

A Feast of Snakes:
Slithering Past History or The Novel as
Historical Snake-in-the-Weeds

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In his 1976 novel, *A Feast of Snakes*, Harry Crews uses a snake oil concoction of sweat, violence and sexual musk and muscle to bind together dog fighting, weightlifting, snake hunting, football, dance and debate in a bizarre and unforgettable tale of rural Georgian life. Two themes dominate *Snakes*: first, the constant tension between thoughts and deeds; and then the frailty of a social order that is built upon the seeming preeminence of physical authority. While the town's football heroes

("Boss Snakes") seem lords of their domain, they are cowed by knowledge, and their frustration at a power greater than their own surfaces in mean-spirited, vindictive and sorrowful behavior. In Crews's world, athletic heroics build a foundation for despair and loss more readily than a bedrock for character.

Beyond the fact that Crews describes a largely undocumented culture—one beyond the scope of nearly all historians—*A Feast of Snakes* draws its historical value from the ability of Crews (and many other novelists) to confront the most unalterable yet least acknowledged fact of history—the incredibly consistent streak of wretched human behavior—and then fine tune it to the tolerance level of the contemporary mind. Humans tolerate depravity of the species only in limited instances: when explained as individual aberration; when undertaken in public; or when defused by fiction. While history most often steers us away from the details of personal feeling, fraudulently raising our hopes that technological progress will somehow drag our behavior along to the next evolutionary rung, distracts us with the Great Man or the Grand Gesture, stays always mired in lesson, fiction allows us to safely acknowledge and understand as much or as little of human joy and misery as we can handle. That is, fiction gives license to examine the terrifying parts of the human mind where reside the things you talk about the least, think about the most, and protect most carefully from history's reach.