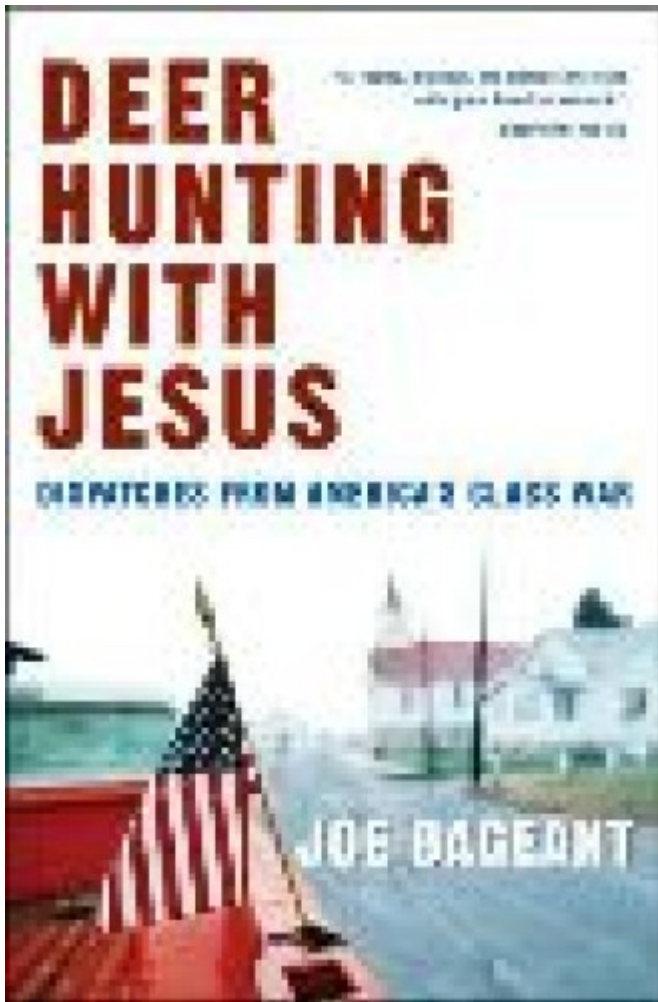


Deer Hunting with Jesus

reviewed by [Robert Westbrook](#) in the [November 13, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Deer Hunting with Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War

Joe Bageant

Crown

If social democracy is ever again to be taken seriously in this country, its proponents have to admit that much of the American working class—upon whom their hopes for

a more egalitarian society must ride—is, despite its seeming best interests, immune to the appeal of social democracy. But it is hard for a social democrat to say so without sounding—well, undemocratic.

It is a bit easier to brood about false consciousness and to avow that most working-class Americans are “dumber than a sack of hair” if you are a social democrat speaking of your own neighbors and kin—neighbors and kin that not only anger but sadden you, not only frighten but touch you, not only resist but love you. Like journalist Joe Bageant, you have to be welcome on the barstools of the Royal Lunch grille. You have to sit there with friends like Dink, Dot and Pootie and look past the T-shirt that reads, one million battered women in this country and i’ve been eating mine plain! You have to buy your groceries with people “who smell like an ashtray in the checkout line, devour a carton of Little Debbie’s at a sitting, and praise Jesus for a truck with no spare tire,” and see the deeper contours of their lives.

Deer Hunting with Jesus is a ground-level report from the town of Winchester, Virginia, on the devastation wrought by class inequality in 21st-century America, and it is an effort to explain why so little has been done about inequality in a nation in which those who suffer its effects make up a majority of eligible voters in an ostensibly democratic polity. It is not a book for the white working class—many members of which have not read a book since leaving high school—but a book about the white working class for those who do not see it, particularly those who still lay claim to the tattered raiment of American liberalism.

Bageant, the son of a garage attendant, grew up in Winchester. He recently returned there to live after a lengthy absence, packing a wealth of countercultural experience and a political sensibility decidedly out of sync with local norms. His son works at the local Rubber Maid plant. His brother is a Baptist minister of a decidedly fundamentalist sort. His old girlfriends live in worthless modular homes sold to them by old high school classmates who are now in the seamy mortgage industry and aspire to break into the cartel that runs the town. His family and friends have all done their part to elect “dangerous dimwits in cowboy boots.”

Though Bageant’s book has much in common with others of recent vintage that ask the same questions—such as Thomas Frank’s much-discussed *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*—it is distinguished by its empathy. No one would think to hail Bageant as the new H. L. Mencken, as they did Frank. Bageant’s plentiful sarcasm is seldom smug. “After a lifetime of identity conflict,” he writes, “I have come to accept that

these are my people—by blood, even if not politically or spiritually. I have prayed with them, mourned with them, and celebrated their weddings. I share their rude tastes and humor, and I am marked by the same fundamentalist God-instilled self-loathing. No matter how much I may change or improve my condition, I cannot escape their pathos. I go forward, yet I remain.”

Bageant is particularly good at taking us into the hearts of working-class women. He even manages to enlist some empathy for Lynndie England, “the leash girl of Abu Ghraib,” who hails from nearby Fort Ashby, West Virginia. The most poignant portrait he offers is that of Dot, a 300-pound woman disabled by heart disease and diabetes, who drags her oxygen tank to the Dairy Queen to sing the songs of her old friend Patsy Cline, another working-class daughter of Winchester, who was reviled in her day by the town’s elite as a drunken whore.

Bageant attributes his neighbors’ right-wing politics principally to ignorance that has left them trapped inside a deeply misleading “hologram” of America. “Theirs is an intellectual life consisting of things that sound right, a blend of modern folk wisdom, cliché, talk radio, and Christian radio babble.” But it is ignorance tightly woven into the day-to-day fabric of their lives, lives of unremitting work that leaves little time for learning and that fosters the fatalism that echoes in the country music playing in their earphones when they are not tuned in to Rush Limbaugh. “Getting a lousy education, then spending a lifetime pitted against your fellow workers in the gladiatorial theatre of the free market economy does not make for optimism or open-mindedness, both hallmarks of liberalism. It makes for a kind of bleak coarseness and inner degradation.”

Class, as Bageant understands it, is less about income than about power (though it is about income too). You are working class if “you do not have power over your work. You do not control when you work, how much you get paid, how fast you work, or whether you will be cut loose from your job at the first shiver on Wall Street.” Work of this sort produces anger, anxiety and daily humiliation. It is an affront to decency.

The dissatisfied and disappointed people who suffer what Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb long ago called the “hidden injuries of class” can be politically aroused. But in this country, at least of late, it is the right and not the left that has most effectively done so.

Bageant argues that American liberals have to learn to talk directly with working people in towns like Winchester if they are ever to wean them from deference to “shit stirrers” like local real estate magnate Laurita Barr, who spends a good deal of time in places like the Royal Lunch alerting folks to the dangers posed by the Democratic Party’s alleged alliance with the North American Man/Boy Love Association. They have to compete more effectively with “local networks of moneyed families, bankers, developers, lawyers, and merchants” who exploit the white working class while winning its favor with appeals to shared values. Unlike liberal Democrats, working-class people in Winchester “encounter Republicans face-to-face at churches, all-you-can-eat spaghetti fund-raisers, fraternal organizations like the Elks Club, and local small businesses.”

And at gun shows. Bageant breaks ranks with the left on gun control, an issue on which he himself strikes me as dumber than a sack of hair. Not only does he get uncharacteristically misty about the religious epiphanies afforded by deer hunting, but he argues vigorously for the NRA’s version of the Second Amendment and the crime-fighting efficacy of a .38 in the nightstand. He is right, of course, that most liberal gun control advocates do not “duck and dodge from street light to street light at 1 a.m. while dragging their laundry to the Doozy Duds, where they sit, usually alone, for an hour or so, fluorescently lit up behind the big plate glass window like so much fresh meat on display, garnished with a promising purse or wallet, before they make the corner-to-corner run for home with their now fragrant laundered waitress or fast-food uniforms.” But one would think that if other societies have figured out a way to protect the lives of such citizens without arming them to the teeth, then we could too.

Nonetheless, Bageant is probably correct in believing that the place for social democrats to start a conversation with Pootie and Dink is not with a proposal to disarm them. Where then, if not gun control, might the left begin to speak to Winchester’s working class?

Health care, perhaps. Bageant’s penultimate chapter is a heartrending account of the fate of working-class widows like Dot and his own mother, consigned after a lifetime of hard work to the dumpsters that are “nonprofit” nursing homes more interested in market share than patient care. For these women and their families, the choice is “either the Hallmont in Winchester, which smells like shit and Pine-Sol, or the one in Romney, which smells like shit and piss.” Bageant’s mother resides in the former and begs her son to save her from it. “Then she turns her wheelchair,

fishes another cigarette out of her pack, and stares into the hallway, each of us condemned to the knowledge that it will never happen.” Bageant asked Dot if she would vote for a politician who called for national health care. “Vote for him? I’d go down on him!” she responded. Sounds like health care is a place to start.