



The Wettest County in the World: A Novel Based on a True Story

By Matt Bondurant

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The Wettest County in the World: A Novel Based on a True Story By Matt Bondurant

Based on the true story of Matt Bondurant's grandfather and two granduncles, *The Wettest County in the World* is a gripping tale of brotherhood, greed, and murder. The Bondurant Boys were a notorious gang of roughnecks and moonshiners who ran liquor through Franklin County, Virginia, during Prohibition and in the years after. Howard, the eldest brother, is an ox of a man besieged by the horrors he witnessed in the Great War; Forrest, the middle brother, is fierce, mythically indestructible, and the consummate businessman; and Jack, the youngest, has a taste for luxury and a dream to get out of Franklin. Driven and haunted, these men forge a business, fall in love, and struggle to stay afloat as they watch their family die, their father's business fail, and the world they know crumble beneath the Depression and drought.

White mule, white lightning, firewater, popskull, wild cat, stump whiskey, or rotgut—whatever you called it, Franklin County was awash in moonshine in the 1920s. When Sherwood Anderson, the journalist and author of *Winesburg, Ohio*, was covering a story there, he christened it the “wettest county in the world.” In the twilight of his career, Anderson finds himself driving along dusty red roads trying to find the Bondurant brothers, piece together the clues linking them to “The Great Franklin County Moonshine Conspiracy,” and break open the silence that shrouds Franklin County.

In vivid, muscular prose, Matt Bondurant brings these men—their dark deeds, their long silences, their deep desires—to life. His understanding of the passion, violence, and desperation at the center of this world is both heartbreakingly tragic and magnificently moving.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. This fictionalized tale of Depression-era bootlegging from Bondurant (*The Third Translation*) enlists the help of *Winesburg, Ohio* author Sherwood Anderson to investigate Bondurant family lore. In 1928, a pair of thieves accost Bondurant's real life great-uncle Forrest at his Franklin County, Va., restaurant. They're after a large cache of bootlegging money and end up cutting Forrest's throat. The story of his survival and his trek to a hospital 12 miles away has taken on mythical proportions by the time Sherwood Anderson arrives in Franklin County in 1934 to research a magazine piece on the area's prolific moonshiners. Soon after Anderson's arrival, two anonymous men appear at the same hospital, one with legs meticulously shattered from ankle to hip, the other one castrated, with the by-products of the deed deposited in a jar of moonshine. The arc of the story lies between the attack on Forrest and that on the two men. Bondurant endows his gritty story with all the puzzle-solving satisfactions of a mystery. It's a gripping, relentless tale, delivered in no-nonsense prose. (*Oct.*) ""

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From [Booklist](#)

This family saga follows the Bondurants, bootlegging brothers runnin' stills, runnin' loads, and runnin' from the law in Depression-era Virginia. The book is mainly narrated through the experience of the youngest Bondurant, Jack (in truth, a grandfather of the author), and his family's moonshine enterprise supplies the action in a plot that evokes the culture of distilling and distributing white lightning. To optimistic Jack, bootlegging is both a bond to his older brothers, Forrest and Howard, and a means to make cash to impress a girl. Forrest, by contrast, is taciturn and suspicious: the world is violent, and he meets it on that ground. Tender of the stills and imbiber from same, burly Howard is always ready to take on the Bondurants' enemies, corrupt law officers. Wending through this conflict in flash-forward mode is novelist Sherwood Anderson, who plumbs the Bondurant story a few years after the brothers' climactic confrontation with the county sheriff. Descriptively gritty and emotionally resonant, novelist Bondurant dramatically projects the poverty and danger at the heart of the old-time bootlegging life. --Gilbert Taylor

Review

"Bondurant tells a distinctively American story. The gritty, suspenseful narrative gripped me and wouldn't let me go. It also touched my heart in all the right ways. Matt Bondurant's writing is as full of beauty as it is of verve and grit. Thank God it's legal to write so well." -- Lee Martin, author of *River of Heaven* and *The Bright Forever*

"In his scintillating new novel, Matt Bondurant explores a crucial period in the history of Virginia and of his family. His gorgeous, precise prose brings to life an amazing cast of characters, including Sherwood Anderson, and the often deadly battles of Prohibition. *The Wettest County in the World* is a remarkably compelling, highly intelligent, and deeply moving novel." -- Margot Livesey, author of *The House on Fortune Street* and *Eva Moves the Furniture*

"Bondurant endows this gritty story with all the puzzle-solving satisfactions of a mystery. It's a gripping, relentless tale, delivered in no-nonsense prose." -- *Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"Interweaving the bleak portraits of Walker Evans, the charged landscapes of Annie Dillard, and the breakneck plotting of Cormac McCarthy, Matt Bondurant mines his own family history to offer a novel that's

both a gritty, fast-paced tale of bootleggers and car chases and a timeless hard-knock ballad, a myth fixed in the amber of one small community's imagination. *The Wettest County in the World* is a suspense story dashed to tintype smithereens, each one a jewel." -- Elis Avery, author of *The Teahouse Fire*

"Brilliantly conceived, and so close to home, this novel proves Matt Bondurant's burgeoning talent -- a book for thirsty American readers to guzzle down, a book for all young American writers to admire." -- Alan Cheuse, author of *The Fires*

"Bondurant writes fiercely and passionately. Severe violence, thrillingly rendered, pervades this book, which will remind readers of hard-hitting Southern writers such as Cormac McCarthy and Larry Brown.The story Bondurant has to tell is riveting, detailed and historical. His knowledge of Southern culture is as deep as his ancestors' knowledge of making whiskey. We are aware from the first page that we are in the hands of a remarkable storyteller." -- *San Francisco Chronicle*

"Bondurant is a nimble writer, especially when it comes to depicting gore and guts. His descriptions of the warped and wounded (a man lying in a hospital bed with "skin blanched like boiled meat; the bedding stained with a yellowish fluid" can leave a reader queasy, but the liveliness of his writing makes it hard for even the most lily-livered to look away.....Bondurant's prose is lyrical.....who can deny the power of a narrative so deeply rooted in childhood imaginings, when a mild and quiet grandfather hung those brass knuckles on the wall?" -- *New York Times Book Review*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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