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Review: Blue Songs in an Open Key, Jazzy Short Stories by Arya F. Jenkins

Mish (Eileen) Murphy · Wednesday, June 12th, 2019

So then in the middle of a bluesy silence he says, like he's talking about a secret stash of pot or something, "Do you want to hear some music?" ("The Bluest Train").

Music has charms to soothe a savage breast (William Congreve).

Like many other people, I'm sure, when I think about jazz (*if I think about jazz*), my mind reverts to stereotypes, and I picture jazz musicians and jazz fans as predominantly male. The short story collection *Blue Songs in an Open Key* by Arya F. Jenkins (Fomite 2019) challenges (and maybe changes) all that. According to Jenkins, in jazz's mansion, there are many rooms. Women, gays, addicts, people with disabilities, people haunted by past abuse, and other "misfits" who appreciate jazz are highlighted in Jenkins's new collection. And all of the thirteen stories in it are in some way connected with the love of jazz.



The short stories that comprise *Blue Songs in an Open Key* have titles that are taken from the titles of individual jazz pieces or albums. I searched *Youtube* for tracks of the jazz songs and albums mentioned in a story or story title. Then I re-read the stories in *Blue Songs in an Open Key* with the appropriate music playing in the background. I found that the jazz complemented the prose in remarkable ways. Jenkins is to be applauded for adding music to her stories in such a natural way that reading this fiction with its rich musical allusions might be close to a "total reading experience."

According to Jenkins, jazz can soothe the soul. In "The Bluest Train," the narrator is a musician turned recovering alcoholic who befriends a "gangly, nerdy giant," a "train wreck of a friend," a man with a traumatic past. "In the days when he could see better and was younger, Carl had bought jazz records to keep himself happy and alive." What exactly does jazz do to ease our lives? For one thing, it makes us realize that "the world is larger than (us), than all our individual pains" ("Epistrophe"). As the narrator of "The Blue Kiss" says, "(M)usic opens up time, and therefore possibilities." The presence of music deepens an experience: "...the music was here now to give the moment some heresy, sense, and truth, providing unification, fusion" ("Bitches' Brew").

Jazz is about connection. In "So What" (a cut from *Kind of Blue*, one of Miles Davis's greatest albums), the narrator states: "(W)hat jazz does is make me think—not about separateness, but how

things connect, interrelate.” She also confides: “I hear jazz in everything, even the weather.”

As a connector, jazz can be the basis of an inter-generational bond. “For a long time, jazz was the magic that kept Chan at home, the glue that kept grandmother and granddaughter together...” (“Don’t Threaten Me With Love, Baby”). One woman was introduced to jazz by her uncle’s playing for her “the music he loved, the best jazz and Broadway tunes he owned” (“Like a Pigeon in the Park”). In another story, a woman becomes a jazz fan simply because of the jazz music her elusive father always played when he was at home with his family, as he rarely was. “When my father was at home he spread a kind of lightness like sparkles whenever he spent time listening to his jazz albums” (“Lulu and Me”).

The short story collection *Blue Songs in an Open Key* by Arya F. Jenkins is about the power of music to connect us and improve the quality of our lives. It is also about interesting, complex characters who find solace and fulfillment in playing or listening to music. Probably, readers who are music lovers will especially appreciate this book; however, the stories in it are relatable, well-crafted, and compelling even without the jazz connection.

Blue Songs in an Open Key is a collection that I know I’ll keep re-reading, exploring, and referring to in the future. Check out this book yourself—these stories, like good jazz, are really cool.

(To purchase *Blue Songs in an Open Key*: www.aryafjenkins.com)

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