



Angels

Denis Johnson

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'A dazzling and savage first novel' *New York Times*

Angels tells the story of two born losers. Jamie has ditched her husband and is running away with her two baby girls. Bill is dreaming of making it big in a life of crime. They meet on a Greyhound bus and decide to team up.

So begins a stunning, tragic odyssey through the dark underbelly of America – the bars, bus stations, mental wards and prisons that play host to Jamie and Bill as they find themselves trapped in a downward spiral through rape, alcohol, drugs and crime, to madness and death.

From the author of *Tree of Smoke* , winner of the National Book Award for Fiction

Angels Details

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From Reader Review Angels for online ebook

LeAnne says

Jamie and her kids should have just stayed in Oakland.

Denis Johnson writes some really dark stuff, even for noir. I tried to care about Jamie through her 5 year old Miranda and baby Ellen...but aside from one incredibly horrible interlude in Chicago, I could not connect with her. Some authors can write from the perspective of or about a character of the opposite gender, but sadly, Denis Johnson isn't one of them. At least for me.

I do know that he had struggles early in life - in his mid teens - that tie to some of what Jamie faced, but maybe I'm too cheery a bird to relate.

Bill had potential to grab me, since his brothers and mom rolled into the story, but when he went up the pipe, I was just glad to see him go.

Really powerful writing, but the only happy spot was noting that Stroh's beer is Shorts spelled backward. Too noir for me, over all.

Rae DelBianco says

Johnson's first novel, *Angels* is a savage downward spiral of people who you at first recoil from at their lack of self control, then come to love as the chaos reveals itself as something much greater than mere individuals. A gorgeous portrayal of confusion, drugs, and madness— a crying angel with roving tattoos is the center of my favorite scene, second only to the ending, which I won't spoil here. The heartrending moments of truth come with less immediacy than they do in some of Johnson's other works, such as *Jesus' Son*, and for that bit of down time I'm opting for 4 stars rather than 5, but overall this is an utterly moving read.

Helena says

Angels is Johnson's first novel, and I suppose it shows, just a bit. I found myself skimming a little through the first sixty pages or so. The writing seemed a little hesitant or maybe it rang a bit false for me through the beginning. By the middle and end of the book, I was hooked.

Angels is the sad story of two people on the fringes of society: Jamie, escaping what she thinks is a terrible life with her two young daughters and Bill Houston, a drifter ex-military, ex-con, alcoholic looking for his next high and easy money. The two meet on a cross country greyhound bus and despite Jamie having sworn off men, she's charmed by Bill Houston and decides to hang out with him a while.

The thing about Denis Johnson's characters is that they're so real and gritty. He creates these realistic characters, low lives, some might say- but he does so with grace and understanding. Above all, they are humans and Johnson forces the reader to empathize and see them as humans, despite their shortcomings.

I rated this four stars initially, but some passages deserve nothing less than five stars- I can't stop thinking about one passage in particular where I had to stop reading as I realized what it would truly be like to lose your mind. The horror and powerlessness of how that would feel in brief moments of lucidity was absolutely perfectly rendered by Johnson, and it was terrifying (The Yellow Wallpaper by Gilman comes close, but not quite). How we can be controlled by our desires, no matter what they are, and miss what is all around us right here and now and what a terrible shame that is, how we piss it all away in our pursuit of other, better things. How in a moment, a split second, our lives can fall apart and how you can't take that moment back. How it feels to be utterly powerless.

I don't want to give anything away, but I will say that I don't know how a person could read through Bill Houston's last chapters and not be affected, even if it just makes you pause and think.

A book that will stay with me a long time, just as Jesus' Son has.

Jeff Jackson says

David Foster Wallace selected *Angels* as one of "Five direly underappreciated U.S. novels >1960." He wrote: "This was Johnson's first fiction after the horripilative lyric poetry of "Incognito Lounge." Even cult fans of "Jesus' Son" often haven't heard of "Angels." It's sort of "Jesus' Son's" counterpoint, a novel-length odyssey of mopes and scrotes and their brutal redemptions. A totally American book, it's also got great prose, truly great, some of the '80s' best; e.g. lines like "All around them men drank alone, staring out of their faces."

I'd add that it's clear this is the first novel of a poet - one who'd been reading a lot of Robert Stone, Don DeLillo, and William Blake. Johnson seems less concerned with crafting an elegant narrative arc and generating momentum than creating short scenes shot through with memorable images and ensuring each sentence is exquisitely wrought. Especially in its first half, the novel moves along in fits-and-starts that might put off people looking for something more conventional, but I was won over by the local quality of the prose and the finely observed gallery of sadsack characters. When it comes time for the climatic bank scene, Johnson steps up and turns in an absolutely virtuoso piece of storytelling, narrating the event from various perspectives for maximum impact, surprise, and substance. The final sections are meditative and hypnotic, achieving a desolate sense of grace that I can't recall from other novels. Many details hail from a late 1970s America that's now vanished, but there's a bedrock foundation to the characters' struggles and the story's bleak settings that makes *Angels* feel something like timeless.

Mary says

This book has been on my to-read list for about a decade. Year after year it got pushed back and forgotten and now finally, finally, I have entered the world of Denis Johnson.

This is a quick read, I read it over two days. We start off with Jamie, a runaway mother with two small children on a greyhound bus who despite being "done with men" hooks up with Bill Houston on the bus and together they journey down into the pits of life – drug use, alcohol, rape, robbery, insanity, murder,

execution.

Johnson packed a lot into his compact book and I think the story could have been better embellished, the characters more fleshed out. Mrs Houton's character particularly resounded with me, she reminded me of one of Yates' pathetic characters; living in denial and with an air of pretence about her. She's wonderfully insane.

Desperation. All the people in this book are bogged down with sadness and desperation.

The writing is wonderfully done. It's rich with imagery and grit. I can feel the Arizona sun bear down on the character's faces, I can taste the tequila and lemon on my tongue as they do shots in the car. I only wish there was more backstory and detail. Another 100 pages could've solved that.

Diane Barnes says

I would have put this book down after chapter one except for two reasons: I was reading it with a small group, and it was only 209 pages. I know it was Johnson's first novel, but if it's any indication of the direction of his work, I will not choose to read another one of his.

The quality of the writing, the imagery, and some beautiful sentences has earned it 3 stars from me. What I cannot deal with are the hopelessness of the characters and the bleakness of the story. Not my kind of book is putting it mildly, but the novel has won awards and is liked a lot by other reviewers, so don't rely on my opinion alone. Just be warned that despair is the order of the day in this one.

Paul Bryant says

I got Denis Johnson and Dennis Cooper mixed up. Big mistake. One is a loathsome creep and the other is clearly the American prose master I have missed these many years, but intend to catch up on very soon. I see DJ just won the National Book Award.

To my ears DJ has the best ear for hardboiled dialogue since Raymond Chandler although it's clear he doesn't give a rat's ass about plot. But on this broke busted disgusted bum steer of a planet you takes em where you finds em.

Peycho Kanev says

DEATH IS THE MOTHER OF BEAUTY

Jason Coleman says

Began re-reading this thing recently and then had to back off for a while. My own life was too stressful, and you better be on solid ground when you read *Angels*, because Johnson isn't going to spare you anything. He

begins with homelessness and moves onto gang rapes (plural), the psych ward, a murder, death row. You feel kind of relieved when all the main character has to worry about is his girlfriend being looped up on red wine and speed at the family cookout or a few shots being fired at him out a window while he's repossessing a BMW and a Harley. Johnson gets away with it because of his immense delicacy. He is never sentimental or sensationalistic, never trying to merely shock. When he leads his man to the gas chamber, I worried for the author, wondered how Johnson was getting through it (I recall how Chekhov agonized over killing the child in "In the Ravine"). He's going to the same place your brain goes during nightmares—hitting those dread notes, behind which there better be something divine, what Johnson would probably call grace (see angels of title), or we're all in trouble. The book, which may quietly be his best, is a masterpiece.

Baz says

4.5 stars. What an ending. The last 30 pages or so were absolutely worthy of 5 stars.

Ned says

This was a great first novel and, considering it was published in 1977, it is was a remarkable achievement. The 3 brothers in crime and their misanthropic parents were nicely done and the bleakness factor was very high (especially for 1977). The characters jumped around a bit too much to keep the narrative, but the ill-conceived robbery was tragically comic. The psychotic breakdown of the girl was almost too much to take, but creatively rendered to its logical disgusting end. I was nauseous about 3/4 through the book, but the finale in the Arizona prison was calming and beautiful in its reconciliation with the inevitable. The politics of the time were reminiscent of Gary Gilmore and the author was a "teacher" in an Arizona prison so he knew his subject matter. Overall Johnson is a very talented writer and I'll read up his later work to see how it matures.

Jon says

This was Johnson's debut novel and it's well written and powerful. In Johnson's short stories, the characters are often those who live on the edge of society. Junkies, alcoholics, and petty criminals populate these stories and Johnson chronicles their lives of quiet desperation with sympathy and insight. In *Angels*, Johnson again focuses on people living on the margins and while it's far from an uplifting book, his characters come alive in all their flawed humanity. In the book, Jaime Mays, a woman with two kids in tow who has just left her trailer park and her husband, meets ex-con Bill Houston on a Greyhound bus. Born losers, they soon hook-up and their cross-country odyssey eventually ends in tragedy and madness. Johnson never sentimentalizes his characters; they are people who, when given a choice, always choose the worse one. The prospect of redemption hovers just beyond their grasp and there is an eventuality to their downfall:

“It was all right to be who he was, but others would probably think it was terrible. A couple of times in the past he'd reached this absolute zero of the truth, and without fear or bitterness he realized now that somewhere inside it there was a move he could make to change his life, to become another person, but he'd never be able to guess what it was. He found a cigaret and struck a match--for a moment there was nothing before him but the flame. When he shook it out and the world came back, it was the same place again where all his decisions had been made a long time ago”.

The dialogue rings true throughout the book and the writing is lyrical and filled with descriptive passages that burn brightly. The characters he introduces are well drawn and Johnson is able to lay them open with surgical precision and expose them at their core:

“He decided to go over a couple of blocks to Michael’s Tavern for something cold, and as he walked beside the road he felt his anger burning up in the heat of noon, and saw himself, as he often did when he was outdoors on hot days, being forged in enormous fires for some purpose beyond his imagining. He was only walking down a street toward a barroom, and yet in his own mind he took his part in the eternity of this place. It seemed to him – it was not the first time – that he belonged in Hell, and would always find himself joyful in it’s midst. It seemed to him that to touch James Houston was to touch one iota of the vast grit that made the desert and hid the fires at the center of the earth”

This isn’t a happy story, the characters are flawed and their decisions throughout the novel are bad. They are misfits living on the edge of society and filled with an emptiness that is always threatening to consume them..

Kirk Smith says

I keep a short list of books that I consider Great-writing-Painful-to-read. A cringe accompanied by pain on nearly every page. Powerful. Memorable.*** Angels. It touches on so many things. Squalor, drug use, alcoholism, rape, murder, and good old insanity. Too well done and Painful. ** Others on the list- for alcoholism Malcom Lowry's Under The Volcano will leave you in a fog for weeks. * Theodore Dreiser's An American tragedy forces the reader to truly feel the shame a murderer carries.* And last as well as the one I most want to completely forget, American Psycho. All on my list of books not to read again. I can't deny they are well written, but they are keeping bad company.

Lee Monks says

One of Johnson's best, and he's at his best when relatively pared down and going for the heart rather than the brain.

Steven Godin says

A dark, powerful and ultimately tragic tale of Jamie and Bill who after meeting on a bus start up a friendship and so begins a journey that was never going to have a happy ending. Right from the early stages you get a sense of what type of people they are, Jamie is trailer trash and quite vulnerable who along with her two young daughters (one only being a baby) may be fleeing from her partner, while Bill has a confident swagger about himself but in the end is just a born loser and has lived a life in and out of prison. There is so much unpleasantness to everything from the bars to the hotels, drugs, sexual violence and madness, but it's Jamie dragging her children around the dark seedy streets that I found particularly uncomfortable. As for Johnson's writing it's actually very good and has a similar style to Cormac Mccarthy which is no bad thing, he also handled the last third of the book with some dignity and tenderness which helps take away the bad taste of events before.

Laura says

The last chapter is a hard one. The characters are no "angels" and they continue down a slippery slope at a very rapid pace. This is not a story of redemption. I can only recommend to folks who don't mind gritty and unsavory characters. This book has multiple characters who all think they are leaving something horrible for something better but it's in direct contrast to this situation. They are self destructive and no one is stopping another from poor decisions. They encourage this behavior. Harsh and raw. Note: another read that influenced Donald Ray Pollock. On another note, thank goodness a parent didn't ask me what this was about while reading at my kiddo's ballgame.....:crickets!

RB says

Denis Johnson is a terrific writer and it is unfortunate that his masterpiece, "Angels", is overshadowed by 'Jesus' Son' - they are both splendid novels, but for me nothing beats the way this novel gets inside and tears you apart and it is subtle and sneaky about it. The story contains a group of misfits each one stuck in their own self-made prisons, either by addiction or childbirth or both, and the reader cannot help but feel she is looking over a great manmade rat maze with no end but death for the participating creatures that cannot see outside of the walls society, family, and their own choices, even without free will, have erected to make sure they never see another world, another way of being. The book comments on several important topics with great care, wisdom, and zero judgement: addiction, free will, capital punishment, motherhood, religion, rape, and the invisible traps set by families . . .

"Angels" is a short novel but nonetheless holds more within its covers than most door-stopper books. Denis Johnson is a writer of immense skill with a large, warm heart that tries to see the best in a world the seems to be conspiring against humanity. His works should be read and cherished even if one believes this optimistic line of thinking to be deluded.

Teresa Proença says

Drogados. Bêbedos. Ladrões. Violadores. Assassinos.
Viagens de autocarro. Hotéis miseráveis. Prisões. Manicómios.
Marginais...

Com este "pacote" abandono qualquer livro às primeiras páginas (não por preconceito, mas por desinteresse), mas Denis Johnson não mo permitiu.

Não gostava das personagens nem do que faziam mas fiquei; prisioneira da escrita e fascinada com a forma como Denis Johnson transforma o horror numa obra de arte.

Não é um livro para guardar no coração, mas valeu a pena...aquele final...

Arthur Graham says

Bill Houston was experimenting with his butane lighter, holding it upside down and trying to keep it lit. "The gas wants to go up," he explained to her, "but then it has to go down before it can go up. It don't know what to do."

Like so much fluid in a cheap plastic Bic, our lives flow along paths equally perplexing and predictable. We don't know what to do either, but to whatever depths we sink and however high we rise, most of it can probably be chalked up to circumstance. Wherever we end up and however we end up getting there, it seems the only thing we can count on is the whole mess going BOOM, and usually much too soon.

That's what this book is ultimately about, or at least it was for me.

Speaking as someone who hasn't spent a single night in jail for at least eleven years, it's surprising how much I found myself relating to Johnson's shady, criminal-minded characters. The (mostly) reformed Arthur Graham standing here today has come a long way since juvie hall, that's for sure, but as a result of my own experiences – not to mention those of all the thieves, fiends, and hoods I've known along the way – I found the Houstons and their associates more than just a little familiar. From plasma bank patrons to public defense lawyers, a sorry bunch the lot of 'em, but not altogether without humanity.

Real people with real problems? You could say that. When you're poor, your options are limited, and when your options are limited, it's all too easy to take whatever cheap thrills you can get. When those thrills revolve around substances, sex, and whatever it takes to retain those scraps of solace in your otherwise miserable life, it's all too easy to end up on the wrong side of the law. And unlike those born into the world of privilege, those who can afford the vices and pay the prices, it's usually the Greyhound-riding, flophouse-dwelling dregs of society who get the raw deal. That's no spoiler by any means - that's just life.

As for the writing itself, Johnson blends a stark, subjective realism with some beautifully rendered imagery, at times quite nightmarish, the combined effect of which forces the reader into the shoes as well as the heads of his tragically human characters.

At this point I'd be remiss if I didn't direct you to this review by my lovely co-read and partner in crime, Ms. Jenn(ifer).

Jenn(ifer) says

First, an opening number: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aq344k...>

Trying to forget your past is a futile as trying to dodge the rain drops when it goes from a drizzle to a downpour. Unexpectedly, the sky will just open up and you're fucked. I'm not going to lie, this book (the first half anyway) brought back an awful lot of unwanted memories for me.

What is it that protected me from turning into one of these sad sonsabitches? I grew up piss poor surrounded by a bunch of degenerates, why am I not chasing the dragon or locked up or living on welfare? Why do I not have 5 kids fathered by a bunch of different baby daddies? Why was I spared?

Allow me to digress for a moment (I swear, this will make sense later). I'm not much for computer games, but there is one game I love to play: two suit spider solitaire. See, this game is all about making the right decisions. And when you get stuck at the end with no more moves, you can simply go back go back go back and choose a different path. Maybe it will be the right one and maybe not, and if it's not, hey, no biggie, you can keep choosing until you finally get on the right path, or you can give up and accept that you're just not going to win this round. It's sort of a metaphor for life for me. Because I'd be lying if I said I haven't made some pretty bad decisions along the way. But every day I wake up, I get the opportunity to make a different choice.

And that, folks, makes all the difference: having the courage and the conviction to make better, wiser choices. Johnson's characters are all plagued by the same fatal flaw: the inability to change the course of the game. The Houston brothers are criminals and abusers just like their father. Jaime is a drugged out waste of life who neglects her children and herself. Save your pity though, because they are where they are because of their own stupid ass decisions, and I for one don't feel sorry for a single one of them. And that's all I have to say about that.

Endogenous vs exogenous. Internal vs external locus of control. Read Arthur's exceptional review for the other side of the argument.

DFW - 2 hits, 2 misses. Bring on the tie breaker.
