

[The Hook and the Haymaker by Jared Yates Sexton](#)

written by Guest Contributor | May 29, 2015



The Hook and the Haymaker by Jared Yates Sexton
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Jared Yates Sexton will tell you flat-out: Hoosier born and bred. Reared by single-mother, forged in his grandma's apocalyptic fire. Strong women. Sweat on the brow types. Bibles on nightstands.

Apart this context, Sexton's stories may catch the light wrong. He's got women objectified, sometimes literally, like when Faye is won in a game of poker. He's got these heroes – selfish men, puffed chests, whisky breath. But it is inapt, even lazy, to take Sexton's actors at face value, removed from Sexton's careful framework.

Yes, the characters are full of air – caricatures of masculinity, feigners of grit – but they're supposed to be. Sexton presents exaggerated illustrations of old Southern literary men.

In "Coming Home," Bradley, a four-year-old thumb sucker, says, "I don't reckon Mommy would be too happy." That dichotomy (the cowboyish "I don't reckon" beside a feeble "Mommy") plays on every single page in this collection, and Sexton's best exists exactly at this clash. With these contradictions, Sexton dismantles notions that masculinity relies on violence and bluster. At their best, Sexton's flaunting heroes are humane, acting in direct opposition of their egos and perceptions of masculinity. Sexton uses these pretentiously macho dudes (that is: hooch-drinking, gun-toting, women-worshipping) to mock the system from whence they came.

"Live Off the Land" introduces a couple of guys and their wives, liquored up. One of the women jokes about "what happens when you get a couple of men together and the booze comes out." A series of actions, proofs-of-manliness, follow, culminating in talk of moving to Alaska to "get away from this shit we call a life." The man continues, "I'm sick of having it easy. I want to get my hands dirty, work up some calluses, you know. Go to sleep at night, exhausted and proud." The irony is they're having this conversation buying Miller Lite at Kroger in the middle of the night. Yet it's sad when Alice laughs at her counterpart's "Mountain Man" dreams. It's real. From these cartoonishly bold men comes complex and believable conflict.

In one story, "Bear Fight," Grandad, "the meanest sonuvabitch in Greene County, Indiana," stares at his mitts silently, likely praying, *Why? Why are we violent? Why are we mean?* Violence pervades a handful of these yarns, and

Sexton proves its purposelessness. Only in moments of peace do Sexton's characters take a hint. Just most of the time they lack the modesty to get there.

And so it goes in this collection. Fronting bravado, each main character fights a losing fight. As readers, the incoming punches aren't hard to read. The inflated blue-collar problems can be chalked up to what it is the characters want but can't get enough of: booze, money, and love.

Often the women drive the action in this book. Some call the men on their bullshit, while others take advantage of the guys' weaknesses. These men are weak. Weak-willed, emotionally fragile. Perhaps a missed opportunity, Sexton fails to meaningfully rearrange stereotypical gender roles. His female characters are empowered in their parts in the stories, sure, but they don't appear bold outside their actions on page. To be fair, all of Sexton's characters may demonstrate moments of influence or brilliance, but rarely does an actor take charge in the big picture. This is what I'm getting at. Instances of victory, despite the losing war looming. A wife wins a spat, but the hubby won't change.

Take Ty in "Just Like That." He's home unemployed while his partner Helen presumably wins the bread. "Ty, she [says], You don't [even] pay taxes." When she returns one afternoon, she has just witnessed a man die in a car accident. Helen is shaken-up, yet Ty throws a fit. He is jealous of the dead man. Helen's stability allows her to ignore her lover's cries for attention. Good on her. Ty grumbles and whines, eventually defeating the dead man in his head, a petty but symbolic victory. Ty wins himself momentary peace of mind, but there's no indication that Ty will sober up and treat his wife or himself with respect. No implication Helen's strength will manifest, and she'll leave him. Perhaps that is simply how it goes, and Sexton draws keenly from reality.

Sexton's collection doesn't reimagine the medium. The sentences frequently take the obvious route. No quotation marks. The conflicts aren't diverse. You can drape Freytag's pyramid overtop each story like a tarp on a Mustang. These aren't knocks necessarily. The book's swings connect. It fulfills its promise as a successor of Sexton's first release, *An End to All Things* (Atticus Books, 2012).

From Hannah's *Airships*-style stars on the cover to the Carhartt jacket Sexton's rocking on the back-cover, this one nails the drawl, sets the stage equal-parts Southern and Midwestern, rushes the tempo, beefs up the characters, and lets them loose. These stories work as a unit, and Sexton is to thank. This collection is built Ford tough. It's Rocky Mountain cold. Book clocks in somewhere between Brown's *Big Bad Love* and Altman's film-adaptation of Carver's *Short Cuts*. Gauge reads true-blue.

A dozen roses are \$17.99 at Kroger. The jackpot for the Hoosier Lotto is up around \$9 million. Here in Muncie, where Jared lived and taught for some time, we have Friendly Package Liquors, "The Coldest Beer in A Million Miles." This week's special, a 24-case of High Life for \$12.97.

Booze. Money. Love. The jab. The hook. And the haymaker.

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