

Xenobe Purvis, "The Hounding" Henry Holt and Company, 2025



One-Minute Book Reviews

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Xenobe Purvis's debut novel is based on a fragment from a 1701 issue of "Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society," which records "a great rumor spread to us that some young girls ... in the Oxfordshire countryside had been seized with frequent barking in the manner of dogs." Purvis has woven the fragment into a Shirley Jackson-like tale of rumor, paranoia, and persecution in the fictive village of Little Nettlebed, Oxfordshire.

The victims of the persecution (hounding) are the five granddaughters of Joseph Mansfield, whose prosperous farm lies directly across the Thames from the village. The girls, ages 6 through 19, have long been something of a mystery to the villagers, because Mansfield and his Wollstonecraft-influenced wife have taught them that women should have the same rights and freedoms as men—a notion locally unthinkable. Furthermore, the girls' grandmother has

recently died, and their half-blind grandfather is known to have little control over their actions.

The instigator of the hounding is Pete Darling, the ferryman who punts the villagers across the Thames to and from Mansfield Farm and the shortest road to the Greater Nettlebed market. Pete, though known to drink ale all day as he watches for customers from a window in the Swan, is an essential village figure whose skill is respected. His belief that all women are "incomplete," and prone to "lustful" looks that drive him to "unclean thoughts" is different only in its religious fear from standard village misogyny.

The Mansfield girls' freethinking assumptions easily provoke Pete's dislike, particularly of Anne, whose scorn for his attentions is obvious. Gradually, dislike becomes obsessive hatred, and one evening, he becomes sure he has seen the five girls turn into hounds. While everyone knows Pete's "visions" are alcohol induced, the rumor soon flies through the village. The girls are accused of killing chickens, then other small animals. The paranoia is only increased when the vicar declares them possessed by the devil, and an Oxford doctor diagnoses a collective psychological illness. The result is violence, a murder, and Joseph Mansfield's despairing conclusion that it's better for the girls to become dogs than to become damaged women.

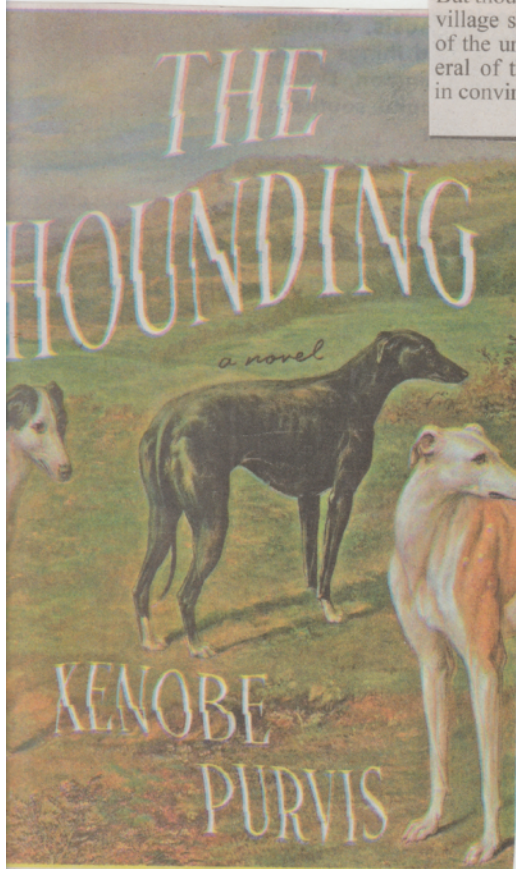
The book's heavy-handed message is greatly light-

ened by Purvis's detailed descriptions of the beautiful 18th century upper Thames landscape and its suffering during an exceptionally hot summer and a drought that makes the Thames run nearly dry. The landscape's shriveled flowers and lost crops add to the growing human fear of the unnatural in which Pete's rumor spreads. But though the people in the village share an eerie sense of the unnatural times, several of them, all portrayed in convincing depth, see the

danger of rumor.

Thomas, an outsider Mansfield hires for hay-making and general chores, likes the girls' freedoms and develops achingly-described first love for Anne, the eldest, that leads him to endanger his own safety. A younger haymaker, Robin, whose father and Pete routinely urge to adopt toxic masculinity in place of his shameful "softness," urges his younger brother to reject the rumors. Temperance, the sympathetically portrayed barmaid at the Swan, tries to use her deep understanding of the village to prevent injustice.

Less surehanded than Purvis's deft characterization is her handling of the book's semi-gothic undertones. Playing on the double meaning of her title, she suggests the girl/hound transformation is visible not just to Pete, but to characters the reader trusts: Temperance, Thomas, and finally Joseph Mansfield see it; Robin hears unexplained barking. Some vision has terrified both the vicar and the Oxford doctor. Theoretically, the reader could ask whether the transformation is the effect, not the cause, of the prejudice against feminine freedom, but exploration of that question would require more subtle authorial inquiry than the book, however interesting, demonstrates.



cover of "The Hounding" by Xenobe Purvis