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## Harriette Arnow's: Chronicles of Destruction

Barbara L. Baer

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### In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Harriette S. Arnow 1973/Photography, Dean Cadje 22 Harriette Arnow's Chronicles of Destruction by BARBARA L. BAER When, at the age of 26, Harriette Simpson Arnow began to write her first novel, there were still no roads into much of Kentucky's backwoods and mountains. The great migration of Southern Mountain people from hill to city had not yet started. But the young writer sensed that life as she had known it along the Cumberland in southeastern Kentucky was doomed. To keep a record of a culture and a people in the process of destruction, Harriette Arnow began writing her Kentucky trilogy; that writing spanned the next two decades. "At an early age I saw my work as a record of people's lives in terms of roads," Mrs. Arnow told me. "At first, it was only a path, then a community at the end of a gravel road that took men and families away, and finally, where gravel led to a highway, the highway destroyed the hill community. "I was aware that nothing had been written on the Southern migrants, of what was actually happening to them and to their culture, of how they came to the cities the first time in the 1920s, leaving their families behind. I began writing during the depression, which had sent hill people back home again. And then, as I was still writing

during the Second War, I witnessed the permanent move the men made by bringing their wives and children with them to the cities. With that last migration, hill life was gone forever, and with it, I suppose, a personal dream of community I'd had since childhood and have been trying ever since to recapture in my writing." As Mrs. Arnow talked, she stroked the burning logs in the fireplace of her small farmhouse outside Ann Arbor. The morning had begun with a blustery rain and winds so the fire brightened the sunless day. Harriette Simpson Arnow's Kentucky trilogy began with *Mountain Path* (1936), continued with *Hunter's Horn* (1949) and was completed with her finest novel, *The Dollmaker* (1954). Whether the books are read today as regional, or realistic or even feminist writing, they are first of all a coherent vision, in the best tradition of American

Barbara L. Baer is a free-lance writer living in California. "Harriette Arnow's *Chronicles of Destruction*" © Jan. 1976 by *The Nation*. Used by permission. 23 fiction, of Americans coming of age on the edge of the shrinking frontier; they tell the stories of men and women who see their dreams of self-sufficiency shrink and their personal freedoms foreclosed by a rapacious industrial society. *Mountain Path* is the only novel of Harriette Arnow in which we can identify the author with her central character. Like her heroine, Louisa Sheridan, Mrs. Arnow was forced to leave the university and earn her living by teaching in a rural school. "I taught for two years in the July-through-February Pulaski County schools when I was 18," Mrs. Arnow said. "It was good for me. I had been so preoccupied with myself and knew so little of life. Those children, who were bright and eager to learn, taught me more than I taught them. They knew the names for everything, for parts of trees and plants I had never heard of. If, later, they were considered 'ignorant hillbillies' in the city schools, it wasn't because they lacked intelligence but through a misunderstanding of language. They didn't know the names for things they had never seen before, and many words were different." Louisa, the young teacher, a precocious intellectual in her circle at the university, arrives in Canebrake, a spot no one has been able to locate for her on any map. She is thrown immediately into the life of the Cal family, subsistence farmers who moonshine for cash and who live according to a strict, nearly martial code that stems from a feud with a family "at the other end of the valley." The children Louisa teaches, the man she falls in love with, the women she watches at work, all cause the young woman to question her education...



*Harriette S. Amos 1873/Photography. Dean Castle*





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