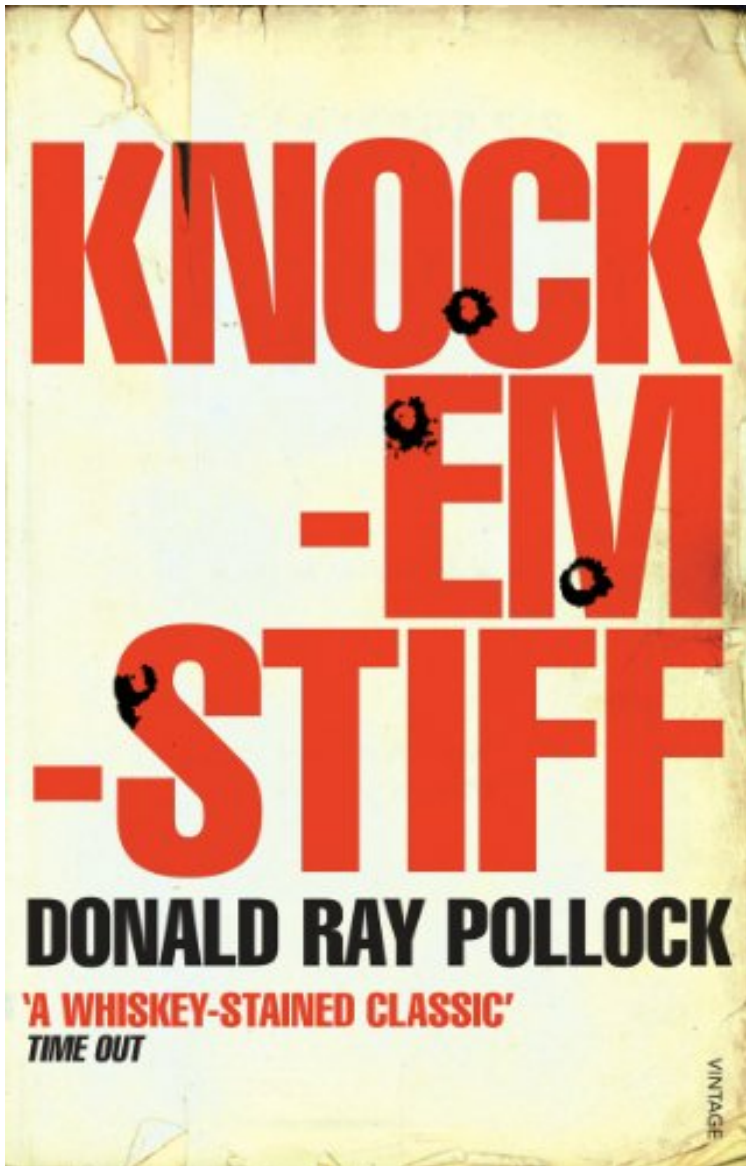


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Knockemstiff



Par Donald Ray Pollock
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Par Donald Ray Pollock : Knockemstiff before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Knockemstiff:

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Description : Description du produitKnockemstiff is the world of Vernon God Little by a writer who depicts poor America like no other. Donald Ray Pollock is an astonishing new voice in American fiction.

Prsentation de l'diteurBlunt, brutal, but infused with a deep sympathy, Knockemstiff is a pitch-dark and hilarious collection of stories set in a tiny town in Southern Ohio.The youth of Knockemstiff grow up in the malignant shadow of their parents; raised on abuse, alcohol, drugs and cigarettes, they are stunted in every possible way: emotionally, mentally, sometimes physically. They talk a lot about escape but they never so much as cross the county line..com Significant Seven, March 2008: A quick Internet search for "Knockemstiff, Ohio" reveals a lazy nexus of shabby houses and dirt roads in southern Ohio, lacking a post office and grocery store, but rich in legends of epic fistfights and swamp-dwelling ghosts. Donald Ray

Pollock, a native of this "ghost town," populates his own Knockemstiff with living revenants: huffers, murderers, sex fiends, and their hapless (though not innocent) victims, all tethered to the woebegone "holler" by their own self-inflicted shortcomings and depravities. Pollock pulls no punches--his prose is blunt and visceral, as well as stylish and skilled--and reading these mini grand guignols can be like crunching on a mouthful of your own broken teeth. He resists casting judgment (or sympathy) on his doomed reprobates; predator or prey (or sometimes both), Pollock contemplates his characters with all the warmth of a "frozen bleach bottle." It's an astonishing debut. --Jon Foro Extrait

REAL LIFEMy father showed me how to hurt a man one august night at the Torch Drive-in when I was seven years old. It was the only thing he was ever any good at. This was years ago, back when the outdoor movie experience was still a big deal in southern Ohio. Godzilla was playing, along with some sorry-ass flying saucer movie that showed how pie pans could take over the world. It was hotter than a fat lady's box that evening, and by the time the cartoon began playing on the big plywood screen, the old man was miserable. He kept bitching about the heat, sopping the sweat off his head with a brown paper bag. Ross County hadn't had any rain in two months. Every morning my mother turned the kitchen radio to KB98 and listened to Miss Sally Flowers pray for a thunderstorm. Then she'd go outside and stare at the empty white sky that hung over the holler like a sheet. Sometimes I still think about her standing in that brittle brown grass, stretching her neck in hopes of seeing just one lousy dark cloud. "Hey, Vernon, watch this," she said that night. Ever since we'd parked, she'd been trying to show the old man that she could stick a hot dog down her throat without messing up her shiny lipstick. You've got to understand, my mother hadn't been out of Knockemstiff all summer. Just seeing a couple of red lights had made her all goosey. But every time she gagged on that wiener, the ropy muscles in the back of my old man's neck twisted a little tighter, made it seem as if his head was going to pop off any second. My older sister, Jeanette, had used her head and played sick all day, then talked them into letting her stay at a neighbor's house. So there I was, stuck in the backseat by myself, chewing the skin off my fingers, and hoping Mom wouldn't piss him off too much before Godzilla stomped the guts out of Tokyo. But really, it was already too late. Mom had forgotten to pack the old man's special cup, and so everything was shot in the ass as far as he was concerned. He couldn't even muster a chuckle for Popeye, let alone get excited about his wife doing tricks with a wrinkled-up Oscar Mayer. Besides, my old man hated movies. "Screw a bunch of make-believe," he'd say when_ever someone mentioned seeing the latest John Wayne or Robert Mitchum. "What the hell's wrong with real life?" He'd only agreed to the drive-in in the first place because of all the hell Mom had raised about his new car, a 1965 Impala he'd brought home the night before. It was the third set of wheels in a year. We lived on soup beans and fried bread, but drove around Knockemstiff like rich people. Just that morning, I'd heard my mother get on the phone and rag to her sister, the one who lived in town. "The sonofabitch is crazy, Margie," she said. "We couldn't even pay the electric bill last month." I was sitting in front of the dead TV, watching watery blood trickle down her pale calves. She'd tried to shave them with the old man's straight razor, but her legs were like sticks of butter. A black fly kept buzzing around her bony ankles, dodging her mad slaps. "I mean it, Margie," she said into the black mouthpiece, "I'd be outta this hellhole in a minute if it wasn't for these kids." As soon as Godzilla started, the old man pulled the ashtray out of the dash and poured a drink in it from his bottle. "Good Lord, Vernon," my mom said. She was holding the hot dog in midair, getting ready to have another go at it. "Hey, I told you, I ain't drinkin' from no bottle. You start that shit, you end up a goddamn wino." He took a slug from the ashtray, then gagged and spit a soggy cigarette butt out the window. He'd been at it since noon, showing off the new ride to his good-time buddies. There was already a dent in one of the side panels. After a couple more sips from the ashtray, the old man jerked the door open and swung his skinny legs out. Puke sprayed from his mouth, soaking the cuffs of his blue work pants with Old Grand-Dad. The station wagon next to us started up and moved to another spot down the row. He hung his head between his legs for a minute or two, then rose up and wiped his chin with the back of his hand. "Bobby," he said to me, "one more of your mama's greasy taters and they'll be plantin' your old daddy." My old man didn't eat enough to keep a rat alive, but anytime he threw up his whiskey, he blamed it on Mom's cooking. Mom gave up, wrapped the hot dog in a napkin, and handed it back to me. "Remember, Vernon," she warned, "you gotta drive us home." "Shoot," he said, lighting a cigarette, "this car drives its own self." Then he tipped up the ashtray and finished off the rest of his drink. For a few minutes, he stared at the screen and sank slowly into the padded upholstery like a setting sun. My mom reached over and turned the speaker that was hanging in the window down a notch. Our only hope was that the old man would pass out before the entire night was ruined. But as soon as Raymond Burr landed at the Tokyo airport, he shot straight up in his seat, then turned and glared back at me with his bloodshot eyes.

"Goddamn it, boy," he said, "how many times I gotta tell you about bitin' them fingernails? You sound like a mouse chewin' through a fuckin' sack of corn." "Leave him be, Vernon," my mother said. "That ain't what he does anyway." "Jesus, what's the difference?" he said, scratching the whiskers on his neck. "Hard to tell where he's had those dick skinners." I pulled my fingers out of my mouth and sat on my hands. It was the only way I could keep away from them whenever the old man was around. That whole summer, he'd been threatening to coat me clear to the elbows with chicken shit to break me of the habit. He splashed more whiskey in his ashtray, and gulped it down with a shudder. Just as I began edging slowly across the seat to sit behind my mother, the dome light popped on. "C'mon, Bobby," he said, "we gotta take a leak." "But the show just started, Vernon," Mom protested. "He's been waiting all summer to see this." "Hey, you know how he is," the old man said, loud enough for the people in the next row to hear. "He sees that Godzilla thing, I don't want him pissin' all over my new seats." Sliding out of the car, he leaned against the metal speaker post and stuffed his T-shirt into his baggy pants. I got out reluctantly and followed my old man as he weaved across the gravel lot. Some teenage girls in culottes strutted by us, their legs illuminated by the movie screen's glimmering light. When he stopped to stare at them, I crashed into the back of his legs and fell down at his feet. "Jesus Christ, boy," he said, jerking me up by the arm like a rag doll, "you gotta get your head out of your ass. You act more like your damn mother every day." The cinder-block building in the middle of the drive-in lot was swarming with people. The loud rattling projector was up front, the concession stand in the middle, and the johns in the back. The smell of piss and popcorn hung in the hot dead air like insecticide. In the restroom, a row of men and boys leaned over a long green metal trough with their dicks hanging out. They all stared straight ahead at a wall painted the color of mud. Others were lined up behind them on the wet sticky floor, rocking on the toes of their shoes, impatiently waiting their turn. A fat man in bib overalls and a ragged straw hat tottered out of a wooden stall munching on a Zero candy bar and the old man shoved me inside, slamming the door behind me. I flushed the commode and stood there holding my breath, pretending to take a leak. Bits and pieces of movie dialogue drifted in from outside and I was trying to imagine the parts I was missing when the old man started banging on the flimsy door. "Damn, boy, what's taking you so long?" he yelled. "You beatin' your meat in there?" He pounded again, and I heard someone laugh. Then he said, "I tell you what, these fuckin' kids will drive you crazy." I zipped up and stepped out of the stall. The old man was handing a cigarette to a porky guy with sawdust combed through his greasy black hair. A purple stain shaped like a wedge of pie covered the belly of his dirty shirt. "I shit you not, Cappy," my father was telling the man, "this boy's scared of his own goddamn shadow. A fuckin' bug's got more balls." "Yeah, I know what you mean," Cappy said. He bit the filter off the cigarette and spat it on the concrete floor. "My sister's got one like that. Poor little guy, he can't even bait a hook." "Bobby shoulda been a girl," the old man said. "Goddamn it, when I was that age, I was choppin' wood for the stove." Cappy lit the cigarette with a long wooden match he pulled from his shirt pocket and said with a shrug, "Well, things was different back then, Vern." Then he stuck the match in his ear and twirled it around inside his head. "I know, I know," the old man went on, "but it still makes you wonder what the fuck's gonna happen to this goddamn country someday." Suddenly a man wearing black-framed glasses stepped from his place in line at the urinal and tapped my old man on the shoulder. He was the biggest sonofabitch I'd ever seen; his fat head nearly touched the ceiling. His arms were the size of fence posts. A boy my size stood behind him, wearing a pair of brightly colored swimming trunks and a T-shirt that had a faded picture of Davy Crockett on the front of it. He had a fresh waxy crew cut and orange pop stains on his chin. Every time he took a breath, a Bazooka bubble bloomed from his mouth like a round pink flower. He looked happy, and I hated him instantly. "Watch your language," the man said. His loud voice boomed across the room and everyone turned to look at us. The old man whirled around and rammed his nose into the big man's chest. He bounced back and looked up at the giant towering over him. "Goddamn," he said. The big man's sweaty face began to turn red. "Didn't you understand me?" he said to my father. "I asked you to watch your cussing. I don't want my son hearing that kind of talk." Then he said slowly, like he was dealing with a retard, "I . . . won't . . . ask . . . you . . . again." "You didn't ask me the first fuckin' time," my old man shot back. He was tough as bark but rail thin back in those days, and he never knew when to keep his mouth shut. He looked around at the crowd starting to gather, then turned to Cappy and winked. "Oh, you think it's funny?" the man said. His hands tightened into fists the size of softballs and he made a move toward my father. Someone in the back said, "Kick his ass." My father took two steps back, dropped his cigarette, and held up his palms. "Now hold on there, buddy. Jesus, I don't mean nothing." Then he lowered his eyes, stood staring at the big man's shiny black shoes for a few seconds. I could see him gnawing on the inside of his mouth. His hands kept opening

and closing like the pincers on a crawdad. "Hey," he finally said, "we don't need no trouble here tonight." The big man glanced at the people watching him. They were all waiting for his next move. His glasses started to slide down his broad nose and he pushed them back up. Taking a deep breath, he swallowed hard, then jabbed a fat finger in my father's bony chest. "Look, I mean what I say," he said, spit flying out of his mouth. "This here is a family place. I don't care if you are a damn drunk. You understand?" I sneaked a look over at the man's son and he stuck his tongue out at me. "Yeah, I understand all right," I heard my father say quietly. A smug look came over the big bastard's face. His chest puffed out like a tom turkey's, straining the brown buttons on his clean white shirt. Looking around at the pack of men who were hoping to see a fight, he sighed deeply and shrugged his wide shoulders. "I guess that's it, boys," he said to no one in particular. Then, his hand now resting gently on top of his son's head, he started to turn. I watched nervously as the disappointed crowd shook their heads and began moving away. I remember wishing I could slide out the door with them. I figured the old man would blame me for the way that things had turned out. But just as Godzilla's screechy, door-hinge roar echoed through the restroom, he leaped forward and drove his fist against the temple of the big man's head. People never believe me, but I once saw him knock a horse out with that same hand. A sickening crack reverberated through the concrete room. The man staggered sideways and all of the air suddenly whooshed out of his body like a fart. His hands waved frantically in the air as if he were grabbing for a lifeline, and then he dropped to the floor with a thud. The room went quiet for a second, but when the man's son began screaming, my father exploded. He circled around the man, kicking the ribs with his work boots, stomping the left hand until the gold wedding ring cut through to the bone of his finger. Dropping to his knees, he grabbed the man's glasses and snapped them in two, beat him in the face until a tooth popped through one meaty cheek. Then Cappy and three other men grabbed my father from behind and pulled him away. His fists glistened with blood. A thin string of white froth hung from his chin. I heard someone yell to call the cops. Still holding on to my father, Cappy said, "Jesus, Vern, that man's hurt bad."