently always looking feverishly for something to read that is worthy of my time. I always want the writer to succeed in making me happy. This one failed miserably.

6. *Michael*: I was hoping for an essay on Michael Jackson that would make my teacher and friend Gordon Lish excited about reading it. Lish has always wanted Don DeLillo to write a biography on Michael Jackson and when I saw this I was thinking perhaps he wouldn't need to. But I found the piece a bore and could not

even finish it.

7. *The Final Comeback of Axl Rose*: Again, I have absolutely no interest in Axl Rose. I do think it is somewhat possible that David Foster Wallace could have won me over and made me read it if he himself had written it. Sullivan did not do this for me.

8. *American Grotesque*: This was a pretty good essay on the 9/12 Tea Party protest march and the suicide of Bill Sparkman. Sullivan made me feel deeply for Sparkman's son and it is too bad how things worked out for him. I already hate the Tea Party, so I was indifferent to all that silly and outrageously pathetic stuff in total, but the census taker tramping around the hollers of Kentucky kept my attention honorably.

9. *LA'HWINE'SKI: Career of an Eccentric Naturalist*: Refined made an interesting subject for this essay. Sullivan shows his own knack for research and digging up remnants enough to make an essay readable and extremely worthwhile, if not important.

10. *Unnamed Caves*: This is a very good essay dealing with the long history of our American Indian in Tennessee. Sullivan goes subterranean along with other professional spelunkers and visits with grave robbers still stealing what little remains to be found of the ancient Mound Builders. The reported cave drawings of birds, spears, stick figures, and human heads give us a fresh new history many of us have never known of.

11. *Unknown Bards*: Though I knew next to nothing of these people introduced by Sullivan I found the essay interesting. After reading a few weeks ago Bob Dylan's *Chronicles Vol. 1* it is surprising and refreshing to discover an entirely other group of blues pioneers and enthusiasts Dylan never mentioned in his book.

12. *The Last Wailer*: The essay was an attempt to find and interview Bunny Wailer, the last surviving member of Bob Marley's band The Wailers on the island of Jamaica. Having recently completed my reading of the Johnny Cash book *Cash: An Autobiography* I was struck with how dangerous it really was for Johnny and his family to live in Jamaica around all these violent and crazy nuts. Cash was lucky he was only robbed and that the intruder's gun pressed to young John Carter's skull never went off. If this were a travel promotional advertisement I assure you, without a doubt, this island I have crossed off my "things to do" list.

13. *Violence of the Lambs*: My thought while reading this severely interesting piece was why did he wait for position thirteen to lay it on us? Very well-written and fascinating, if not frightening essay about things that may be true, and maybe might happen.

14. *Peyton's Place*: I was hoping for more tantalizing fun, but I feel Sullivan could have used his time better than spending it to both live here in that Hollywood house and eventually write this essay. Why I read it was simply because of some of the brilliance I discovered along the way in getting to this point in the book. But I should have quit reading after the last essay with the human-killing chimpanzees.

It pains me to say that John Jeremiah Sullivan is no David Foster Wallace. When I say this it makes me feel as if I am Ronald Reagan in his presidential debate with Walter Mondale, and that particular psychological transference certainly enters me a little creepily. But Sullivan's long non-fiction work titled *Blood Horses: Notes of a Sportswriter's Son* is every bit as good, or even better, than any non-fiction piece Wallace has ever written. It would be desirable to have a non-fiction piece by Wallace the length that *Blood Horses* came in at, but we are left, gratefully, with the many short and brilliant pieces Wallace did leave us. John Jeremiah Sullivan could serve us best by returning to the long form or else inserting more of himself into the subjects of his shorter pieces. But this book was certainly worth reading and I will be on the look-out for more bright essays from this young and promising writer.

Kevin says

Reading these stories brought to mind the image of Chuck Klosterman kidnapped, stuck in a hotel room, pumped full of Ambien, and forced to write less about music pop culture. That's not as much of a criticism as it sounds, I suppose, because Klosterman is frequently eager to the point of breathlessness in his essays and I find myself wishing he'd slow down and take his time. Well, I mean I used to think that until I got my hands on this book that approximates the results of said experiment and found myself frequently bored.

I can't tell you what about Sullivan's prose didn't click with me. All the words are in the right order and used correctly, and the majority of the subjects are interesting, and yet somehow the final output is bland. Often I couldn't tell if he was putting me on or not and in trying to figure out what was the truth and what was fiction I found I wasn't sufficiently engaged to care either way so I let it drift. There were two or three articles I ended up skimming after the halfway point and in looking at the table of contents I can't even remember which ones those were.

Now as I sit here attempting to write what passes for a review I'm left interested in figuring out why nothing resonated, but it's the same problem I sometimes have when cooking: I can tell something spice is missing but I can't tell you what it is that it needs. Detecting the absence is not the same as knowing what to do about it. More cussing, maybe? A bit more of an angry streak? Some fire, some hot sauce, something. Check it:

"When I woke up at dawn he was nibbling my ear and his right hand was on my genitals. I sprang out of bed and began to hop around the room like I'd burned my finger, sputtering foul language."

No spice, nothing.

To clarify, I'm not asking Sullivan to be mad at the guy for being gay and having desires; he goes on at length to say that he's not. Regardless of the gender or sexual identity of the perpetrator, Sullivan woke up to unwelcome molestation and that's how he delivers the anecdote to us? It's two lines that should have my adrenaline up and instead I'm falling asleep.

I don't know. Maybe I've become a True American and I can't appreciate anything that's delivered without 300mg of sodium and a slap to the back of the head. Maybe I just want to feel like Sullivan really reacts to anything around him (his brother being electrocuted to death, seeing with his own eyes secret Native American cave art from hundreds of years ago, his home being used as a television set) instead of sleeping his way through it all, or at least through the retelling.

Mike Puma says

John Jeremiah Sullivan is a free-lance writer whose work has appeared in *GQ*, *The Paris Review* and *Harper's Magazine*. *Pulphead* gathers a diverse assortment of essays on various topics—each told with a generous consideration of the personalities involved, nothing harsh or mean-spirited. Sullivan has gentle, easy-going flow as if listening to a friend. Good stuff. Entries preceded by a √ might be of interest to those musically inclined or with an interest in music.

√ **Upon this Rock**—A fond recollection of an apostate (Boy Howdy! I can relate) assigned to covering and

writing about a christian rock festival. Generous, non-aggressive, critical, nostalgic, superb. No harsh Hitchens, Dawson, or Harris here. An excellent consideration of how these people encapsulate themselves in what Bill Maher refers to as 'life in a bubble.'

Feet in Smoke— An account of the author's brother's near-death, post-death, and gradual return-to-life experience; told with humor and tremendous love—very moving in a non-maudlin sort of way, which is not to say, you're not a dick if you don't tear up a little.

Mr. Lytle: An Essay— Andrew Lytle was a friend and literary peer of Robert Penn Warren and Allen Tate; as editor of *Sewanee Review*, he promoted the works of Flannery O'Connor, Cormac McCarthy, Elizabeth Bishop, et al. This essay chronicles a year in the author's life spent attending to the needs and whims of the celebrated "last confederate" told with great compassion, forgiveness, and respect. Bravo!

At a Shelter (After Katrina)—First-hand accounts of acts of ingenuity and fellowship precede a premonition of the end of civilization.

Getting Down to What Is Really Real—The author describes a night out with former *Real World* personalities in their Real Life perpetuations of Reality TV fame where millions of other Real people wondered if the show was Really Real or Really scripted. Real people. Really.

√ **Michael**—No matter what you think or thought of Michael Jackson, this brief 'essay' will likely lead one to a more generous interpretation of the guy's life and work. Generous (I keep using that word), thoughtful, and well-worth the short time it takes to read.

√ **The Final Comeback of Axl Rose**—Regardless of what you think of Axl Rose, or even *if* you think of AR, this brief essay chronicling the author's time spent researching the singer, getting to know his friends, watching concerts from the sides of the stage, will likely leave you thinking a little more favorably of the Indiana boy the author feels akin to. Personally, I still have a little trouble seeing what was and now is and thinking AR has become some bizarre mash-up (physically) of Mickey Rourke and Bo Derek.

American Grotesque—After firmly establishing the First American Revolution as that which actually occurred in Bermuda among the passengers of the shipwrecked *Sea Venture* over socialism, you know the one immortalized by Shakespeare in *The Tempest*, the author goes on to describe attendance at a Tea Bagger 9/12 rally, the Right-leaning perspectives of his insurance industry dependent family, and a death in Eastern Kentucky which, while questionable, was ruled a suicide by local authorities. Oh, and he situates the health care debate within the perspective of at least one of the founding fathers, Benjamin Franklin, who enabled the building of Philadelphia Hospital, in part, by tricking the assembly into matching funds for its construction. Good stuff, BF.

La?hwi?ne?ski: Career of an Eccentric Naturalist—Biographical essay on the life of Constantine Samuel Rafinesque, a French German naturalist, philosopher, geologist, poet, historian, and loon. The author's family once boarded Rafinesque, and he presents his American experience with humor and care. Rafinesque got pissy when Jefferson didn't include him in the Lewis & Clark expedition, went back to Europe, and missed an opportunity to participate in the Red River expedition. On his return, he spent years in the wild befriending Audobon and leaving his own largely-overlooked mark on American natural history.

Unnamed Caves—The author describes his adventures in the named and unnamed caves of Kentucky and Tennessee, the archeologists who informed his expeditions, and the looters of artifacts from the caves, some better motivated than others, who've secreted away amazing parts of American pre-history.

√ **Unknown Bards**—Describes the author's experience researching Country Blues performers, lyrics, and recordings while introducing a bevy of blues artists (they can't be called anything else) predating Robert

Johnson even *fin de siècle* greats largely forgotten by history. An interesting assortment of characters. Bravo!

√ **Last Wailer**—(The author recommends listening to this while reading the essay; so do I) During a trip to Jamaica, the author has several interviews with Bunny Wailer, the last of the Wailers, in which he learns about Bob Marley's early life, Jamaican political history and garrisonism, Rastafarianism, pisses Bunny off, and cops what must have been one hell of a buzz with his driver.

Violence of the Lambs—A chilling consideration the increased number of animal attacks, the increased number of formerly non-violent animals attacking, animals using weapons against humans, increased rate of genetic change in short periods of time, and phenotypic plasticity. This one will give you pause.

Peyton's Place—Presents the author's experience of living in a 'celebrity house'—its brief appearance in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* and its frequent appearance as the home of Peyton Sawyer in *One Tree Hill*.

The funny thing about this collection, or a funny thing about this collection, is that, once finished, readers get a sense of knowing the author and knowing him fairly well—like a fictional character in a novel you've really liked, only in this case, knowing the guy's out there doing what he does and doing it very well.

Superstine says

Syns denne kunne vært dobbel så lang, eller kanskje evigvarende. Eventuelt kunne forfatteren flyttet inn i boden min og skrevet essays bare til meg (, hvis noen kan få boden min til å høres interessant ut i essayformat er det sannsynligvis John Jeremiah Sullivan).
