



# They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History (Oxford Oral History Series)

By Alessandro Portelli

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Made famous in the 1976 documentary *Harlan County USA*, this pocket of Appalachian coal country has been home to generations of miners--and to some of the most bitter labor battles of the 20th century. It has also produced a rich tradition of protest songs and a wealth of fascinating culture and custom that has remained largely undiscovered by outsiders, until now.

*They Say in Harlan County* is not a book *about* coal miners so much as a dialogue in which more than 150 Harlan County women and men tell the story of their region, from pioneer times through the dramatic strikes of the 1930s and '70s, up to the present. Alessandro Portelli draws on 25 years of original interviews to take readers into the mines and inside the lives of those who work, suffer, and often die in them--from black lung, falling rock, suffocation, or simply from work that can be literally backbreaking. The book is structured as a vivid montage of all these voices--stoic, outraged, grief-stricken, defiant--skillfully interwoven with documents from archives, newspapers, literary works, and the author's own participating and critical voice. Portelli uncovers the whole history and memory of the United States in this one symbolic place, through settlement, civil war, slavery, industrialization, immigration, labor conflict, technological change, migration, strip mining, environmental and social crises, and resistance. And as hot-button issues like mountain-top removal and the use of "clean coal" continue to hit the news, the history of Harlan County--especially as seen through the eyes of those who lived it--is becoming increasingly important.

With rare emotional immediacy, gripping narratives, and unforgettable characters, *They Say in Harlan County* tells the real story of a culture, the resilience of its people, and the human costs of coal mining.

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## **Editorial Review**

### Review

*"They Say in Harlan County* is a multi-vocal exploration of three centuries of Harlan County history: foundation narratives of eighteenth century conquest and pioneer settlement through tales of the Civil War and its aftermath of industrialization, vivid recollections of racial violence and labor struggles, stories of the mid-twentieth century devastation of the region by strip-mining, outmigration, the War on Poverty, the corruption of the United Mine Worker leadership, and the struggle over compensation for black lung."

--*Western Folklore*

*"They Say in Harlan County* is a stunningly effective, even beautiful book. Its interpretations reinforce tropes that have become standard in Appalachian scholarly circles; understanding Harlan County as a place whose cultural and historical essence is hardness and struggle will strike readers as familiar." --*The Journal of Southern History*

"The book's gestalt is shaped by memory, the individual memories of narrators and other commentators, and Portelli's deeply informed efforts to make sense of them. But in a deeply humane final section he speaks of the power of oral history, of storytelling and cultural work in general, to heal 'the wounds of the soul' that cut 'deeper than broken backs and broken lungs' *They Say in Harlan County* in its rangy, melodious, and insightful 400 plus pages suggests that this just might be true." --*Memory Studies*

"Alessandro Portelli is a scholar whose quarter of a century of *listening* to the voices of those he asked to speak has resulted in his truly *hearing* those voices...For its methodological uniqueness and rigor, as well as for its heart and soul, Portelli's book should be considered for required reading at both undergraduate and graduate levels." --*Rural Sociology*

*"They Say In Harlan County* will stand as an important example of the craft of the oral historian for a very long time. Through its pages Portelli makes us aware of the power of oral history to remind us of our shared humanity, of the agency, pride and dignity of working class life. In an era obsessed with the acceleration of culture and of knowledge being conveyed in a limited number of characters this book stands out as a model of what reflection, consideration and thought still has to offer in understanding the human condition." --*Oral History*

"In this unforgettable book are incredible first hand accounts of life and death, tradition and progress, love and struggle. Alessandro Portelli has done a wonderful job of presenting the stories of the most inspirational and fearless people I have ever known--the men and women of Harlan County." --Barbara Kopple, two-time

Academy Award-winning director of *Harlan County USA* and *American Dream*

"This work is a real gem; it is much-needed. For well over a century, this relatively small Appalachian county has been known across the nation, though seldom in positive ways. Portelli's skillful questioning brings out valuable outlooks and information on coal camps, paternalism, the miner's life, early unions, death underground, black lung disease, Depression times, and the bloodshed of the 1930s labor wars. The result is a sad, strong, powerful story of pathos and joy, of terror and courage, of villains and heroes." --James C. Klotter, State Historian of Kentucky

"By allowing the people of Harlan County to tell their own stories, we can hear the hidden story of America. Alessandro Portelli gives us a deeper understanding of how democracy in America works. Portelli shows a much more complex, interesting, and tragic reality than the ideal set out in our pledge for liberty and justice for all." --Herb E. Smith, filmmaker and co-founder of Appalshop

"Rarely since Harry Caudill's "Night Comes to the Cumberlands" in the early 1960s has a book so firmly captured the spirit of the people and their almost hopeless struggle to live in an almost forgotten land." --*The Post and Courier*

"Allows the strong people of Harlan to speak - in their own words - about how they were pitted in strong conflict against themselves and in struggle against powerful economic and social forces." --*Harlan Daily Enterprise*

"*They Say in Harlan County* is an important book; it is also an enjoyable read. The range of topics and its accessibility will make it useful to scholars and classrooms across disciplines, including history, literature, and folklore. ... Overall, this book will prove a model for other historians interested in oral history-based community studies." -- *H-Net Reviews*

"Effectively navigates meaning throughout this rich work, and many of the people interviewed prove remarkable storytellers, writers, artists, and poets. ... The trust built up between Portelli and his informants plays a critical role in the overall effectiveness of these interviews and this book; clearly, the residents hold Alessandro Portelli in high regard, revealing incredibly personal details and cultural information. Portelli returns the favor in the publication of this masterful book." --*Journal of Folklore Research*

"A revelation." --Gerard Stropnick, co-editor of *Letters to the Editor: Two Hundred Years in the Life of an American Town*

"Beautifully written. ...This is oral history at its best, told by a plurality of diverse voices...firsthand accounting, directly from the people of Harlan County, gives this book both intensity and purity. Portelli is a master craftsman who has given us a powerful and profound understanding of the people of Harlan County."  
--*Business Lexington*

"This is a labor of love as well as a work of scholarship. ... Portelli's work emphasizes the significance of selective memory, interpretation, and mythification in creating the received history of a culture. His rigorous archival work, supporting his sensitive editing of the interviews, will make *They Say in Harlan County* an essential historical and methodological reference for generations who want to understand how history lives and evolves." --*Journal of Appalachian Studies*

"His research is infused by a deep and loving respect for his narrators, his writing steeped in a humanity that transcends academic jargon...a major contribution to the field and a must-read for every oral historian."  
--*Oral History Forum*

"A powerful book from a distinguished oral historian that will no doubt have considerable influence on the fields of oral history and Appalachian studies." --*Journal of American History*

"Alessandro Portelli has studied Appalachia from his base at the University of Rome for decades. ... Portelli focused his research on Harlan County and created this impressive book." --*Appalachian Heritage*

## About the Author

**Alessandro Portelli** is Professor of American Literature at the University of Rome-La Sapienza. He is the author of *The Death of Luigi Trastulli: Form and Meaning in Oral History; The Text and the Voice: Speaking, Writing, and Democracy in American Literature; The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue*; and *The Order Has Already Been Carried Out: History, Memory and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome*, which won Italy's prestigious Viareggio Book Prize.

## Users Review

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**Jake Harris:**

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**Lester Baker:**

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