



# A Million Heavens

*John Brandon*

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## **A Million Heavens** John Brandon

On the top floor of a small hospital, an unlikely piano prodigy lies in a coma, attended to by his gruff, helpless father. Outside the clinic, a motley vigil assembles beneath a reluctant New Mexico winter—strangers in search of answers, a brush with the mystical, or just an escape. To some the boy is a novelty, to others a religion. Just beyond this ragtag circle roams a disconsolate wolf on his nightly rounds, protecting and threatening, learning too much. And above them all, a would-be angel sits captive in a holding cell of the afterlife, finishing the work he began on earth, writing the songs that could free him. This unlikely assortment—a small-town mayor, a vengeful guitarist, all the unseen desert lives—unites to weave a persistently hopeful story of improbable communion.

## **A Million Heavens Details**

Date : Published July 3rd 2012 by McSweeney's

ISBN : 9781936365739

Author : John Brandon

Format : Hardcover 272 pages

Genre : Fiction, Contemporary

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# From Reader Review *A Million Heavens* for online ebook

## Tarin Towers says

"A Million Heavens" follows about a dozen characters as they live their messy lives in and around shitty small towns in New Mexico. Events center around a young boy who currently lies in a coma, having collapsed after playing beautiful, original music out of nowhere. His piano teacher feels guilty. His father is a wreck, refusing to leave the hospital. Legions of residents of the area hold weekly vigils, with mixed motives.

One of these, a young community college student named Cecilia, has also lost a dear friend with musical gifts, and we see her story unfold as she pursues self-destruction, not purely out of rebellion but out of a total loss as to what to do with herself and her housebound mother.

A touch of the supernatural inhabits this novel, not just in the form of the spooky gifts of the somnolent child, but in the form of Cecilia's dead bandmate, who occupies some sort of limbo in the afterlife where he's alternately cajoled and blackmailed into writing new songs from beyond the grave. Another character we follow is a wolf, named Wolf, who tracks the comings and goings of the main character, as haunted by music as the rest of them.

I am a huge fan of "Arkansas," Brandon's first novel. While this one didn't have me crowing about its genius like "Arkansas" did, I still greatly enjoyed it.

Note: Plan on doing a lot of flipping back and forth in the book until you remember who all the characters are, because there are about a dozen, and it takes a while to figure out which ones you have to pay attention to. Keep going, though, even if it feels like work at first. Once you get going, it's a joy to track the progress of everyone from the gas station owner to the mayor/uncle/hotel proprietor.

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## Chantal says

I want very badly to give this book 5 stars because so much is done so well within it, but then there's the wolf, and Reggie. Honestly, if these two characters weren't there, getting in the way, and insisting on a direction, I think Brandon's other characters, all so wonderfully crafted and honest, might have taken the story to even better places.

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## Jordan says

Tentatively 4 stars.

In my mind, I bounced back and forth between 3 and 4 stars as I read. I had 3-star "It's good, but why should I care?" moments and 4-star "Daaaaang this shit is legit" moments, and ultimately the latter won. I think.

Reggie is dead. Soren is in a coma. These are not spoilers, because the back of the book will tell you as much. The book isn't so much *about* them as it is about everyone *around* them; the majority of the main characters don't even know Reggie or Soren, but they come together in unexpected, inexplicable, and

fascinating ways. The style is part magical realism, part stream of consciousness, and all loveliness.

We hear a little bit from Reggie, the dead guy. He's in a purgatorial rehearsal space, where unseen powers are encouraging him to write music again. His afterlife lyrics migrate to Cecilia's subconscious, and drive her a little crazy. She falls into a bizarre rebellious streak, but no, she's still a good person, guyz. Don't judge.

Cecilia's uncle is Mayor Cabrera, the undersexed widower overseeing a struggling hotel and the dying town of Lofte. His sections are always endearing, and you can't help but root for him.

Completely unrelated to Reggie et al., Dannie the cradle-robber is dating lil' Arn. Well, not really dating him so much as using him for his sperm. Their story is despairing, and even a little fucked up, and ultimately unresolved. Arn's back story doesn't serve a direct purpose in the narrative, but it is thought provoking.

Soren's father is little more than just that: Soren's father. He remains unnamed, defined by his unconscious son, and removed from happiness and vivacity. He is complacent. People walk into his life and walk right out again, and not a single fuck is given.

Most strikingly, there is a wolf. He is slowly gaining human rationality and understanding, and it is driving him to madness. Reggie's music calms him, but he finds it harder and harder to curtail his rage. The author's philosophical musings are largely communicated through this process, so I will let you discover them for yourselves in the actual book. I swear, they comprised the bulk of my 4-star-'wow'-moments-while-reading.

Oh, and there's also a gas station attendant. He likes his life, but wants to wander the desert for a while. Not entirely sure what to make of him.

These are the main characters, if you can even call them that. The characterization makes up the bulk of my 3-star moments. I just couldn't *care* about them. Sure, their thoughts and actions are visceral and interesting, and John Brandon's prose is simply DIVINE, but... eh. Okay, they're people. People + Wolf. Cool?

The other main 3-star moment: the ending. It was unsurprising, cliched, and a bit saccharine. Or at least, the part that *had* an ending; the bulk of the story lines seem conspicuously unresolved, which I found really engaging as a reader. I may not care about these people, but what happens to them (or doesn't happen) at the end of the novel brought my rating back to 4 stars. And it shall remain as such. For now.

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## **Oriana says**

I guess I forgot to tell you guys about this one when I proofed it, sorry. It's kind of a slower burn than his previous books; it felt a little draggy at the beginning, but all of a sudden I was *so* immersed in it and it just tears through from there on. Unsurprisingly, being John Brandon, it's really super sad, but it's a bit more plangent than the previous ones, and less cruelly fucked up.

Also, jeeppers, look how pretty that cover is! Oh, McSwy's, you can do no wrong.

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## **Jonathan says**

If John Brandon writes like anyone, he writes like Kurt Vonnegut. The content is completely different, of course, but the structure of the sentence is remarkably similar. Short, simple sentences, often beginning with the name of a character, full of matter-of-fact detail, and frequent little bursts of philosophy.

My first book by Brandon was *Citrus County*, and while that one was a page-turner, this one has very low tension. If it were a movie, it would be one of those indie flicks with lingering camera shots of squinty-eyed actors sitting in a small town gazing meaningfully out a window or doing something poetic by themselves. This book has lots of little spurts of plot growing all over the place but in the end it is (to me) an atmospheric work.

Not that there's anything wrong with that. Brandon has gotten more adept at deftly telling a lot of stories at once. There are many characters here and he cuts back and forth between them a lot. That and the easy-reading descriptions make reading this book about as easy as watching television, except in this case you have the vague sense that someone wiser than you is trying to get something across about people, and about hope, and about waiting. No morals or philosophizing here, just a few hundred pages of meditation.

I think Brandon could do all this and write a page-turner, too (because he did, in fact, do all this and write a page-turner too) so I'm only giving this three stars. But it's not because I'm not a fan of Mr. Brandon's. I'm down to one unread book by him, and I'm going to savor it.

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## **Jennifer says**

Cecelia, The Wolf, The Mayor, Reggie, Dannie, Arn, The Gas Station Owner, Soren's Father, The Piano Teacher, The Wolf, Dannie, The Gas Station Owner, Arn, Cecelia, The Mayor, Reggie, Cecelia, The Wolf...these are subheadings cutting up the entire book every two or three pages. These characters all relate to each other but not in a very interesting way. Additionally, each character is referred to in third person by each name above which is tiresome and annoying when you have to keep reading "The Gas Station Owner" every time the author refers to him. Same goes for Soren's Father and The Mayor...don't these people have/deserve real NAMES!?!? Ugh.

Additionally, each character had such a sad, stagnant life. Reggie was dead and in spirit limbo. Cecelia misses Reggie, has a shut-in mother and goes to vigils for a boy in a coma. Soren's father is waiting for him to come out of a coma. Dannie goes to the vigils for Soren, has cut everyone from her life and is trying to get pregnant with Arn. Arn doesn't know his much older girlfriend, Dannie is trying to get knocked up, compulsively lies to Dannie and grew up in abusive foster care. The gas station owner works in a gas station (duh) and wants to take a death walk into the desert. The wolf wants to torture domesticated animals for fun because he's going crazy. The Mayor misses his dead wife and worries his city is financially ruined.

I don't know why I kept reading this as long as I did. Well, no, I do. Each character in this book is written separately from the others which led me to ASSUME that they would all converge and tie in together in a way that would make wonderful sense by the end, which is what encouraged me to keep reading. In the end, they sorta-kinda relate, but not in a way that I found fulfilling. I should've quit while I was ahead. There were a few great lines within these pages, but, most of it was uninteresting filler told from the point of third person...which, as we all know, is a boring as hell way to tell a story. I could kinda understand where the author was trying to go with each character, but by the end it just wasn't worth it.

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## Amy says

Book: *A Million Heavens*

Author: John Brandon

Published: July 2012 by McSweeney's, 272 pages

First Line: "The nighttime clouds were slipping across the sky as if summoned."

Genre/Rating: Literary fiction; 3/5 songs, written by the man you loved who died, filling your mind until you can think of nothing else

Review: I am an unabashed John Brandon fan.

His *Citrus County* was one of my favorite books of last year, and I'm still looking to get my hands on his *Arkansas* (my library isn't the best at stocking indie-published novels, and the price tag is still a little steep for my Kindle, but I'm going to break down one of these days. I'm a terrible impulse-buyer when it comes to the Kindle.)

(Also, can we just marvel over this cover? Gorgeous. McSweeney's really excels at cover art.)

I was so looking forward to *A Million Heavens*, and after a few initial disappointing chapters, I thought, "it will get better. It just has to hit its stride."

Unfortunately, it never really did.

Set in New Mexico, it follows, in small, somewhat strange chapters, the events that happen to various townsfolk over a bleak winter. A young prodigy lies in a coma while his father sits by his bedside, helpless. People sit outside in vigil, for various reasons. A woman on the run from her life attempts a new start with a man with a checkered past. A lost young musician mourns the death of the man she loved, which is proving to also be the death of her muse. The mayor of the town tries to find himself through his love for a woman who is possibly off-limits. And a wolf travels through the town, trying in vain to retain his wildness in a town that's becoming increasingly industrialized and filled with the mystery of humans.

The problem I had was that I cared about very few of the stories/characters. I found myself waiting, somewhat impatiently, for the chapters involving Cecelia, the musician, and her departed love, Reggie (who actually gets a voice and a storyline from the beyond.) They were the two characters who seemed the most fleshed-out, whose fates and outcomes I actually cared about. The rest of them, although not poorly written (Brandon couldn't write clunky prose if he tried; the man writes beautifully) were...somewhat cardboard. Uninteresting. I was not invested in their stories, in their fates. I was reading to see what happened to Cecelia; if she would redeem herself, if she would find what she was looking for under the New Mexico stars, in the damage she found herself drawn to cause. I was reading to see if Reggie would be able to finally communicate his love for her from beyond, because he'd missed his chance when he was on earth.

I'm not flat-out panning the book. Brandon's prose is leaps and bounds better than most people's I read, and

I will continue to read his work, and eagerly await what he publishes next. But after the wonder and mystery and magic of *Citrus County*, I found myself disappointed by this one. I know he's capable of more and of better. I appreciate that he was trying something different and outside the box, and I like that he's attempting to evolve; I just don't think this book worked on all levels.

(Originally published at Insatiable Booksluts)

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### **Richard says**

I love libraries, and I love librarians who take a chance on books that may not make it to the best-seller lists. (I don't know how they choose, but if anyone would like to enlighten me, I'd appreciate it.) Here in Seattle/King County we have great librarians. In the past year I've taken a chance on five books that ended up to be 4/5 star titles. All from the library, all off the shelves on a whim - lucky me. *A Million Heavens* makes it six.

A child prodigy who taps the universal chords for all of 30 seconds falls into a coma. The six or so other characters tracked in this novel are all touched by that incident - some more directly than others, but all within the orbit. John Brandon does a terrific job of giving life to each of the characters, and a few others on the periphery. This is a book about the good we do to and for one another, even with some bad mixed in, and I think the entire work is a love hymn of sorts. It's the most optimistic read of the year for me. It also takes place between Albuquerque and Santa Fe, and I love the SW as much as I love libraries.

It lost a star in its ultimate resolution, but it kept me hanging on to the very end, even if the ending confused me. Ah well, on the great whole it's a book to enjoy, and to think about. Well worth the read.

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### **Diane Yannick says**

*A Million Heavens* drove me crazy. How dare the author write such a disjointed narrative and then tie it together so beautifully in the last few pages? John Brandon can write beautifully but I wanted a story that I could dig into without keeping a journal of 'symbolism that I should (but don't want to) think about'.

I plodded through narration by a wolf, a gas station owner, a dead guy, a mayor, some guide, Arn, Dannie, Cecilia, Soren's father, and assorted others. I know the characterizations were layered to reveal a universal truth. I understood the power of "dreaming about what they already got." Yet, I felt duped as a reader. I never knew enough about the characters to really care about them and their long-winded, convoluted stories. At the center is Soren, a gifted pianist who is in a coma. I'm fine with that as a catalyst to see how others behave. I just found myself perpetually annoyed by the multiple narrators.

Powell's Indiespensable club chose this book for me. I'm back to picking my own books. I have this compulsion to finish (almost always) any book that I start so I need to choose very carefully.

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### **Sean Owen says**

John Brandon has done an impressive job of carving out a recognizable style with only a few books to his

credit. The Brandon style has a very strong sense of place, though "A Million Heavens" is based in the New Mexico desert rather than the sprawl of northern Florida that was the home for "Citrus County" and several of his short stories. Brandon's books have a multitude of perspectives rather than a single leading voice. These characters are nearly all united by a sense of dissatisfaction or yearning.

The strength of "A Million Heavens" is largely derived from Brandon's characters. He manages to create characters across ages and social strata that are all wholly believable. Part of what allows him to accomplish this is his strength with dialogue. While tragedy is behind the unhappiness of these characters Brandon is wise to avoid the sentimentality and focus instead on the low grade day to day manifestations of unhappiness. These characters are more troubled by lives that have gotten off track for reasons that are somewhat unclear than they are by the bigger tragedies.

"A Million Heavens" is a bold leap for a young writer who previously wrote about characters near his own age and from his home turf. Brandon's willingness to experiment and take risks is what gets him into trouble here. One of the characters is a wolf and the wolf chapters work for a time as a sort of distant narrator, but when the chapters begin talking about the wolf's angst the conceit falls apart. Another of the characters is in a sort of heaven/purgatory and Brandon is unable to make this come off the way he seems to have intended. I'm willing to forgive him these missteps, because on the whole the book still succeeds.

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### **Amy says**

Slow, a bit bizarre, glad when it ended.

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### **Wayne says**

I really liked this novel. It fits together like a half-dozen character studies. It seemed disjointed at first and I had some difficulty fitting the pieces together, but by the last 1/2 I was truly transfixed. Awestruck in the last quarter. A beautiful, creative narrative about loss and need and connection and the things we are willing to give away. I look forward to reading more of his writing.

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### **Jason Sinclair Long says**

I think maybe some of the reviewers who didn't like this book either don't like this KIND of book or don't know how to read this kind of book. There are a lot of negative comments regarding the "disjointed plot line," etc. Yes, like many other authors have done in the past and will continue to do in the future, Brandon switches between several inhabitants of a prescribed geographical area. And then he ties all the disparate stories together in the end. For me, in this case, it works. The writing is varied and exciting and the characters complex and moving, two things Brandon may have been proving he could manage based on critiques of his first two novels (terse prose and flat characters). Truth be told, I read A Million Heavens while burning with fever, so perhaps I was more open to the kaleidoscopic structure of the book because my defenses were down. Whatever the reasons, I liked the book and would recommend it.

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## **Steve Bauman says**

Beautifully written and structured.

Initially it seemed too clever for its own good--the wolf-perspective chapters were kind of, "oh yeah, it's a McSweeney's book, herp"--but Brandon does such a superb job of tying everything together... it's just an impressive piece of work from start-to-almost finish. The ending is a bit perfunctory, though in some ways that's probably for the best, as it may have tried to tie things together too neatly with too much detail about the final fate of coma boy/musical prodigy/god's mouthpiece Soren. The other characters orbiting around Soren, including the wolf, are vivid and compelling.

So yeah, go read it. Now.

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## **Suzanne Zeitouni says**

I'm not usually a fan of mystic realism and this parable seemed stretched at times. A group of disjointed misfits whose stories entwine with the meanderings and symbolic maulings of a wolf, leave the reader in free fall at times. This work was more poetry than narrative and while I appreciated the lyrical qualities I became bored with the journey.

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