



# Corpus Christi

*Bret Anthony Johnston*

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## **Corpus Christi** Bret Anthony Johnston

From an acclaimed and award-winning young writer comes an intensely moving debut collection set in the eye of life's storms. In Corpus Christi, Texas—a town often hit by hurricanes—parents, children, and lovers come together and fall apart, bonded and battered by memories of loss that they feel as acutely as physical pain.

A car accident joins strangers linked by an intimate knowledge of madness. A teenage boy remembers his father's act of sudden and self-righteous violence. A "hurricane party" reunites a couple whom tragedy parted. And, in an unforgettable three-story cycle, an illness sets in profound relief a man's relationship with his mother and the odd, shifting fidelity of truth to love.

Told in fresh, lyrical voices and taut, inventive styles, these narratives explore the complex volatility of love and intimacy, sorrow and renewal—and expose how often these experiences feel like the opposite of themselves. From the woman whose young son's uncanny rapport with snakes illuminates her own missed opportunities to the man confronting his wife and her lover in a house full of illegal exotic birds, all the characters here face moments of profound decision and recognition in which no choice is clearly or completely right.

Writing with tough humor, deep humanity, and a keen eye for the natural environment, Bret Anthony Johnston creates a world where where cataclysmic events cut people loose from their "regular lives, floating and spiraling away from where we had been the day before." **Corpus Christi** is a extraordinarily ambitious debut. It marks the arrival of an important, exquisitely talented voice to American fiction.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

## **Corpus Christi Details**

Date : Published June 14th 2005 by Random House Trade Paperbacks (first published 2004)

ISBN : 9780812971873

Author : Bret Anthony Johnston

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# From Reader Review Corpus Christi for online ebook

## NancyKay says

Johnston was my workshop teacher at the VQR Writers Conference in 2018. I read his novel before we met, and this collection (which was published first) afterwards. He's very good at pulling together human emotions and even extreme actions out of his all-encompassing sense of place and atmosphere, the hot, humid, frequently stormy seaside town of Corpus Christi. I read these stories slowly and with great pleasure.

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## Chris says

I love this book so intensely that I feel like I'm confessing secrets by writing about it. It's one of those books I don't want to recommend to people because if they read it and don't feel destroyed and reborn I will probably like them less and never ever invite them to my birthday parties ever again. I still have a hard time explaining why this collection of stories flattens me so entirely, and I suspect others might find it occasionally hokey or even exploitative. For me though, it strikes all the right chords. The settings are rich and familiar (Corpus Christi, TX), and the characters are people I could easily know. Add to it the fact that fellow-Texan Johnston is almost exactly my age and I'm perhaps the ideal audience here.

It's no exaggeration to say that I feel like a better person for having read this. I want even more to do right by the people I love, and I feel more awake in the present moment--knowing it will all soon be gone. When I finished this late one night on vacation, I stayed awake for more than an hour trying to compose myself before I went to sleep in the bed adjacent to my elder daughter. I didn't want to be a blubbering lummoX waking her up post-midnight to squeeze the breath out of her three-year-old lungs as I struggled to hold her so tightly that I could never lose her. So when I say that I don't recall the last time a book had such a brutally wonderful emotional impact on me, I only mean it literally.

ps> If you do read this book and don't love it, please don't tell me. I really am serious about the birthday party thing.

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## John Luiz says

I first became aware of Brett Anthony Johnston because of a terrific story that he had in the Fall 2011 issue of American Short Fiction titled "Paradeability" about a father coping with the aftermath of his wife's death and his son's obsession with learning how to become a clown, which is the boy's way of coping with his mother's loss. It's a greatly paced and nuanced story, offering wonderful insights into how the father and son cope with tragedy. All the skill at display in that piece made me go searching for more work by Johnston and this collection didn't let me down. Each story offers a terrific premise, great character insight and deft writing.

The 10 stories in the piece, all located in or near Corpus Christi, Texas, are:

1. Waterwalkers – 31 pp – My favorite story in the collection. While a hurricane is bearing down on Corpus Christi, a man runs into his ex-wife in a hardware store. They haven't seen each other in years, since they

separated and divorced after the death of their son. The story is filled with evidence of why they had the original connection, and how it got marred by the pain of losing their child.

2. *I See Something You Don't See* – 29 pp – The first in a trilogy of stories about a son who's had to take time off from his teaching job and post-graduate studies in order to move back to Texas to take care of his mother who is dying from cancer. Here his mother is hopeful that she still has some time to enjoy life, but when the son learns her cancer has actually taken a turn for the worse, he keeps the news from her for a while and is wracked with guilt about keeping a secret he knows will shatter all her newfound hope.

3. *In the Tall Grass* – 27 pp -- A son who has a distant relationship with a father he worships witnesses an episode in which the father erupts into violence, kicking an already hobbled man in his weak knee because of a dispute over the rent the father owes on a stall in a horse barn. The boy, eager for the connection, is mystified by why his father would take him along to witness such a scene.

4. *Outside the Toy Store* – 10 pp – A widow meets a woman he dated five years earlier, after his wife died and when his daughter was gravely ill. The woman is with her twin, three-year-old boys whom she had with another man after their relationship ended. The encounter begins pleasantly, with each of them recalling fond memories of their time together, but then their interaction takes a surprising turn that reveals much about the man's current state of mind.

5. *Corpus Christi* – 35 pp – The one story I wasn't thrilled by. It gets a little too artsy for me with the point of view shifting from one character to the next, and there are sections you have to read several times just to figure out what's going on. It's all about the at first circumstantial, and then tragic interaction between a man whose suicidal wife is in a psychiatric hospital and the sister of a soldier who's been committed there after brutally beating up a fellow soldier on the base. On the road later, there's an even more fateful encounter between the husband, the sister, and another soldier from the base who brought her to the hospital.

6. *The Widow* – 26 pp - The second installment in the trilogy of stories about son Lee and his mother, Minnie, who's dying of cancer. Set again in the present moment when Lee is caring for her, the story reveals through several flashbacks how close Minnie had been to her late husband, and how she'd never fully emotionally recovered from his sudden death a few years earlier from a heart attack.

7. *Two Liars* – 27 pp – Another story about a young boy witnessing the wayward ways of a father he adores. In this piece, the son watches his father arrive at startling decision for how to deal with the family's financial woes – he sets their house on fire.

8. *Anything That Floats* – 12 pp – To escape the heat during a prolonged drought, a mother, whose husband is in the hospital, takes her snake-obsessed son to a pool at a hotel managed by a man she had an affair with the year before as payback for her husband's philandering.

9. *Bird of Paradise* – 22 pp - A teenaged boy gets involved with a friend's crazy father who is having an affair with a woman and asks the boys to steal things from his lover's house. But things taken a dramatic turn when the cuckolded husband, having learned of the affair, shows up at his rival's house with a gun.

10. *Buy for Me the Rain* – 29 pp – The final story in the Lee and Minnie trilogy packs an incredible wallop. Some incredibly moving scenes as the son sings to his mother, hoping to relieve her final painful moments. There is also a heart-wrenching description of of the mother's final breaths and what the son has to witness as he watches life seep out of his mother. Combined with those moving scenarios is a brutally honest portrait of the son's secret wish that his mother's funeral might give him the opportunity to reunite with the great

love of his life, a flighty woman whom he quickly realizes can't give him all he wants even after she does come back into his life and they restore at least a physical connection.

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### **Laura Leaney says**

Bret Anthony Johnston's collection is comprised of stories linked together by setting; they all take place in Corpus Christi, and various characters appear in more than one story; but unlike Elizabeth Strout's marvelous book *Olive Kitteridge*, these stories are tedious! They are mostly domestic in subject matter: dying or dead relationships between husbands and wives, mothers and sons, sons and fathers, et cetera. And there's nothing wrong with that, except when the minutia of living - and all the details that don't matter- take on too much importance. I was bored with two-thirds of the stories, and left unmoved by nearly all of them.

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### **Genny says**

I had the pleasure of hearing Bret speak during one of my visits to Corpus where he was promoting his newest book, *Remember Me Like This*. He is a graduate of my high school who has gone on to much greater things--trading in a career as a professional skate-boarder and ultimately teaching creative writing at Harvard. He's a charming and personable speaker as well as a graduate of the fabulous Iowa Writers' Workshop (where I believe this book originated.) All that said, *Corpus Christi Stories* is not an uplifting account of life in South Texas. He stung me with his opening story about the death of a young son and the devastation that rocks the family -- it recounts places and dredges up memories of my older brother who died unexpectedly at age seven. I put down the book and cried. The next story is about an ailing mother who senses the encroachment of death but soldiers on cheerily. Another page from my life. I cried again. Bret's prose is clean and clearly voices a CC point of view for me, but I don't know if it would resonate to someone who didn't know the milestones and touchstones of the place. I enjoyed the book but recommend it with reservations.

I have added *Remember Me Like This* to my To-Reads. (Gotta support my homeboy!)

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### **Valentina Stella says**

Un libro in teoria tristissimo che però riesce a raccontare il tema della morte con una dolcezza infinita, esplorando la natura umana e le sue debolezze, i suoi momenti eroici, le sue fragilità. Sono racconti che gravitano attorno a Corpus Christi, città del Texas, sono quasi completamente slegati l'uno dall'altro, ma andando avanti con le pagine capisci che un filo che lega tutto c'è.

Ho letto le ultime pagine piangendo. Ed è stato bello.

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## **Julie says**

This was a pretty underwhelming book. I had read reviews that said “What a great first book!” or “Can you believe he used to be a professional skater?!?!”

As a matter of fact, I can. I think it’s a little more astonishing that he is a professor of creative writing at Harvard. Was it well written? Yes. Did he accomplish the task, a difficult one in my opinion, of composing just the right amount of a story within the “short story” length? I suppose.

I think what really bothered me was the content. Too many were just uninspired tear jerkers. The most prominent story is simply a description of a mother and her son as she slowly dies from cancer. Maybe that is more appealing subject matter for some, but I think it’s something that is universally acknowledged to be awful, and I don’t really think that it was described in any groundbreaking way. It’s a difficult process for the son as he watches his mother die, the mother feels guilty for imposing on the son, neither one of them can do a damn thing about it. It sucks. It makes you cry because you think about what if my own mother died of cancer? Wouldn't that just really, really suck?

Of course it would, and I don’t need to read a book by this guy to know that. Neither is it something that I feel like this book helped me explore in any meaningful way. It pretty much made me feel exploited and anxious to finish the book so I could read something more provocative.

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## **Lucinda says**

5 stars! This is the best collection of short stories I've read in a long time...such a promising debut. It's clear the author has toiled to make the writing as fresh, concise and sharp as it is. The stories themselves are stunning, and will stay with you. They brought me to a town -- an entire universe --I never thought to explore. So glad I did.

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## **Zach VandeZande says**

Good god, these stories. Bret Anthony Johnston's collection reminds us what is to be human, that it is something fundamentally sad and full of longing. The three stories about Lee Marhsall and his mother, in particular, are some of the most powerful, perceptive stories I've ever read.

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## **Adrian Stumpp says**

Johnston didn't teach a writing seminar at Weber State I was supposed to attend, and in preparation for his cancellation, I read this collection of short stories. There are no flat out duds. There are no works of genius. Two of them are above average. The rest teeter on the border between average and slightly below average. Johnston is at his best when he dares to try something different, although I should say he never tries anything very much different. The cycle of stories concerning the preparations of a young adult man for his mother's pending death of cancer are particularly forgettable. (NOTE: I wish this d@#\$ thing had a spell check. Also, is it okay to swear on here, or do you get dinged?) Johnston rarely attempts any fireworks of the language

and when he does it's too little too late. What mars these stories, and most contemporary stories that strive to be ruthlessly "realistic" is two fold: (1) The prose stubbornly refuse to become stentimental, which as a rule I find preferable, except that (2) The tried and true underlying ideology is that of the grief, paralysis, and spiritual impotence indemic of the Postmodern Man (or Woman). The cumulative effect is unbearably sentimental because it glorifies a subdued aesthetic and emotional numbness that, as a postmodern, I guess I'm supposed to appreciate, but I really don't. worth reading are "Corpus Christi" and "In the Tall Grass."

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### **Jacque says**

After finishing Johnston's book *Remember Me Like This*, I knew I'd discovered an author I would want to read again. He hasn't written another novel, but I discovered his book of short stories.

I took me a while to finish this because some of the stories made me so emotional that I just had to put it down between them. I'm not one who enjoys a good cry, I want to ignore those feelings and move on. But don't misunderstand - not all of the stories are sad. But they ARE all touching and extremely well-written. It's a talented author who can introduce characters and make you feel connected to them in the span of a short story, and Bret Anthony Johnston is definitely talented.

When I finished this, it occurred to me to wonder who could read this book without crying and I realized that 20 years ago, I could have done it. But anyone who has watched a loved one dying could not read the trilogy of stories about a son who moves back home to help his mother through her last months. They are spread throughout the book, which doesn't lessen their impact a bit. They were the hardest ones for me to read, but the ones that will stick with me the most.

If this book doesn't sound like one you'd enjoy, I urge you to read *Remember Me Like This* instead, so you can appreciate Johnston's skill.

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### **Jackie Law says**

*Corpus Christi*, by Bret Anthony Johnston, is a collection of ten short stories exploring the intimacies of human relationships. Each story is set in or around the town of Corpus Christi in Texas, USA. There are crossovers within the tales such that the reader quickly becomes immersed in the setting.

The relationships in each story vary. Some are familial, cross generational; others feature friendship, sometimes lovers. There are accidents, violence, stormy weather and loss. The challenges of living within and without marriage, parenting, and adolescence are explored.

A triptych of tales offer snapshots of the day to day trials of a terminally ill widow being cared for by her adult son. The difficulty of communication is brought into sharp relief.

A good short story must capture the readers attention from the off, have a purposeful plot and satisfying denouement. Each of these tales left me sated. The narrative throughout is steeped in the melancholy of life. When concluded I had to walk away to process what I had just read.



The writing seeps poignancy but avoids sentimentality. Feelings evoked are raw, intense, the rarely acknowledged expressed with piercing clarity. The sparse prose gets under the skin and touches the heart. The trials detailed and the ripples of their effect exquisitely portrayed.

“parents, children and lovers some together and fall apart, bonded and battered by memories of loss that they feel as acutely as physical pain. [...] events cut people loose from their regular lives, floating and spiralling away from where we had been the day before.”

A fine collection of stories from an accomplished writer. This is a rewarding read.

My copy of this book was provided gratis by the publisher, Two Roads.

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### **Elliot Sanders says**

I was thrilled with the BASS selected story, and enjoyed several of the others, but several fell flat, in my opinion. Constant POV changing was also an issue for me in several pieces.

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### **Jessica says**

Normally I'm not a fan of short stories but occasionally I find a talented author who can change my mind about the format such as Jess Walter (*We Live in Water*), Annie Proulx (*Close Range*) or Russell Banks (*Permanent Member of the Family*). More often I am left frustrated by short stories either being boring, leaving things so underdeveloped in the plot or characters rendering the story pointless, or trying too hard to be clever, bizarre or open-ended. All that said, I was delightfully surprised by the Johnston's collection "Corpus Christi." Having read his novel I knew he was a capable writer but as I have discovered that does not always translate to an author's short stories (or vice versa). These stories were fresh and thoughtful and managed to give a very full picture of the characters and place in a few pages. Some were very specific anecdotes about one day or thing that happened to someone like the time a son's father went to jail. Where another about an adult son taking care of a terminally ill mother was a three part narrative that could be read together or could hold up each on its own. Each story was meaty and well developed and carefully crafted. The treatment of the characters was tender and without judgement and the story was told without a predetermined moral or conclusion. The book shares a love of story telling and we as readers can relate to many of the themes and people. I would highly recommend the book to anyone looking for realistic bite-sized fiction.

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### **Kawai says**

Most people who follow even just a clutch of literary magazines are familiar with Bret Anthony Johnston's stories, which consistently grace the "Best Of" anthology, while also appearing in a wide range of magazines, including *Ploughshares*, *The Paris Review*, and others.

And much like that work, this (now early) volume in Johnston's career shows off what he's best at: writing about the raw and painful thoughts that come in the quiet moments of lives that are being pushed to the point of breaking.

And while the collection can start to feel a bit redundant if you read it straight through--almost every family has at least one of its nuclear members dead or on the way out, the protagonists are all insightful and shy young men, ethnic/economic markers are minimal, illness tends to be the fulcrum of the plot--it is, nonetheless, incredibly tender and moving.

Johnston's work has only gotten better since this collection, but all his best tools are on display here, as well: Great dialogue, effective and strategic use of simile/metaphor, diamond-sharp exposition. Well worth the read, whether you're familiar with his more recent work or not.

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