



# Winter's Bone

*Daniel Woodrell*

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The sheriff's deputy at the front door brings hard news to Ree Dolly. Her father has skipped bail on charges that he ran a crystal meth lab, and the Dollys will lose their house if he doesn't show up for his next court date.

Ree's father has disappeared before. The Dolly clan has worked the shadowy side of the law for generations, and arrests (and attempts to avoid them) are part of life in Rathlin Valley. But the house is all they have, and Ree's father would never forfeit it to the bond company unless something awful happened. With two young brothers depending on her and a mother who's entered a kind of second childhood, Ree knows she has to bring her father back, dead or alive, or else see her family turned out into the unforgiving cold.

Sixteen-year-old Ree, who has grown up in the harsh poverty of the Ozarks, learns quickly that asking questions of the rough Dolly clan can be a fatal mistake. She perseveres past obstacles of every kind and finally confronts the top figures in the family's hierarchy.

Along the way to a shocking revelation, Ree discovers unexpected depths in herself and in a family network that protects its own at any cost.

## **Winter's Bone Details**

Date : Published July 20th 2010 by Little, Brown and Company (first published 2006)

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Author : Daniel Woodrell

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## From Reader Review Winter's Bone for online ebook

### RandomAnthony says

Ok, I read *Winter's Bone* on D and Karen's recommendations, so I'm posting links to their reviews before I start:

<http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...>

and

<http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...>

*Winter's Bone* is a hell of a book in that A) the novel is fantastic, and B) it's set in an American version of hell. The story of Ree, a teenage girl charged with finding her bail-jumping father in order to save her family's house, catches fire early and never cools down. Ree lives in a terrifying section of the Ozarks that takes on the character of a mythical underworld with its own set of unwritten codes and rules, of which the two most important are "don't snitch" and "don't steal". This book made me want to never drive through the Ozarks again. Seriously. What if your car broke down? The characters in *Winter's Bone* made the guys from *Deliverance* look like pussies. Ree must traverse this hellish landscape of tenacious loyalties and inbred family ties with the help of her baby-bound former best friend and a mutilated uncle flying on crank. Good luck with that, eh?

By the way, I'm not exaggerating when I describe this book as "mythical". Three grim, violent sisters reminded me of the fates and furies. Other characters were monstrous sociopaths. Ree's gripping journey has an epic quality; she'll cross hell to preserve her brothers' redemption and reclaim hope and dignity. Woodrell's brilliant phrasing captures the dread winter in the kind of place where everyone knows each other and there's no comfortable way to reconcile the idea that you share a country with the natives. He catches details that color in the lines of despair and unspoken unease. Ree's resolve is all the more paradoxically human and superhuman for the surroundings.

This book checks in at less than 200 pages but feels complete and more than satisfying. Goddamn, I loved *Winter's Bone*. Now I want to see the movie. I hope they don't fuck it up. Mr. Woodrell's sparse, muscular prose deserves all the praise and awards around its neck and a solid movie to match.

(Thanks, D. and Karen!)

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### Nataliya says

Reading this book made me realize how **FRIGGIN' SHELTERED** my life has been. To me, *Winter's Bone* reads just like a nightmarish dystopia. To millions of people, apparently, it's life.

Ree Dolly is incredibly tough and hardened by life - much more than you'd expect from a sixteen-year-old

girl.

*"She could be beat with a garden rake and never cry and had proved that twice before Mamaw saw an unsmiling angel pointing from the treetops at dusk and quit the bottle. She would never cry where her tears might be seen and counted against her."*

Unlike other lauded "tough" heroines in the recent literature, her toughness is not in the "leave me the hell alone" variety of Lisbeth Salander or grumpy variety of Katniss Everdeen. **Ree is tough in the true survivor way.** She has no other choice - she is the oldest child in the Ozarks "*bred'n buttered*" family of a crystal meth cook father and a mentally unstable near-catatonic mother, with nobody else to care for her two younger brothers. And now she is this close to losing the only thing they own - their home - to the bail bondsman, unless Ree can somehow prove that her allegedly bail-jumping father is dead. ***And that's not an easy thing to do when the world would rather have you shut up and not ask questions.***

*'Whatever are we to do about you, baby girl? Huh?'*

*'Kill me, I guess.'*

*'That idea has been said already. Got'ny other ones?'*

*'Help me. Ain't nobody said that idea yet, have they?'*

But this short novel is not as much about Ree's quest to figure out what happened to her missing father - she and the reader already have a good idea what happened to Jessup Dolly - as it is about showing a **fascinating albeit harrowing picture of the cruel, backwards, meth-ruled world of the Ozarks.** Ree Dolly lives in a hostile, harsh, and unforgiving world that follows no law but its own. She is surrounded by distant kin members that make up the majority of this rural mountain community. But very soon she learns that blood ties do not always mean much, that there quite a few matters about which her neighbors and relatives would much rather remain tight-lipped. ***And they will not hesitate to do whatever they feel is necessary to silence the uncomfortable questions, even if they come from a teenage girl.***

Ree is kind, smart, independent, competent, spirited, and resourceful. **However, there is little future for her in this world besides meth-cooking or marry as "*required by pregnancy.*"** Ree has been harboring a dream of joining the Army "*where you got to travel with a gun and they made everybody help keep things clean*", where she finally, for the first time ever, can have "*only her own concerns to tote.*" But we all know - as does Ree - that she has too much heart to do so, even if it means sacrificing her dreams for the sake of others who are her responsibility.

**For men in Ree's world there seem to be two options - meth and prison. For women it's even less.** There is obedience, loveless marriages, violence, and hard work.

*"The men came to mind as mostly idle between nights of running wild or time in the pen, cooking moon and gathering around the spout, with ears chewed, fingers chopped, arms shot away, and no apologies grunted ever. The women came to mind bigger, closer, with their lonely eyes and homely yellow teeth, mouths clamped against smiles, working in the hot fields from can to can't, hands tattered rough as dry cobs, lips cracked all winter, a white dress for marrying, a black dress for burying."*

**The only thing that being a woman earns for you is that you probably won't be beaten half-dead and bloody by a man** (unless he is "your" man, as Ree's little brother notes). But it's little consolation given that the women Ree meets do not lack viciousness. Misogyny is everywhere, and is viewed as a normal part of life. Nobody has much in this world, and women least of all. And if you are half-dead from a beating, and your uncle is about to raise mayhem, you, of course, will be the one to blame.

*"Love and hate hold hands always so it made natural sense that they'd get confused by upset married folk in the wee hours once in a while and a nosebleed or bruised breast might result. But it just seemed proof that a great foulness was afoot in the world when a no-strings roll in the hay with a stranger led to chipped teeth or cigarette burns on the wrist."*

I found it scarily disturbing that Ree has naturally absorbed and internalized the laws of this bleak harsh place. When we meet her, she has an unusually strong moral compass and stubbornness to a boot, **but I wonder how long it's going to be before she cracks and submits to the ways of her surroundings.** After all, she is also very lonely - with her mother pretty much checked out of this world, and her best friend trapped in a marriage with no love but a little baby, and Ree misses her so very very much.

*In Ree's heart there was room for more. Any evening spent with Gail was like one of the yearning stories from her sleep was happening awake. Sharing the small simple parts of life with someone who stood tall in her feelings.*

**I hope she finds a way out, I hope she finds a way to keep her awesome self intact, I hope she succeeds in raising her brothers the way she wants to and not the way the society expects them to be.** She is definitely strong enough for that, and I hope her spine is indeed made of steel. She will need it to survive.

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Wonderful book with one of the best female characters I have seen in a while. It's rather bleak but at the same time has undertones of hope - rooted in Ree's stubborn refusal to give up. **4.5 stars**, and feeling thankful that I live where I live - **because I sure as hell would NOT be able to survive in Ree Dolly's world.**

*"I ain't leavin' you boys. Why do you think that?"  
'We heard you once, talkin' 'bout the army and places we wouldn't be. Are you wantin' to leave us?'  
'Naw. I'd get lost without the weight of you two on my back.'*

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## Paquita Maria Sanchez says

Well, I'm an idiot (pretend this is news, please). I dismissed this book out of hand for years because I had a bunch of weird assumptions about it, none of which were based in anything even resembling reality, or the very encouraging reviews of it I actually did read several years ago. Even despite being told otherwise on multiple occasions, I sorta-thought 1) it was a Young Adult novel, 2) full of cheap emotional ploys, 3) like maybe a teen version of *The Lovely Bones* only because there's also a movie of it I've never seen, which has that Hunger Games (a YA novel...right?) girl in it, and 4) because the word "bone" in anything will never pass unnoticed by *this* teenage boy, but instead will make me lump totally unrelated things together in my head. The lovely boner, winter's boner. I'm not a terribly complex person. As for the YA assumption, I blame Jason for explicitly stating that was not the case, and in doing so, somehow planting the idea in the back of my stupid brain that it totally was the case. Apparently, I don't listen real good-like, which I also partially blame on the fact that with certain reviewers, I often don't even pay much attention to the title of the book they are reviewing, but just dive right into it because I enjoy their review-writing styles so much. Anyway, as I've mentioned elsewhere, I've been in a noir mood lately (and here is where I stop myself from squeeing some more about that tracking shot in episode four of *True Detective* and yelling at you for the zillionth time to watch that insanely wonderful show, but seriously: mercy, mercy me), and this book kept popping up as a rec, challenging all my wrongly-wired ideas about it. So I read it. And oh, boyeee.

Other people have described the vivid language better than I possibly could, so I won't bother. Much. À la McCarthy, this is a backwoods inferno so leanly yet effectively described that you can smell the blood and shit and rot, and gasp for a couple breaths of clean air in the rare moment where our leading lady is allowed the respite of mental retreat into daydreams, brief, shimmering visions which are themselves shadowed by dread given your knowledge that she is basically dangling just under half her weight over a pit of madness similar to the one fully embraced by her near-catatonic mother. And who wouldn't want to escape this hopeless, woe-filled existence, peopled as it is with impoverished psychopathic rednecks deadened by drugs and drink? A world where scrappiness is both absolutely essential, and will almost certainly get your teeth knocked out at some point. You simply can't win, unless you reality-check the shit out of your notions of victory.

I'm not even going to describe the plot, because it is deceptively simple, and this novel deserves more than some boring synopsis. The colorful dialect, the juxtapositions of mostly dark with sporadic, not quite mercifully light imagery, the way this book captures the vicious cycle of violence created and perpetuated by a world where criminality is seen as the only logical solution to poverty. All that. All right here. So good. Almost as good as True De...right, sorry. I shut up now. I grunt, grunt you should read. You read? You read.

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## **TK421 says**

A few authors over the course of the past few years have recently stood out above the normal, literary crowd—for me, anyways. And the thing I noticed about these authors is that they all seem to write darker fiction. If I had to say, a good representation of these authors is: Roberto Bolano, Cormac McCarthy, Castle Freeman, Jr., and now, Daniel Woodrell.

These authors make up a class of writers that I have termed Brutal Poets. Their use of language invokes a visceral response from the reader, sounds sometimes biblical or archaic, but never forced. The way they describe a landscape that mimics the inner feelings of characters is alarming and disorientating because of its precision and perfection. Basically, these authors seem to really know what it is that they are writing about.

Woodrell, a previous unknown to me before I saw the adaptation of his novel on DVD, is a master storyteller. Terse and sparse, his novel WINTER'S BONE is a punishing reward of a read. The story takes place over a few days in the Ozarks, Appalachia country. Ree Dolly needs to find Jessup, her daddy. He's skipped out on court, and has put his house and acreage up for collateral for his bond. The problem is something isn't right. He's gone missing. And Ree begins to understand more about where she lives exactly, and who the people really are that populate her family and community. Characters like Thump and Uncle Teardrop and even Ree's Mom add a depth to this story that brings it past a "missing-person" story or a "murder mystery."

From the moment Ree takes it upon herself to find out the truth about her father, to the moment she has the emotional revelation at the end of the story with Uncle Teardrop, this bleak novel will keep you mesmerized, wanting to turn pages as fast as you can until you have reached the staggering and horrifying conclusion.

Don't do this. Don't ruin such a great experience by consuming it whole. Nibble at the book. Let your mind digest it. Savor it. Like a death row inmate being given their last meal, taste every juicy word on every page. Drink up every image and scene. There are plenty of other books out there to scarf down as fast as you can. Not this one.

Warning: be prepared. Oftentimes there are bleak moments like when Ree is beaten by the Milton sisters, and presented in a barn to Thump. When Ree comes to, she and a girl named Megan exchange these words:

Megan squatted, patted Ree's face, and said, "Whatever are we to do about you, baby girl? Huh?"

"Kill me, I guess."

"That idea has been said already. Got'ny other ones?"

"Help me. Ain't nobody said that idea yet, have they?"

This scene still makes my flesh get goose bumps.

(VERY HIGHEST RECOMMENDATION)

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### **Anthony Vacca says**

For the most part, I am perfectly content to read books littered with despicable exemplars of our wonderful species. Give me your moral degenerates, your psychopathic wives, your misogynistic husbands, your bloodthirsty children, your lechers, repeat killers, serial adulterers, conmen, thieves, necrophiliacs, Christians—give me every last bit of your human refuge because I will gladly read about them over honest, good, hardworking men and women any day of the week. Why? Because good people are boring outside of the real world.

So it was a bit of a surprise to get knocked arse over teakettle off my high horse of arch cynicism by this mean, gaunt and big-hearted novel by Daniel Woodrell, the esteemed bard of anti-bucolicism in the Ozarks.

*Winter's Bone* relates the story of 16-year old Ree Dolly and her quest to find her missing father—an all-around fuck-up who is good for one thing, and that is making meth—before he misses his court date and the gov'ment takes possession of the family's house and land, which good ole dad was kind enough to put up so he could make bail and then split. Add a nearly catatonic mom and two younger brothers who completely rely on their older sis for survival, and you'd be kind of a cold bitch or bastard to not feel something for Ree. But what really got under my skin was seeing how obviously foiled Ree's life and dreams already are at the age most of us think we got this whole life situation on lockdown. Woodrell brings to life the hollers and frozen wastelands of the novel's setting, packed with their hundreds upon hundreds of kissing cousins that have been loafing about since for God knows how many generations now. Ree lives in a patriarchal shithole of a society that champions lifelessness, despair, violence, teen pregnancy, and drug abuse over education, happiness, and self-worth. And a poor economy is only somewhat to blame for these factors.

But Woodrell's novel functions as more than just a condemnation of American backwoods life and the banal cruelty humans enact upon one another; it also offers something resembling hope to the reader, even if it is the meager chance that humans may actually be capable of caring about other people. And let the record show that Ree is a heroine to marvel over as you root for her to somehow come out on top by the end of this sparse, hauntingly-written Gothic yarn.

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### **Mandy says**

Blood is thicker than water.

This book turned out way better than it started. I was going to rate it a 2 and then it turned around and picked up. A story of survival and family. A story about one girl's determination to find her father and clear her name so she could raise her brothers.

Not too shabby. A bit like Ma and Pa Kettle meets Deliverance if you catch my drift....

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### **Dan Schwent says**

Ree Dolly's father has jumped bail, leaving their home forfeit unless Ree can find him before his court date. Will she be able to find her father before she ends up homeless with her two brothers and insane mother?

First off, I have a confession to make. I live in rural Missouri and, therefore, some of the locations depicted in the story seem a lot like places I've driven through at a high rate of speed. Also, I've eaten squirrel on at least two occasions. Now, on to the meat of the review.

Winter's Bone is a lot more than I was expecting when I picked this book up. The terms "country noir" and "hick lit" have been thrown around to describe it so I had a picture in my mind of some kind of rural mystery. Winter's Bone is so much more than that. Daniel Woodrell's prose is something to behold, so much better than I was picturing when I picked up the book.

While the mysterious whereabouts of Ree's father are the central mystery of the book, the way of life of hillbilly crank dealers in the Ozarks is the real star of the show. Ree's quest for her father is an odyssey into a world of cooking meth, living in shacks or trailers, and eating whatever you can shoot. The backwoods life isn't pretty and Woodrell shows it warts and all.

Ree's a tough girl, confronting the worst the back country has to offer and never waivering in her search for her father. She goes through a lot of hell, taking care of her mother and brothers the entire time. She's not as tough as Lisbeth Salander but she more than holds her own.

I guess the highest compliment I can pay this book is that I'll be reading more Daniel Woodrell somewhere down the line. I'd give Winter's Bone a 4+.

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### **Lobstergirl says**

Horrendous, goopy, writers' workshop writing.

"Moons of ache glowed in spaces of her meat and when she moved the moons banged together and stunned."  
(Are sentences required to make sense in "contemporary fiction?")

"Moans droned from her chest of bones. Shit leaked from her panties and she felt runnels of yuck on her thighs." Channeling Dr. Seuss and Cormac McCarthy simultaneously: ambitious!

"She thrust her head into the cold and broadcast the hot mush of old swallowed food toward the snowbanks."  
Conjures up a Rush Limbaugh radio program, somehow. Was "catapulted" too literal?

The thought that instructors are actually encouraging soupy messes like this is dispiriting, and one wants now to read things that are cleansing, purifying, bracing tonics, literary enemas - Willa Cather, Sir Walter Scott, Jackie Collins, the minutes of the winter meeting of the Financial Accounting Standards Board.

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### **D. Pow says**

Man, O Man, can this guy write. This is a very impressive novel. Here is language that soars, home-spun lyricisms, trailer-trash poetry, a book chock-full of crackhead sonnet riffs; Woodrell is a virtuoso of the first degree.

In Ree Dolly, the teenage protagonist he has conjured up, he has invented somebody you'll remember gladly until your dying days. Fiercely courageous with a keen eye for the moral effrontery foisted on her small shoulders by kin close and distant, she is feisty as a stirred-up Wolverine and wiser than her elders by far. Instances of unsurpassed brutality and the banality of poverty vie with quiet moments of grace and communion with nature wherein Ree's beat down body and unbeatable spirit serve as host to all that could be perceived as transcendent in this often unfair and fucked up world.

Loved the book. Love Woodrell. Loved Ree. Sheee-it, folks, read it for yourself and see. You'll love it too.

Note: Thanks to Ben Harrison for recovering this review.

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### **Bonnie says**

Beautifully written, this is a simple story about survival, winter and bones. The main thing to survive is poverty - the kind where buttonless overcoats are de rigueur, and hunting and skinning squirrels is not done strictly for entertainment. It's in the Ozarks and winter is bone-cracking cold. We open the book to a hint of flurries, and venison hanging in trees to "sweeten that meat to the bone", and we meet Ree Dolly, our tough teen heroine.

The title "Winter's Bone" for me summoned a cold, terrible image: blue, white, visceral, and hard. It is actually the perfect mental picture for this story. The real meaning is something quite different, but hey misunderstanding titles (and lyrics) is what I do.

Bones. Bones. Dem bones is everywhere. There's the olden Dolly kin "who had so many bones that broke, broke and mended, broke and mended wrong, so they limped through life on the bad-mend bones for year upon year until falling dead in a single evening from something that sounded wet in the lungs". There's the fun bones, "Lust slaking to dance tunes, standing hip bone to hip bone, the new hands moving over her rumples and furls and tender knobs, hands good as tongues in the dark corners of those whiskey moments", and the tasty bones, "Soup stock from deer bones simmered on the stove and steamed a comforting scent."

Meth cooking is the main industry in these parts. It isn't all "let's party", and it isn't blue. But it is of the "I am the one who knocks" variety.

Sometimes safety at the workplace fails and everything blows, and the makeshift lab is no longer viable. "That shit's all poison, girl. Toxic. It'll eat the skin clean off your bones and wilt the bones, too. It'll turn your lungs to paper sacks and tear holes in 'em".

Towards the end, when Ree finds what she is looking for, I think there was a sort of failure of nerves on the part of the author. "Is my story too quietly grim", he seems to have asked himself, "or could it use some CSI graphic osteology, with chain saw and axe?"

I would much prefer the quietly grim over the sensational.

Really, all that's needed is a Hardscrabble Elegy.

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## Paul Bryant says

Gets so close to a fourth star it can smell the new paint job. In fact the plot is totally 5 star – the motivations and machinations of all the characters make complete sense and are a real heartbreaker. The main character, 16 year old Ree Dolly, is great. In the movie, which I came across all of 4 years ago, she's played by none other than Jennifer Lawrence in her first big role, and the movie and Jennifer both knocked me flat on my back then. It's a must see. If any book was filmed exactly right it's thisn.

What nearly defeats this chunk of hick lit is Daniel Woodrell's prose style. He thinks he's the new improved perfect blend of Annie Proulx, William Faulkner and maybe ole Cormac M and some others like that. He's Mcproulkner or sumpin. Here's what I mean:

*The world seemed huddled and hushed and her crunching steps cracked loud as ax whacks.*

*Little Arthur was a little-man mix of swagger and tongue, with a trailing history of deeds that vouched for his posture.*

*A picnic of words fell from Gail's mouth to be gathered around and savoured slowly.*

Here, Ree is given some real bad news:

*There was a sound in Ree's head like a world of zippers zipping shut, and a sudden tilt factor engaged every place she looked. The creek shifted heights in her eyes and swayed overhead floppy as snapped string, the houses beyond skinny as ribs and knotted together in bows, the sky spun upright like a blue plate set on edge to dry.*

And here's Ree being assaulted violently:

*Ree felt her joints unglue, become loose, she was draining somehow, draining to the dirt, while black wings*

*fling angles crossed her mind, and there were mutters of beasts uncaged from women and she was sunk to a moaning place, kicked into silence.*

And later

*All her aches were joined as a chorus to sing pain throughout her flesh and thoughts.*

I'm sorry but this strongly reminds me of Doctor Johnson's famous advice to writers:

*Read over your compositions, and where ever you meet with a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out.*

Maybe it's a matter of taste but for me a lot of Mr Woodrell's prose above verges on parody; it's hideously overwrought and self consciously gorgeous. It strikes poses in every phrase. It has the same relationship to the compelling communication of sense and emotion that a catwalk model has to walking in a straight line.

About half of the entire short novel is given over to descriptions of the beautiful Ozarks :

*Disappearing snow left the old tossed stones plain amidst the puny winter weeds and spreading muck. Some stones were stacked two high and some lay in close clusters with stunted oak growing from the narrow spaces between.*

Not a field or creek or a snowflake passes by without it's nailed to the page. If you like that you'll love *Winter's Bone*.

Such a shame, then. A great – really great – tale of loss and hard-won redemption amidst the vicious but ethical crank-cooks of the Ozarks was very nearly capsized by its mode of telling. If Daniel could only have dialled it down a notch or two.

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## **Nancy says**

### **Posted at Shelf Inflicted**

This short novel has many things I enjoy in dark fiction – quirky, dysfunctional characters, a determined heroine struggling to survive and keep her family together, a bleak setting, a sense of hopelessness, people who pay the price for their bad choices. This is a quiet story that crept up on me slowly and haunted me for days afterward.

Actually, it terrified me and made me glad I grew up in New York City. Sure, there were shootings, muggings, carjackings, and stabbings. You just had to watch your back constantly and try to stay out of the dangerous neighborhoods. Once I was home and the six deadbolts locked, I felt safe.

16-year-old Ree Dolly has no sense of safety. Her mother is mentally ill and unable to care for her children, her dad has disappeared, her relatives are downright scary, and meth is a major source of the family's income.

I have never been to the Ozarks and have no idea how accurately this story portrays the region and its

inhabitants, though I'm sure these characters really exist somewhere.

What keeps me from giving a five-star rating, is the prose. At times, it felt overwritten, taking me out of the story. I also felt it was too brief, making the characters and relationships too remote. In the end, I wanted more than an empty, hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach.

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## Lawyer says

### Winter's Bone: Daniel Woodrell's Tale of When Blood is thicker than water

When I was a boy we had no Interstates. The car was not air-conditioned. A trip from Tuscaloosa to North Alabama was a twisting, turning drive through mountains and steep valleys as you drove into the northern part of the County. We traveled early to avoid the afternoon heat. The mists rose up from the valleys making the mountains look as though they grew out of clouds. My grandfather would comment on the smell of the working stills hidden in the country we passed through. Although prohibition had ended decades before, many counties, ruled by Bible thumping Southern Baptists and Methodists voted to keep their Counties free of liquor. That Jesus turned water into wine seemed to have little influence on them.

#### *North of Tuscaloosa Co., Alabama*

When I became a man and a career prosecutor, violation of the prohibited liquors statutes were few and far between. As time passed one drug after another became the most desired. But nothing compared to methamphetamine and its staying power, and the growing volume of cases that crossed my desk.

I've met cookers, dealers and users. Users tell me that Meth gave them the greatest sex they ever had and they kept looking for the same big bang with each time they used.

#### *I just can't get no satisfaction...Before and After on Meth*

That land up north of the County is still there, though I usually bypass it by taking the Interstate now. And I can't remember the last time I was in a dry County. But that country up there sounds a lot like the setting of Winter's Bone. The people up that way are a lot like, too. They don't talk much, especially if you're the Law or you work with the Law. I worked two killings where the bodies both ended up on the Tiger Mine Strip Pit Road. It's a God forsaken place. And by the time you find a crime scene, any car involved has been stripped and burned, and the blow flies and maggots and just about anything that walks crawls or flies has turned what was a living human being into a mess of stinking goo. That trick of putting Vick's in your nose works a little bit, but the smell of death gets into your hair, mustache, and clothes.

There's always the guilty and always the innocent. It's the innocents that got left behind that always worried me the most.

In the early Meth days, cookers hadn't got their chemistry down real well. It wasn't unusual that a cooker blew himself and his lab sky high. The place stunk to high Heaven. Not even we knew how dangerous the fumes were when we went into one of the places. But in my line of work you developed a black sense of humor. Dang. Another one got it wrong. No file to open. Breaks your heart, don't it. Yep. Sure does. Reckon

he's playin' his harp. Naw. He's tunin' his fork.

*After a meth lab explosion*

Daniel Woodrell has written a book that I identify with on a number of levels. It's my first Woodrell. But it won't be the last. And I won't forget this book for a long, long time. Frankly, I didn't think I needed to read about a Meth cooker. However, by page four I realized Woodrell didn't care about the cooker anymore than I did. This is about the innocents that get left behind and how they must get by, *if* they manage to get by at all.

And this is when Woodrell hooked me:

***"Walnuts were still falling when Ree saw him last. Walnuts were thumping to ground in the night like stalking footsteps of some large thing that never quite came into view, and Jessup had paced on this porch in a worried slouch, dented nose snuffling, lantern jaw smoked by beard, eyes uncertain and alarmed by each walnut thump. The darkness and those thumps out in the darkness seemed to keep him jumpy. He paced until a decision popped into his head, then started down the steps, going fast into the night before his mind could change. He said, 'Start lookin' for me soon as you see my face. 'Til then, don't even wonder.'"***

In a few terse sentences, Daniel Woodrell has introduced you to Jessup Dolly. Dolly is telling his seventeen year old daughter, Ree, goodbye. Dolly is a man on the run. He's the best Meth cooker in the Missouri Ozarks. The law has caught up with him. Jessup has done one stretch in the pen. He doesn't want to do another. He's out on bond, putting up his family's home and timberland. He has a court appearance in a week. He doesn't tell his daughter they're going to lose their home.

Jessup leaves behind a wife, either insane or in an advancing stage of dementia, two boys, and his seventeen year old daughter Ree. When you're a meth cooker's daughter you grow up hard and you grow up fast. Ree left school at sixteen to care for her mother and two younger brothers, Sonny and Harold.

No gas for the chainsaw? Ree chops wood for the potbelly stove with the ease of a lumberjack. No food on the table? Ree can bark a squirrel flattened against a tree limb with a .22 bullet. She rarely misses. Ammunition costs money.

Ree's got plenty of family. Jessup's brother, Tear Drop, named for a penitentiary tattoo, the Miltons, and the Halsam's. Pretty much everybody is kin through some degree of marriage or cousins, removed by generation or not.

Ree is a woman in an adolescent's body. She has satisfied her sexual curiosity, exploring pleasure with her girl friend Gail Lockrum. She knows how to kiss, but is disappointed with her first kiss with a boy when she asks for his tongue and he responds, "Yuck." Her first experience is with a dooper friend of her father, Little Arthur. He gave her mushrooms and told her it would make her sandwich taste much better. She feels all ooey gooey and wonders if she had only imagined it until she found her panties ripped. Yeah, a dooper's daughter grows up hard and fast.

When the bondsman comes looking for Jessup at the house, he tells Ree Jessup Dolly had signed away their home and land. Ree is determined to find her father in the week she has before his court date.

On her search, Ree descends into the dark secrets of her Ozark people. Blood is not always thicker than

water. Thump Milton, the patriarch of the Milton clan will not help her and tells her to abandon her search. Sonny Blond Milton's extent of help is to offer to take in her younger brother Sonny, but not Harold. Seems there was a reason for Sonny being named Sonny, born while Jessup was away in prison. Ree thought Sonny never looked that much like Daddy.

Winter swirls through the mountains and valleys of the Missouri Ozarks. Ree must take shelter in a cave. An Ozark snow storm will chill you to the bone. She realizes that either she must find her father alive or dead or her family may end up living in one of those caves.

*You can feel the cold in Woodrell's prose.*

Yet, even Uncle Tear Drop will not help her. He takes her to a cabin destroyed by fire, a meth lab destroyed by a cook's mistake. He tells her that Jessup died there. But there is no proof of death.

Something is terribly wrong. Kin doesn't kill kin except for thievin' and...No her Dad wouldn't ever do that.

Ree is a heroine, courageous, responsible, and willing to do anything to save her family. Her father must be dead, but she needs proof. As Ree is caught up in swirling violence, frankly, my Dears, I didn't give a damn if he was dead. The guilty always leave the innocent behind.

Daniel Woodrell knows the Missouri Ozarks. He was born there, grew up there, and lives near the Arkansas line still. Winter's Bone is his eighth novel. Five of his novels have been New York Times Notable Books of the Year. I've got some catching up to do. So, Mr. Woodrell, keep writing. I'm going to be gaining on you.

*Daniel Woodrell's latest book is The Outlaw Album: Stories*

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## **Jason says**

It's funny how my brain works. So this novel is about a strong teenage girl living in conditions of depressing destitution without a father, caring for her sibling(s) and her invalid mother, cooking for them, bathing them, getting them ready for school, and generally assuming a responsibility that far exceeds her years—she even hunts squirrel! Any of this sound familiar? Maybe I'm not the only one who was reminded of Katniss Everdeen, but what's interesting is that both Everdeen and Ree Dolly, the protagonist of *Winter's Bone*, are portrayed by the same actress in the film adaptations. So the question is, was I reminded of Everdeen because I thought first of Jennifer Lawrence? Or did I think of Everdeen because her character is legitimately similar to that of Dolly? I might never know, but I would expect the answer to also shed light on the elusive Ron Rash—Steve Holt conundrum.

Anyway, the character and situational similarities end there. Dolly has a sharp-shooting snark that Everdeen could only dream of.

*"It don't seem like you've got to try none, girl, smarty-mouth shit just flies out your yap anytime your yap falls open."*

In fact, it's that smarty-mouth yap of hers that, while nearly getting her killed on occasion, is somehow related to her stubborn persistence that ensures her and her family's survival over the long term—survival in spite of an extended family of drug runners who value their personal safety above kinship, and survival in the face of the unforgiving landscape of the frozen Ozarks. Put another way, Dolly's little world makes District

12 seem like peaches and bubblegum. And yes, I realize that Everdeen has to duel to the death in an arena filled with poisonous jabberjays or whatever, but there is a strong sense of reality pervading *Winter's Bone* that makes it far more bone chilling.

Speaking of bones, the imagery in this book is amazing: brittle bones of dead wildlife decaying on the cold ground, the cracking bones of one's frozen fingers after exposure to the harsh winter air, rock hard bones from imagining Jennifer Lawrence with an archery bow. Ok, not that last one. But there are other bones here, real bones pertinent to the plot, bones the significance of which I cannot reveal.

For me, this could have been a five-star book. My only complaint is that it is actually *too short*. Besides all the excellent imagery, even the characters are amazing—especially the female ones—and the fact that their appearances in the novel are so brief just left me wanting more, more, more.

### Winter in the Ozarks

↑↑↑↑↑↑↑↑↑  
(It is fucking **cold**.)

Oh, and by the way, this was my favorite film of 2010. What was at the time an excellent 5-star film I now see as an excellent 5-star film adaptation.

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### Joe Valdez says

My introduction to the fiction of Daniel Woodrell is *Winter's Bone*, and what a strong introduction. Published in 2006, it logs somewhere between a novella and short novel at only 45,883 words, but the remnants left behind conjure such a strong sense of environment and of a gritty female protagonist struggling to survive in that environment that I felt like I'd walked a mile in her shoes, in the snow, trucking water pails, both ways. The literary ambitions of the novel are impossible to tamper down, but rather than overwhelm the story or characters, the prose brings them into the light with both menace and wonder.

Set in Missouri, in the Rathlin Valley near the Arkansas state line, the story introduces sixteen-year-old Ree Dolly as her father Jessup, a gifted meth cook out on bond from his latest arrest, leaves home never to return. Ree assumes responsibility for what remains of the family: a scrappy ten-year-old half brother named Sonny, a sensitive eight-year-old brother named Harold and their mother Connie, an able-bodied invalid who's retreated into the world of her mind, casually referred to as "crazy" by the two hundred or so Dollys, Lockrums, Boshells, Tankerslys and Langans linked by blood or marriage and living in poverty within thirty miles of the valley.

A sheriff's deputy named Baskin pays a visit to Ree, delivering the boys from the spot where the school bus was halted by snow. Talking to John Law can be hazardous to one's health in the valley, but rather than ask Ree where her father has run off to, the deputy brings news that Ree's daddy put their ancestral home (on Mom's side, the Bromont side) as well as their timber acres up as collateral for his bond. If Jessup Dolly fails to turn up for his court date next week, the property will be sold by the county. Ree maintains her composure and assures Baskin that she'll find her father.

*She'd start with Uncle Teardrop, though Uncle Teardrop scared her. He lived three miles down the creek but she walked on the railroad tracks. Snow covered the tracks and made humps over the rails and the twin humps guided her. She broke her own trail through the snow and booted the miles from her path. The morning sky was gray and crouching, the wind had snap and drew water to her eyes. She wore a green hooded sweatshirt and Mamaw's black coat. Ree nearly always wore a dress or skirt, but with combat boots, and the skirt this day was bluish plaid. Her knees kicked free of the plaid when she threw her long legs forward and stomped the snow.*

Ree finds a sympathetic ear with her aunt Victoria, her favorite of all Dolly women short of Mom, but is told in no uncertain terms by her menacing uncle not to go looking for her father. Uncle Teardrop has been a meth cook longer than his younger brother but lost his ear and melted the left side of his back in a chemical mishap. Ignoring her uncle's warning, Ree proposes going to Hawkfall Valley to see if the crew her father was working with know something, but has her head yanked back by her uncle for emphasis. He gives his niece fifty dollars and another warning for Ree to stay close to the willows.

Climbing a ridge and crossing a meadow blanketed by snow, Ree arrives at the home of her best friend Gail Lockrum, who already has a four-month-old baby and a useless husband who'd rather be with his girlfriend. Ree recalls her father's girlfriend, a "kindy garden" teacher in town, and asks Gail if she can get the keys to her husband's truck to drive her there. The answer is no. Ree hitches a ride with the school bus driver and is dropped off in Hawkfall. The way people aren't talking to Ree convinces her that her father has been killed and no one wants to talk to her about it.

Ree is left with no alternative but to seek the help of Thump Milton, a Milton family patriarch and a terrifying grizzled coot. Ree waits in his yard for an hour before being turned out, notified by his wife that he knows everywhere Ree has been today and why she's here and to leave. Ree, who's talked about leaving the willows to join the army one day, receives an offer from Sonny's rapsallion father to take the boy in, with Uncle Teardrop taking Harold. Seeing no future for either of her brothers by abandoning them, Ree puts her life in Thump Milton's hands by returning to Hawkfall for another try at him. Ree has to be carried out.

*The women of Rathlin Valley began crossing the creek to view her even as she lay in the tub. Sonya led Betsy and Caradoc Dolly's widow, Permelia, who owned the third house in the rank of three on the far bank, into the bathroom and closed the door on the paled waiting boys with their stricken faces. Ree lay with her good eye open a peep in water skimmed thinly with suds. The women stood in a cluster looking down at the colored bruises on milk skin, the lumped eye, the broken mouth. Their lips were tight and they shook their heads. Permelia, ancient but mobile, witness to a hundred wounds, said, "There's never no call to do a girl like that."*

Word for word, *Winter's Bone* may be one of the finest novels that I've read. There's a harrowing precision to it. Woodrell has such a command of this landscape and the family trees populating it that he could've written a novel three or four times the length of this one. I'm glad he didn't. There isn't an indulgence to be found here. Instead of telling reader about what happened to characters or occurred between them in the past, he focuses on what they're feeling now. There's some trust there, but the prose is also strong enough to fill in those spaces. Then there's Ree Dolly, who Woodrell seems to respect enough to make the star attraction of every page.

*While frosty bits gathered in her hair and on her shoulders she raised the volume of those ocean sounds. Ree needed often to inject herself with pleasant sounds, stab those sounds past the constant screeching, squalling hubbub regular life raised inside her spirit, poke those soothing sounds past that racket and down deep where her jittering soul paced on a stone slab on a gray room, agitated and endlessly provoked but yearning to hear something that might bring a moment's rest. The tapes had been given to Mom who already heard too many puzzling sounds and did not care to confront these, but Ree tried them and felt something unknot. She also favored The Sounds of Tranquil Streams, The Sounds of Tropical Dawn, and Alpine Dusk.*

The more novels I read, I don't know if what marks a great character is an arc, but consistency. Ree is a rock that forces the stream around her to change course, not the other way around. She's kin to Mattie Ross of *True Grit* (also a teenager) in making up her mind and sticking to it. The forces that Woodrell puts in Ree's path are formidable and her vulnerability is palpable. The inner fortitude of the character and her extreme disorientation at changes taking place around her weren't entirely translated to screen, with Debra Granik adapting and directing a solid film version in 2010 that introduced audiences to Jennifer Lawrence and made her a star. The novel is a better movie.

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## karen says

yes.

this is pretty much why i read, to find a book like this amongst all the three-star so-so's. and it wasn't love at first sight (which might make the experience even better; i didn't love *winesberg, ohio* right out of the gate either) - i had some reservations from the first page, when the poetic quality of the language seemed forced and i wasn't going to deal with 200 pages of:

"three halt haggard houses formed a kneeling rank on the far creekside...", or "Ree, brunette and sixteen, with milk skin and abrupt green eyes..." but except for a few instances of striving-to-be-musical prose (heidi klum would say "we question your taste level" and brad becker would say "i'll taste *her* level"), this is utterly gorgeous, and is already on my mental hall of fame list.

of course it brings up a list of names in my head - they are unavoidable comparisons: ron rash, cormac mccarthy, castle freeman jr, - people who write about misbegotten people deep in the hard-lined appalachian/ozark regions without romanticizing the harsh realities of survival. but it's more than that. woodrell has created a sort of ozarkian godfather story with its unspoken rules about loyalty and power and family above all else where people live and die by deeply embedded codes of honor. even the supporting characters here speak volumes and any one of them could stand alone in their own novel.

but the action centers around sixteen-year old ree. she of the milk skin. and this character is, i think, what everyone is thinking they have found in that dragon-tattooed salander, who i found cartoonish. ree is a sixteen-year-old girl who is genuinely hard, not just clinically affectless. she is resourceful but not, god help us, plucky. she is pissed off but not in an anarchic teenaged way. she is no wide-eyed innocent, but she isn't psychotic, either. she's just a human surviving within her inherited power system, raising her two little brothers and caring for her mad mother, sacrificing her love and dignity without regret, but with necessary resignation. yet she does *show* emotion, even though it is a luxury in her situation. every scene she has with gail is understated, but packs an emotional wallop. (yeah, i know, i hate that expression and i'm not sure why i used it. blame the heat)

this is no morality tale, it is just a slice of a life that is happening, unsung, in america. it's too short a book for me to say much about without rooning it for everyone, but i loved it like crazy, and will have to get all his other, out of print, books into my hands...

come to my blog!

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## Diane says

This novella is a gem. It's tough yet emotional, scary yet empowering, stark and yet beautiful.

I have been meaning to read *Winter's Bone* for several years, but I kept putting it off because I thought it would be depressing. And while the story is bleak, it is so gorgeously written that I got lost in the prose.

The book is set in an impoverished region in southern Missouri called the Ozarks, where making meth is a popular way of earning a living. But 17-year-old Ree Dolly hopes to escape to the Army next year, if she can track down her Daddy. He's out on bond and has been gone for a while, and if she doesn't find him, she'll lose the family home.

Poor Ree. She's just a teenager, yet she has to make all of the adult decisions because her mother has gone crazy and her daddy skipped out. She's even taking care of her two younger brothers, teaching them how to cook, how to fight, and how to shoot.

Although friends advise her against it, Ree starts asking around to see if anyone can find her father. The more she asks, the more danger she finds. This is one of those stories where a happy ending seems impossible.

The movie version of this book with Jennifer Lawrence is well done, but I thought the book was much richer in detail and description. I highly recommend it.

### **Favorite Descriptions**

"Mom sat in her chair beside the potbelly and the boys sat at the table eating what Ree fed them. Mom's morning pills turned her into a cat, a breathing thing that sat near heat and occasionally made a sound. Mom's chair was an old padded rocker that seldom rocked, and at odd instants she'd hum ill-matched snips of music, notes unrelated by melody or pitch. But for most of any day she was quiet and still, wearing a small lingering smile prompted by something vaguely nice going on inside her head. She was a Bromont, born to this house, and she'd once been pretty. Even as she was now, medicated and lost to the present, with hair she forgot to wash or brush and deep wrinkles growing on her face, you could see she'd once been as comely as any girl that ever danced barefoot across this tangled country of Ozark hills and hollers. Long, dark, and lovely she had been, in those days before her mind broke and the parts scattered and she let them go."

"Ree's grand hope was that these boys would not be dead to wonder by age twelve, dulled to life, empty of kindness, boiling with mean. So many Dolly kids were that way, ruined before they had chin hair, groomed to live outside square law and abide by the remorseless blood-soaked commandments that governed lives led outside square law."

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### **Kemper says**

I grew up in a rural area with no shortage of poor rednecks so I thought I knew about country poverty, but the people I knew with their decayed farm houses and trailers lived like Donald Trump compared to the backwoods clan of hill folk in this book.

Ree Dolly is a 16-year old girl who dropped out of high school to take care of her crazy mother and two younger brothers. She lives in a remote part of the Ozarks where the only job opportunities are in crystal meth production. Ree plans on joining the army the second she's old enough, and she's trying to prepare her brothers to take care of themselves once she leaves.

Ree's father, Jessup, hasn't been home in weeks, but that's nothing new so she isn't concerned until a deputy shows up looking for him. Ree is shocked to learn that Jessup is out on bond and used their house as

collateral. If he doesn't show for his court date in a few days, Ree and her family will be homeless during a harsh winter. Ree has no choice but to start asking her extended family if they know where her father is, but this is dangerous because the closed mouth rednecks don't like people asking questions, even if they're kin. The only one who even kinda helps her is her crazy Uncle Teardrop who got half his head melted in a meth lab fire, and he's not exactly reliable. Ree will soon figure out that her daddy got himself into big trouble with the family and looking for him will bring more of the same to her.

Daniel Woodrell created a stark portrait of rural poverty where shooting squirrels for supper and chopping wood for heat are still routine chores. Then he put a character you can't help but love in the middle of it. Ree is smart and tough, but even rarer in her world, she's managed to hang on to a sense of dignity. She has no illusions, but she isn't cynical or cold either. She's doing everything she can to protect her brothers and mother, and she has a touching relationship with her best friend Gail, who got pregnant and married a man she barely knows.

Short, but powerful, this a terrific novel with a heroine you won't forget.

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### **Bill Kerwin says**

In this crime thriller set in the Ozarks, 16-year-old Ree Dolly goes on a manhunt to locate her meth-cooking father, dead or alive. She needs to find him because he put their house up for collateral with the bailbondsmen, and he's due in court soon.

The Ozark atmosphere is convincing, Woodrell's prose is spare and poetic, and--most important of all--Ree Dolly is a great person to get to know. (I half hope--and half dread--that this may be the first in a series. I want to hear more of Ree, but I enjoyed this book so much I don't want an inferior sequel to spoil my experience).

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### **Trudi says**

I've put off writing a review for this book because I always struggle with the great ones and Woodrell's *Winter's Bone* is one of those (with a capital G). It's craft and heart and drama and beauty. It's poetry and grit, entangled in an embrace of love and hatred.

Woodrell offers up a stinging portrait of impoverished life in the Ozarks, where kin saves as often as it condemns. The hill people of Ree's world live by their own laws separate from that of the state -- of paramount importance, don't be a snitch and mind your own business. Bad things happen to anyone who talks too much or asks too many questions. Unfortunately, sixteen year old Ree has *a lot* of questions that need answering with only her to ask them. Left on her own to protect a shattered mother and two helpless kid brothers, Ree is desperate to uncover the whereabouts of her meth-making father. She must venture into the cold and ice and pass over hostile thresholds where she is neither invited nor wanted.

Ree's fierceness and courage stole my heart. She ranks as one of my favorite literary characters OF ALL TIME. Her stubbornness and smart mouth made me smile as much as it made me fear for her safety. Ree has her own set of rules to live by that include, stepping in to do for her brothers where her parents have failed and "Never. Never ask for what ought to be offered." Ree is an old soul, mature beyond her years, forced to grow up fast and smart in a world that has teeth and a taste for blood.

This is a harsh story, one where the author pulls no punches. Woodrell is not out to romanticize this hill life or the hardscrabble characters living it. He wants us to see the ugly, to *feel* it in our bones, but for all of that there is tremendous beauty here as well, not just in the prose that SINGS but in the simplicity of a proud people who do what they must to survive in an environment that does not forgive weakness or stupidity lightly.

I cannot recommend this book enough. I am also going to recommend Kemper's review here, because he does such a wonderful job capturing the book's honesty and intensity. If I haven't convinced you to read *Winter's Bone*, he will.

\*\*\***A note on the audio version:** Outstanding! Emma Galvin captures Ree's strength and vulnerability perfectly. Woodrell's prose is so gorgeous it soars when read aloud.

Love and hate hold hands always so it made natural sense that they'd get confused by upset married folk in the wee hours once in a while and a nosebleed or bruised breast might result. But it just seemed proof that a great foulness was afoot in the world when a no-strings roll in the hay with a stranger led to chipped teeth or cigarette burns on the wrist. ` *Winter's Bone*

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