

The Largesse of the Sea Maiden—Short stories by American author Denis Johnson

By Sandy English
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The Largesse of the Sea Maiden, New York: Random House, 2017, 224 pp.

American author Denis Johnson (1949-2017) wrote convincingly and often movingly about the painful personal conundrums that people found themselves in, particularly as social conditions declined in the US in the 1970s and beyond.

Johnson wrote five novels, two story collections, five collections of poems and several plays. The best known novel is *Tree of Smoke* (2007), which won the National Book Award for Fiction, and his best known story collection *Jesus' Son* (1992).

Much of Johnson's work exhibits a desperation and angry perplexity with the world, although the artistic results vary considerably.

The Largesse of the Sea Maiden is the work that Johnson finished as he was dying of liver cancer. These five stories are perhaps his best work and show that the author responded, in his own way, to changes in American life over the last quarter century.

Johnson, the son of a CIA operative, grew up in the Philippines, Japan and in various parts of the US, and experienced drug addiction and alcoholism first-hand until he more or less stabilized himself in his 30s.

He attended the Iowa Writer's workshop while short story writer Raymond Carver (1938-88) taught there. Carver is clearly an influence on Johnson's work.

In his first volume of short stories, *Jesus' Son* (1992) the narrator, a drug addict, known only as "Fuckhead," describes what critic Jim Lewis called "a landscape of derangement." The work became popular among younger people at the time, for better or worse. It was made into a very uneven 2000 film directed by Alison Maclean and starring Billy Crudup and Samantha Morton.

The thoughts of Fuckhead in the stories are imagistic, broken and full of impressions and uncompleted thoughts: "This man was just basically one of those people on a boat, leaning on the rail like the others, his hands dangling over like bait." ("The Other Man"). While Fuckhead is working as an orderly in a hospital, high on stolen pills, a man with a knife in his eye comes in, and the doctor on duty is afraid to touch him. No one knows what to do.

The WSWS in 2000 complained that Johnson's technique tended to involve "putting the down-and-out, generally drunk or stoned hero in unlikely places—a highway in western Missouri, a farmhouse near Iowa City, an abortion clinic in Chicago—surrounding him with 'offbeat' characters—a traveling

salesman drinking Canadian Club and steering his car while he sleeps, a former college football player pretending (or not?) to be deaf and dumb, an orderly taking more pills than he dispenses—and, with a few verbal flourishes, counting on the results to be amusing, bizarre and somehow 'poetic.'"

There is a peculiar sense of freedom in the stories, but an ugly freedom filled with bad judgment and damage. People do almost anything they want in an ecstasy of self-indulgence, but they invariably suffer the consequences. The stories take place in the 1970s when, as Johnson writes, "Pets and children wandered free." There seem to be no social norms, or even a larger American society.

Overall, the characters are not engaging, and the life depicted here is not that intriguing. The writing effectively reflects the addled thoughts of addled people existing in a netherworld. Johnson recognizably and articulately identifies that netherworld. But after a number of decades and much more poisoning of youth by opioids and other substances—now in an epidemic state—one wants fiction to have a broader sweep about and understanding of the issue.

Is it a coincidence that, although politics hardly come up in these stories, *Jesus' Son* was written in the shadow of the dissolution of the USSR and the accompanying triumphalism about a "new world order" and the rest?

There is something breathless and almost euphoric about the stories, and the characters experience a strange and too easy redemption in the end. Interestingly, Johnson acknowledged a debt to Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry*, the monumental book of short stories about the Russian Civil War (1918-1922), for *Jesus' Son*. Unfortunately, the two works can hardly be compared.

His long novel, *Tree of Smoke* (2007), about the Vietnam War, was a more notable work. Here a CIA father-and-son team operate in the Southeast Asian country without the slightest regard for the horrors that they and their country commit. Soldiers who hate everything about the conflict go AWOL and live much like the characters in *Jesus' Son*, but with a desperation driven by the need to survive psychically the madness and horror of war.

One soldier dreams that "he couldn't find his car. The parking lot changed into a village of narrow curving streets. He didn't want to ask for help, because he carried his M16, and these people might arrest him. Time was running out." The unfathomable reasons for the war condition everything. The novel overall is a serious artistic accomplishment that reminds one in many ways of

Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*.

Also significant was *Train Dreams* (2011), a novella about a timber worker in Idaho from 1917 to his death in the 1960s, his marriage, his temptations. It begins with the attempted lynching of a Chinese railroad worker and contains one of the most horrific descriptions of a fire in recent American literature. Surviving great loss is a theme. Unhappily, there are more apparitions of ghosts than real history here. The work was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 2011, the year in which no prize was awarded.

In *Largesse of the Sea Maiden*, the world, on the surface, is more stable than in either *Jesus' Son* or *Tree of Smoke*. Rather than a self-indulgent free-for-all, or a devastating war, there are in these stories the confines of jobs, rehab centers, even—perhaps symbolically—prison.

The substance and themes in “Starlight on Idaho,” for example, resemble that of *Jesus' Son*, but they are more maturely treated. The narrator, Cass, writes letters to a fifth-grade classmate, his family, the Pope, the devil, in which he recalls abuse and misfortune: “[B]roke, lost, detox, homeless in Texas, shot in the ribs by a thirty-eight, mooching off the charity of Dad in Ukiah [California], detox again, run over (I think, I'm pretty sure, I can't remember) then shot again, and detox right now one more time again.”

With plenty of self-pity thrown in, he tries to assess it all. In the end, we sense that Cass may overturn and overcome the disasters of the past, but only by a tremendous individual effort. The redemption of the narrator of *Jesus' Son* seems easy by comparison.

The narrator of “Strangler Bob,” who describes himself as “middle class gone crazy” is in a county jail for a short stint. The young narrator meets people who have committed horrible crimes, or who will go on to commit them (as one inmate accurately prophesizes). Later, out of jail, he does a former fellow inmate a favor and becomes addicted to the heroin he is given in gratitude. When the story ends, he is near death.

In “Triumph over the Grave,” like the other stories here, the narrator recounts several episodes that seem unrelated. One may be autobiographical or made up by the narrator, about being in pain and needy, and publicly embarrassed by a doctor, whom he calls “the Colossus of Orthopedics.” The medical man, an authority, appears dark and monstrous.

In the same story, we shift to the narrator's visits to the writer, Darcy Miller, at his ranch in Texas. On one visit, there are buzzards in the sky and Miller is comfortably haunted by ghosts. We hear the “demoralized lowing of distant cattle” and the narrator says, “I saw nothing, really ... to suggest that anybody cared what went on here or even knew of the existence of this place.” This seems to catch the feeling of many places in America today.

The most effective piece in the collection is the title story. Here, a television advertising executive, Whit, an artist in his own way (at one point he describes and ponders the success of the ad that made him famous), relates several incidents seemingly connected by coincidence.

At a party, people talk about the loudest sound they've ever heard. An amputee at the party who lost his leg in the war in

Afghanistan asks a woman, a fellow guest, to kiss his stump. She later marries him. At another party, a fellow adman burns an original painting by Marsden Hartley in a fireplace. None of his guests moves to stop him.

Later, Whit receives a call from an ailing ex-wife, asking him to apologize for his “crimes” in the marriage. Whit is willing, but not clear which of his two ex-wives is speaking. He apologizes because the crimes are likely the same in both cases, and his ex-wife can die comfortably.

The narrator tells the story of an embittered religious painter friend, Tony Fido: “This period when I was seeing a bit of Tony Fido,” Whit says, “coincided with an era in the world of my unconscious, an era when I was troubled by the dreams I had at night. They were long and epic, detailed and violent and colorful. ... Once I dreamed of Tony—I defended him against an angry mob, keeping the seething throng at bay with a butcher knife. Often I woke up short of breath, shaking, my heartbeat rattling my ribs.”

The words “era” and “epic” and the image of a “seething throng” attacking an artist are worth pondering.

Tony Fido commits suicide by jumping from “our nation's highest concrete-beam bridge.” Whit meets Tony's friends at a memorial, but none of them know each other. They assume that he knew the dead man best, when, in fact, Whit feels that he knew him only a little. Whit is bequeathed a cookbook of the artist's mother's recipes that documents a fall into alcoholism.

On reading these stories, one feels that a quarter century of cultural retrogression and endless war and reaction, while not necessarily in the forefront of the author's mind, were an atmosphere that he imbibed and responded to. There is no more freedom, little comfort, and no one is really in control of anything. Again, he identifies these disturbing conditions, however, without making enough of them.

It is not a surprise that mystical and semi-religious elements, always present in Johnson's work, are more pronounced in *Largesse of the Sea Maiden*.

Nick Offerman (Ron Swanson in *Parks and Recreation*) performs the title story with a sense of patience and gravity on the audio version of this book published by Random House Audio.

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