

book review

'Jesus' Son' is not happy

by Brent Legault

Some stories don't have happy endings. The stories in Denis Johnson's new collection, *Jesus' Son*, have unhappy endings, beginnings, and inbetweens.

Jesus' Son reads like a short novel. The eleven stories move in a roughly linear manner, with a definite progression of character. This character neither descends nor ascends. It's a kind of side-shuffle, moving from one addiction to another, never curing the need, just replacing the outlet.

Each story is told from the first person in a very matter-of-fact tone. The voice remains essentially the same throughout, and although the character never identifies himself, it's clear that the narrator is the same for each story. He frequents the same places. He picks up fragments and threads of stories that he forgot to fill in elsewhere. He lies, he steals, he survives. An unreliable, yet totally believable guy.

Jesus' Son follows the narrator through his many adventures. Watch him take drug after drug. Watch him spend his last few dollars on weak drinks. Watch him accidentally squish a litter of baby rabbits that he intended to save. Watch him spy on a showering woman. He basically spends most of his time trying to do nothing, yet somehow ends up doing something, and fails at even that. Perhaps this is why his friends sometimes call him Fuckhead.

Johnson's stories are not tightly plotted. In fact, you would find it a challenge to find any plot at all. These stories have no tangible skeleton. Their backbone is made of heroin and loneliness, rather than a logical series of events. These stories discover

themselves. They happen.

If you are reader of thrillers or murder mysteries, you will hate *Jesus' Son*.

However, if you like stories depicting characters who seem to merely exist, who are caught up by the immense pettiness of their lives and allow unconscious forces to manipulate them, then this book is for you. *Jesus' Son* is the literary equivalent to movies like Gus Van Sant's *Drugstore Cowboy*, or Charles Bukowski's *Barfly*.

The themes are implied rather than dictated. "Meaning" is extracted by the reader, instead of mandated by Johnson. Poignancy hides within a brief sentence, or a single word. For instance, in "Out on Bail," Fuckhead nearly dies of a heroin overdose, and his friend, Hotel, does die because he "didn't have to share it with his girlfriend."

The last line of that story reads, "I am still alive." From this brutally obvious statement and others like it, you must decide for yourself whether Fuckhead is happy or sad, stupid or smart. Any "point" Johnson may have been trying to make lies off the page someplace, where it should be.

These characters lead depressing, worthless, unwholesome lives. They hurt others as easily and unthinkingly as they hurt themselves. A pragmatist may see this book as an example of what not to do in life. But it is still a fun book. The prose is tight and quick. There is no "gothic" droning. No dawdling. It's in and out and over. It doesn't preach. It lets you decide the difference between the beautiful and the ugly.

Don't read this book if depressing stories depress you. Nothing happy happens in *Jesus' Son*, and therein lies its charm.



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