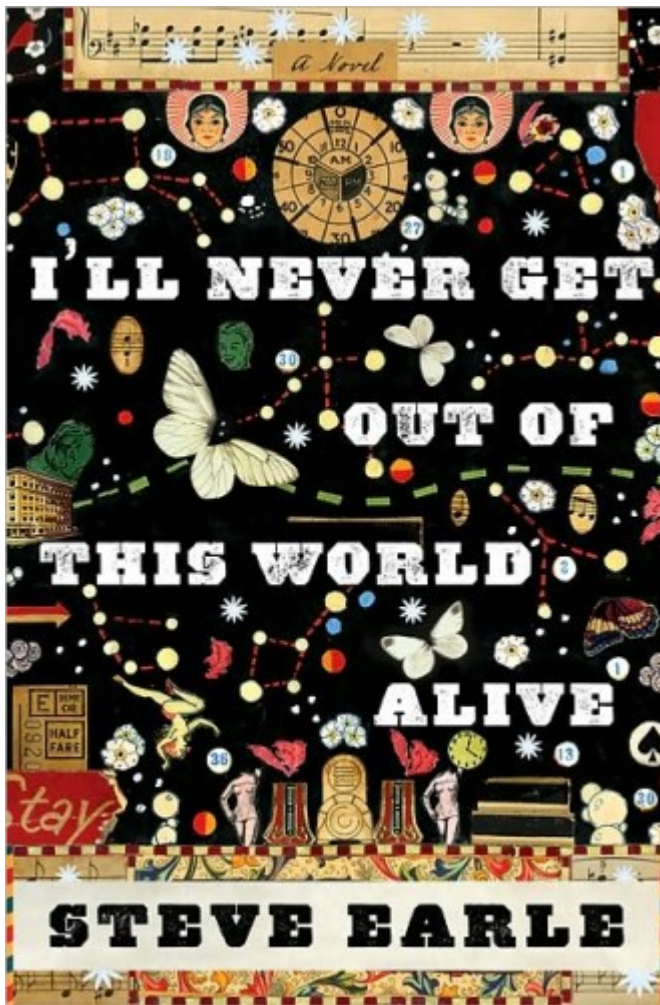


I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive, by Steve Earle

reviewed by [Virginia Gilbert](#) in the [November 15, 2011](#) issue

In Review



I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive

By Steve Earle

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

At a book signing in St. Louis for *I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive*, Steve Earle was speaking to about a hundred people when someone leaned on a light switch and the windowless library meeting room was plunged into total darkness. Power outages had become familiar events over the stormy spring, but the audience sat in shocked silence.

"Did I die?" Earle asked in a quiet voice. The crowd laughed. Someone found the light switch, and his Q&A continued.

For me, that quip summed up the depth of Earle's willingness to tackle scary subjects and his ability to personalize the universal and lend a new perspective, all the while packing every word with layers of meaning. I've marveled at this gift for years, first in his songs, then in his short stories. Now he's written a novel.

On the surface, this volume is Earle's response to his publisher's request for a book-length story similar in tone and themes to his collection of short stories, *Doghouse Roses*. "Write something about a music legend," Earle reports that the publisher urged. And he did, sort of. But the tale, set in 1963, also explores issues of sin, grace, redemption and death with parablelike reverses in every chapter.

Who are the true saints and who are the true sinners is a main theme. Prostitutes and junkies are sympathetic characters. A police detective is a minor bad guy. Probably the most casually evil character is a Roman Catholic bishop, whose concern for politics and hierarchy prevents him from recognizing a miracle of redemption.

Earle is also a musician. With the 1986 release of his first album, *Guitar Town*, he was at the forefront of a new wave of singer-songwriters who were marketed as country. But having worked in genres from rock to bluegrass, Earle could just as easily be considered a folk singer in the tradition of his hero Townes Van Zandt and their predecessor Woody Guthrie. To use an oft-quoted phrase from my seminary days, Steve Earle will preach. I used his song "Jerusalem" for my senior sermon in 2007.

Earle says writing a novel is a bit like writing songs. But writing this novel took a lot longer. "I thought it was finished, then I'd go over a hill and see another hill." He began it a few years after he kicked his drug habit and finished eight and a half years later, just after his father died.

"We do death very badly in this country," Earle said. "I was a hippie for 13 years and was exposed to all this Eastern stuff" that allowed followers to face death "not near as scared as my dad was."

The title is a reference to one of Hank Williams's last recorded songs. The story's main character is a junkie ex-doctor, Doc, who is haunted by Hank, his last patient before his license was revoked. Doc supports his heroin habit by performing illegal abortions. His world—and the life of nearly everyone he knows—is transformed by a young Latina woman with faith-healing powers.

Earle's use of detail and his economy of expression bring to life the junkies, pushers, prostitutes, undocumented immigrants and other outsiders who live in South Presa, a down-at-the-heels neighborhood in South San Antonio. He turns aside the stereotypes that politicians and even theologians often see in the "people on the margins" and creates real people. He describes them without an ounce of maudlin sniffing over the unfairness of life or self-righteous moralizing about bad choices and personal responsibility:

Doc knew that poverty alone could never account for the complete lack of compassion for one's fellow man in evidence on any South Presa Saturday night. They lied and they cheated and they turned one another in to the police. They cut and they shot and they pounded their neighbors' faces into bloody pulp and strangled their own best drinking buddies with their bare hands, but Doc tried not to judge. Being in the unique position of having lived on both sides of the tracks, he knew firsthand that there was, truly, no more or less honor among patricians than among thieves.

Into this neighborhood comes Graciela, a young undocumented immigrant whose boyfriend brings her to Doc for an abortion and abandons her as Doc struggles to staunch her bleeding. She stays in the rooming house with Doc and becomes his assistant, treating gunshot wounds, venereal disease and maladies of the underclass. But he won't allow her to help with abortions.

Earle's handling of abortion is nuanced and iconoclastic, like the rest of his book. On the one hand, it stands in as classic sin—a symbol, along with Doc's drug habit, of the depths to which he and the rest of the neighborhood characters have sunk. On the other, it is an act of compassion: saving women from the physical and emotional complications of unwanted pregnancy and preventing the birth of innocents into an

evil world. Some days Doc views it with self-loathing; other days, it's almost a calling.

Florynce Kennedy is credited with saying, "If men could get pregnant, abortion would be a sacrament." Earle appears to take seriously the idea of abortion as sacrament and juxtaposes it to more accepted sacramental acts, such as confession. He treats abortion, the abortionist and the women who get abortions sympathetically, without any pretense that this is a choice anyone would make if they thought they had an alternative.

But abortion is just one controversial issue that Earle explores. In another thread of the story, a parish priest has a dilemma. He has been hearing the confessions of a growing stream of reformed prostitutes. Church attendance is growing! But the elderly and middle-aged women who have made up his dwindling congregation do not welcome the freshly redeemed newcomers.

This novel would be a good choice for a book group that wants to tackle complicated issues through well-written fiction. But it would be a tough choice, too. Readers should expect to have their conventional values challenged in unexpected ways.