Hannibal the Cannibal

THE #1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

THOMAS HARRIS

HANNIBAL

A novel by the author of *The Silence of the Lambs*

It may seem strange to see a discussion of *Hannibal*in a journal devoted to early American culture. As a villain, Hannibal Lecter seems one of Dracula's grandchildren, and the heroine, Clarice Starling, has been praised as a tough, contemporary feminist heroine. Nevertheless, beneath both the novel and the film adaptation runs a current of early American literary genres, centuries-old figures of American villainy and heroism.

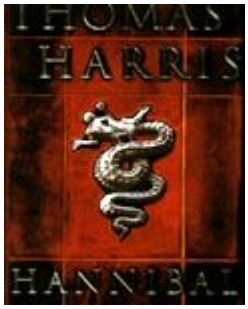
But before I bite off more than I can chew here (my apologies; such jokes seem mandatory for reviews of Harris's works), a little plot summary: *Hannibal*follows the continuing careers of Clarice Starling, FBI agent extraordinaire, and Dr. Hannibal Lecter, psychiatrist and monster (AKA "Hannibal the Cannibal," in deference to his practice of turning his victims into gourmet repasts). Both are being hunted: Starling because she refused the sexual advances of a married male superior and because she is an uppity female in general, and Dr. Lecter because he is, well, a cannibal.

After his escape from custody, detailed in the earlier*The Silence of the Lambs*, Lecter fled the country and created a new, pleasurable life for himself in Europe. One of Lecter's surviving victims, the horribly mutilated and paralyzed Mason Verger, has committed his considerable fortune to the task of capturing Lecter and killing him by feeding him alive to his collection of genetically manipulated super-pigs.

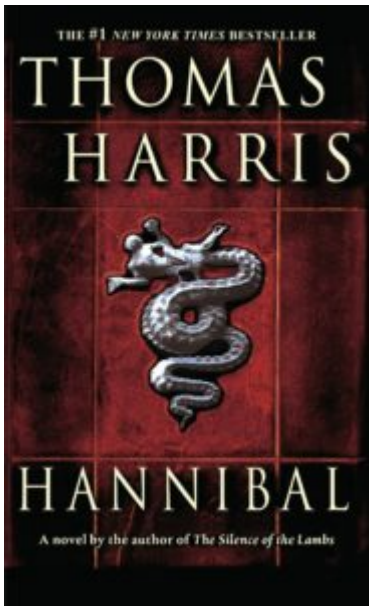
Meanwhile, Starling's once brilliant career at the FBI has plateaued; her superiors consider her troublesome and refuse to assign her to projects worthy of her talents. Moreover, they intend to make her the media sacrifice for a blundered drug bust. The divergent story lines come together when Mason Verger uses Starling as bait to draw Lecter into his trap.

The book is at its most entertaining when it is most audaciously gothic: when Dr. Lecter lurks around Florence's academies and museums under the name of—wink, wink—Dr. *Fell*; when he visits touring exhibits of medieval instruments of torture and gazes with rapt attention not on the machinery, but on the throngs of sightseers eager for a glimpse of horror but oblivious to his presence; when he eludes his would-be assassins with a quick flick of a Harpy blade. Furthermore, my inner professor enjoyed the scenes in which Lecter confounds a learned society with an accomplished lecture on the aesthetics of Dante's poetry, as a bat (I told you he was related to Dracula) enters the room and circles above him. His listeners actually applaud him for his perfect Italian and his keen insight into the prosody of Dante's *Inferno*, and then, "going out of the soft light of the Salon of Lilies, they seemed to carry the spell of the lecture with them" (197). Lecter goes on to suggest another lecture on—wait for it—the theme of *chewing* in Dante. Moreover, were I ever to take up cannibalism myself, I would turn to Dr. Lecter's recipes, *Le Cordon Bleu*for cannibals. One of his meals is described by the magazine *Town and Country*: "a notable dark and glossy ragout, the constituents never determined, on saffron rice. Its taste was darkly thrilling with great bass tones that only the vast and careful reduction of the *fond* can give" (262).

Despite these memorably decadent details, the book and the film are mediocre, even as pop thrillers. The ostensible main plot—Mason Verger's attempt to capture Lecter and torture him to death, Starling's attempt to stop him—is forgettable, uninteresting. Its significant narrative function is to bridge the European gothic plot line that begins both the book and the film and what I see as the far more interesting element, the American genre that concludes it.



Thomas Harris. Hannibal. New York: Delacorte Press, 1999. 484 pp., $27.95.



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And make no mistake. For all their decadent, Italianate, Miltonic overtones, the serial-killer books by Thomas Harris resurrect the gritty frontier narratives of the Wild West and Indian fighting that are the literary precursors to later American gothic and horror fiction. The serial killer in *The Silence of the Lambs* was nicknamed "Buffalo Bill" for his tendencies to partially skin his victims. We discover early in this book that Starling's coworkers have named her after "Annie Oakley" for her shooting prowess. Surprisingly, early American literary allusions pop up deep within Italian plot—a seemingly gratuitous allusion links the European to the American gothic traditions of the nineteenth century. On the run after spectacularly killing an Italian police detective, Lecter hitches a ride and is dropped off "not far from the home of Count Montauto, where Nathaniel Hawthorne had lived" (205). If all these hints are not enough, Harris nudges us again as he brings Lecter, fleeing Mason Verger's thugs and the Italian police, back to the United States from Europe in part three of the book, entitled "To the New World."

And of course, Hannibal Lecter is known as "the Cannibal." While this last term may not be as readily identified with "Wild West" literature as Buffalo Bill or Annie Oakley, the term "Cannibal" belongs with them as a New World invention. Columbus records it during his very first voyage as the name of a people whom his informants fear for their ferocity. In his journal, he links the name to the practice of eating human flesh, and the word "cannibal" quickly became a term with which colonists made their Native enemies—whatever the evidence of flesh eating—out to be monsters. Dr. Lecter's penchant for juniper-flavored reduction sauces might make him a gourmand, but the tenderloin it flavors is human, and his textual acts of cannibalism place him within a literary tradition that stretches back to the earliest European narratives in America.

More specifically, Harris's book connects to the tradition of the so-called "Indian captivity narrative." This genre was among America's most popular; its influence can be seen in James Fenimore Cooper's works, in countless contemporary romance novels, even, one critic argues, in Patty Hearst's autobiography. Puritan writers in New England were virtuosos of the genre. They used captivity narratives both to identify themselves as the righteous and to vilify enemies. They portrayed their opponents as inhuman villains who enjoyed torturing, killing, and cannibalizing; they congratulated themselves that *they*were not *them*, even as they reveled in describing horrors, and even as their writings were devoured by a reading public titillated by accounts of

spectacular and bloody English deaths.

Take, for example, this passage from the writings of Cotton Mather, well-known (even notorious) Puritan minister, describing the death of an Englishman during King William's War: "They went behind the fire and thrust it forwards upon the man with much laughter and shouting, and when the fire had burned some while upon him even till he was near stifled, they pulled it again from him. They danced bout him, and at every turn they did with their knives cut collops of his flesh from his naked limbs and throw them with his blood into his face. When he was dead, they set his body down upon the glowing coals and left him tied with his back to the stake . . . (138)."

It is a horrific passage, but update the language and it resembles gruesome scenes of torture and cannibalism that Harris describes in loving detail. Now, we know just how biased Cotton Mather is; however horrifying this event, he elsewhere presents with vindictive glee the reciprocal torture and execution of Pequot or Abenaki captives by English fighters. Given the obviously racist origins of such tales, we have to wonder: why do even traces of these outdated frontier genres make their way into a contemporary horror story? Why resurrect them with the story of a sophisticated cannibal who enjoys devouring his victims in aesthetically spectacular ways?

Joyce Carol Oates offers one possibility. In a review essay on the spate of "nonfiction" books about serial killers published just after Jeffery Dahmer's atrocities were uncovered, Oates muses on the disturbing popularity of these killer figures: "Somehow it has happened that the 'serial killer' has become our debased, condemned, yet eerily glorified Noble Savage, the vestiges of the frontier spirit, the American isolato cruising interstate highways in van or pickup truck."

Hannibal Lecter is a twenty-first-century Noble Savage. If Oates is right, we are seeing in the overwhelming popularity of the serial-killer discourse at the turn of this century a revision of earlier narratives, substituting a new villain—white male*monster*—for the old villain—brutal Indian warrior—in order, like the Puritans, to explore our deepest fears, and perhaps our most private pleasures. Hannibal Lecter gets what he wants. Unequivocally, without inner conflict. Does the symphony conductor disappoint? Do you covet an antiquarian's sinecure? Lecter has the easy, brutal answer. Despite his Old-World "charm," Lecter knows how to inhabit the American Noble Savage described by Oates; he may drive a supercharged Jaguar for his own enjoyment, but he stalks Starling and kidnaps his victims in a beat-up gray pickup.

The character of Clarice Starling marks the generic parallels with the captivity narrative as well. Although the passage from Cotton Mather quoted above details the death of a male prisoner, the most popular narratives were about white women captured by Indian enemies. The controversial ending of this book (Lecter introduces Starling to the pleasures of consuming one's enemy, and they become romantically involved) can be folded into this discussion of the

early American captivity narrative. Reportedly, Jodie Foster refused to play Clarice Starling in the movie sequel because of her sense that the book's ending betrays the character. Lecter drugs, hypnotizes, and psychoanalyzes her, and in the end she enthusiastically joins him in a cannibalistic meal that symbolizes her crossing over to his realm. However, the ending is shocking less for its betrayal of a dubious feminist heroine than for its fidelity to outmoded literary forms. *Hannibal* is a contemporary captivity narrative that updates some of the oldest American fears about "going Native," especially when women cross that line.

The Puritans' own great, unarticulated anxiety about captivity went beyond their fear of torture, humiliation, or death. Their worry was that Indian captivity was not painful but pleasurable, or at least seductive, that the brutal images they conjured up in their tales and ascribed to monstrous others were self-reflection. Take the case of Mary Rowlandson. This New England minister's wife was captured by Narragansetts in 1676 and held for eleven weeks before she was ransomed, later publishing an account of her experiences. Although she steadfastly viewed her captors as inhuman, she charts her progress from total resistance to at least limited participation in the lifestyle of the people with whom she travels. Significantly, eating becomes one of the most important markers of her acculturation. She writes, "The first week of my being among them I hardly ate anything; the second week, I found my stomach grow very faint for want of something; and yet 'twas very hard to get down their filthy trash: but the third week, though I could think how formerly my stomach would turn against this or that, and I could starve and die before I could eat such things, yet they were sweet and savory to my taste" (147). Finally, she makes concessions to the necessity of famine, snatching a piece of horse liver from the fire almost raw and consuming it "with the blood about my mouth, and yet a savory bit it was to me" (148).

Strikingly, these instances of "going Native" come from a writer who is also an Indian hater. We have no way of hearing the stories of English women and children who remained with their captors' communities, much to the chagrin of Puritan authorities who were horrified by the seductive power of the lifestyle despite their best attempts to vilify it. As historian James Axtell has documented, many captured colonists refused to return at war's end. They had become loved and loving members of their "captor" families.

While we might read in these choices an expression of freedom, of happiness in the release from the strictures of a difficult English lifestyle, early American writers, of course, read it differently. Rather than seeing in the choice reasons for critiquing their own culture, they found it inexplicable, or evidence of the captive's own depravity.

One might argue that in the tradition of the best gothic literature, Harris's incorporation of Starling, an admired heroine, into the madness and cruelty of Hannibal Lecter's immoral lifestyle shatters our smug self-assessment—if she succumbs, we could, too;*Hannibal*, then, may be an effort to peer beneath the

monster’s facade, a worthy attempt to leave the legacy of frontier, racist fears behind and humanize the others we view with horror. The liaison of Clarice and Hannibal is perhaps meant to remind us of our collusions with the devil, and the Wild West elements just put a particularly American spin on the lesson.

But such an attempt is problematic. While in *The Silence of the Lambs*, Lecter eschewed the psychoanalysis of his own behavior, here his twisted ways are explained by childhood trauma that is familiar to regular readers of serial-killer fiction, even if the specifics of the abuse are not. We are left wondering whether the memories of Lecter’s childhood horrors are offered as excuse or mere explanation, and they simply do not fit with his earlier challenges to the FBI’s normative, psychologized definition of evil. By making Lecter another serial killer with a terrible background, Harris reaches the limitations of the genre. In the novel there are lines that one should not, that one does not cross, unless one is horrifically damaged. Savagery in *Hannibal* is not a trick of representation; it is real.

In the novel, Starling’s acceptance of the cannibal’s lifestyle aligns her generically with the women who refused to return to English settlements after war’s end. That Starling “goes cannibal” could be taken to indicate her own deep sickness, the freedom of Blake’s Satan, or even her participation in the universal, sinful human condition. The novel’s ending vacillates among these possibilities, but finally tries to keep Starling chaste by making her a heavily drugged, hypnotized cannibal.

The changes from book to film reflect these problems. Although fans admire Lecter as a Romantic anti-hero, the captive woman’s purity must remain unassailed. Lecter’s evil and Starling’s innocence are kept completely separated. The film “corrects” the misstep of the book’s ending and firmly re-places her back among the Puritans. Starling resists Lecter until the end, sickened by his cruelty even when it is directed at her own enemy, battling her own physical weaknesses to bring Lecter to justice. An earlier exchange between Lecter and Starling underscores the connection to her goodwife ancestors. As she rescues Lecter from Verger’s thugs, determined to thwart their vigilantism and bring him to the FBI’s justice, she tells him, “Do right and you’ll live through this.” His wry reply is precisely to the point: “Spoken like a true Protestant.”

Further Reading

On the New World history of “cannibalism,” see Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean 1492-1797* (London, 1986). For recent collections of American captivity narratives, see*Women’s Indian Captivity Narratives*, ed. Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola (New York, 1998);*American Captivity Narratives*, ed. Gordon M. Sayre (Boston, 2000). The

passage by Rowlandson quoted above comes from the Sayre edition. Christopher Castiglia makes the Rowlandson to Hearst connection in *Bound and Determined: Captivity, Culture-Crossing, and White Womanhood from Mary Rowlandson to Patty Hearst* (Chicago, 1996). Cotton Mather's description of the captive's death is taken from "New Assaults from the Indians with Some Remarkables of Captives Taken in Those Assaults" in *Puritans Among the Indians: Accounts of Captivity and Redemption 1676-1724*, ed. Alden Vaughan and Edward Clark (Cambridge, Mass., 1981). Joyce Carol Oates reviews nonfiction serial-killer accounts in "I had No Other Thrill or Happiness," *New York Review of Books* 24 March (1994): 52-59. James Axtell investigates the issue of English captives who chose to remain with their adopted families in "The White Indians of Colonial America" in *The European and the Indian* (Oxford, 1981).

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