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## George Washington Harris, 1814-1869

**Harris, George Washington, 1814-1869, Writer.** Harris was born in Allegheny City, Pa., but his parents were probably North Carolinians. At five he was taken to Knoxville, Tenn., by his married half brother, Samuel Bell, who opened a metalworking shop. Harris received little formal education, was early apprenticed, and by his late teens had served as captain for a Tennessee River steamboat. In 1835 he married Mary Emiline Nance, tried large-scale farming in Blount County, Tenn., and lost his land, a slave, and even household goods. By 1843 he was back in Knoxville operating a metalworking and jewelry shop.

While living on his farm Harris had already begun to contribute to local newspapers, and during the next decade he practiced a variety of literary forms and published in the internationally circulated sporting magazine, the New York *Spirit of the Times*. During 1843 Harris published, under the pen name "Mr. Free," four formal letters describing rural customs, sports, and hunts. Presented from a gentlemanly perspective, the Tennessee backwoods is evoked in versions of pastoral. In 1845, in "The Knob Dance," Harris created a fictional account of a ritual frolic presented in the comic dialect of a narrator whose extravagance and sense of community are richly expressive of deep patterns of the folk culture. Action and language celebrate freedom, intensity, and the joys of the body.

In 1854, again in the *Spirit*, Harris expanded his comic depiction of southern backwoods life with the creation of his vital, intense, "nat'ral born durn'd fool," Sut Lovingood, a Tennessee youth who declares his brains are "mos' ove the time onhook'd," recounting his family background in a comic, grotesque fable of conflict with his father and flight from home. Throughout the 1850s Harris created a variety of adventures for his character, many revised and included in *Sut Lovingood's Yarns* in 1867.

Although Harris's achievement is complex, two areas stand out. Harris peoples his backwoods with self-assertive characters and develops Sut as an arresting seer. Sut's folk speech, metaphorically rich and presented in painstakingly detailed dialect, is an unsurpassed creative distillation of the American comic vernacular. Inseparable from this aesthetic achievement and embodied in it is a set of unique, uninhibited southern social and political ideas.

Harris's topics cluster around the prankster's search for excitement, the family and community, the reduction of authority figures—sheriffs, judges, preachers, and fathers—and the complexities of relations between the sexes. Some episodes convey the responses of the insular community to outsiders, such as blacks, Jews, Catholics, Mormons, and Yankees. Harris's first political targets were Tennesseans, but later he treated many national figures, including James Buchanan, John C. Fremont, Abraham Lincoln, and numerous abolitionists. Other targets were "strong minded women," philosophers, and utopian theorists. His reductive satires express dramatically the narrowest fears and hatreds of his community.

Writers such as Mark Twain, William Faulkner, and Flannery O'Connor have praised Harris's characterization and language. Critics' responses have been from "Rabelaisian" to "repellent." Clearly, Harris's range extends from vituperative satire to the ambiguities of grotesque realism and, finally, to the celebratory mode of folk humor.

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George Washington Harris, *High Times and Hard Times*, ed. M. Thomas Inge (1967), *Sut Lovingood: Yarns Spun by a "Nat'ral Born Durn'd Fool"* (1867); Milton Rickels, *George Washington Harris* (1965).

### Titles by George Washington Harris available on this site:

- [Sut Lovingood. Yarns Spun by a "Nat'ral Born Durn'd Fool." Warped and Wove for Public Wear](#)