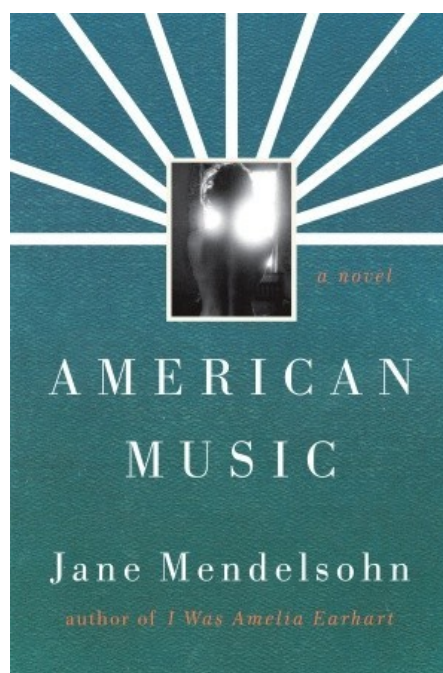




American Music

Jane Mendelsohn

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From the author of *I Was Amelia Earhart*, a luminous love story that winds through several generations—told in Jane Mendelsohn’s distinctive mesmerizing style.

At its center are Milo, a severely wounded veteran of the Iraq War confined to a rehabilitation hospital, and Honor, his physical therapist, a former dancer. When Honor touches Milo’s destroyed back, mysterious images from the past appear to each of them, puzzling her and shaking him to the core.

As Milo’s treatment progresses, the images begin to weave together into an intricate, mysterious tapestry of stories. There are Joe and Pearl, a husband and wife in the 1930s whose marriage is tested by Pearl’s bewitching artistic cousin, Vivian. There is the heartrending story of a woman photographer in the 1960s and the shocking theft of her life’s work. The picaresque life of a woman who has a child too young and finds herself always on the move from job to job and man to man. And the story of a man and a woman in seventeenth-century Turkey—a eunuch and a sultan’s concubine—whose forbidden love is captured in music. The stories converge in a symphonic crescendo that reveals the far-flung origins of America’s endlessly romantic soul and exposes the source of Honor and Milo’s own love.

A beautiful mystery and a meditation on love—its power and its limitations—*American Music* is a brilliantly original novel.

American Music Details

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From Reader Review American Music for online ebook

Jill says

Through the ages, the power of stories has defined and guided and transformed and healed us. On rare occasions, it has even saved lives. In the ancient *One Thousand and One Nights*, for example, the legendary Persian queen Scheherazade kept herself alive with mesmerizing stories that persuaded the King to spare her.

With a nod toward this beloved tale, Jane Mendelsohn introduces Milo, a severely wounded Iraqi veteran suffering from a spinal cord injury and PTSD and Honor, his young and emotionally crippled physical therapist. When she touches his destroyed back, it unleashes powerful stories within him – a virtual tapestry of images from the past.

For instance, there is the triangle of the married couple Joe and Pearl and her bewitching cousin Vivian in the mid 1930s. As the aspiring jazz musician Joe falls more and more under the sway of Pearl's green-eyed cousin, he finds himself in the untenable position of loving two women in vastly different ways. Their affair takes off on the cusp of the golden age of jazz, when the two attend Count Basie's inaugural concert in New York on Christmas Eve.

There is a woman photographer in the 1960s, whose life's work is shockingly stolen. And then there's the story of a favored concubine and a eunich named Hyacinth in 17th century Turkey, whose forbidden love is captured in music. All these stories are interspersed with Honor's own story – the daughter of an unmarried mother who is searching for both her past and her future.

The one story that is held back from the reader – until much, much later – is the story of Milo himself. It is a story that he is afraid to grasp or explore. Honor muses: "Milo Hatch, a handsome young man, only in this story, the story she was receiving from him, he was not a twenty-four-year-old war veteran struggling or his sanity in the first decade of a new century, he was a young jazz musician in the 1930's who was falling in and out of love. And he was more: he was the boats on the Hudson River at sunset, the blue light of a September dusk, a black car pulling up to a gritty curb at night, a woman with ships in her eyes."

Together, Honor and Milo – both crippled emotionally – seek the answers to their damaged lives through these stories. She says to him, "All I know is that these stories seem to be inside you. And that somehow when I touch you they come out. I you let us keep going maybe we can get some answers. But maybe not." He recognizes the magic as well: "The story could not go on without her. He could not go on without her. And the light moved through her and she was strange to him, and radiant."

These stories appear in pulsating and transcendent detail – colorful, vibrant, ready to snatch onto, ready to burst forth. As the book progresses, Milo and Honor's story becomes more and more part of the fabric of these tales – with love always at the core. Each must decide what stories to believe in and which to discard. Milo reflects that "he had nearly given his life for a story about his country, but he didn't believe in that story anymore. Then he had come home and he had kept on fighting and had fought for another story: Honor's." And Honor? Her stories come alive for her as a way of reconciling with an unknown or misunderstood past.

Is the torrent of memories and alternate lives a mirage and can it indeed save either or both? As this intricate puzzle plays out, we learn the answers. And all the while, the music is in the background "a moment in time that had given rise to that music, a moment and a music that had seemed so isolated from history." Like Count Basie, this book elevates...and swings.

Matt says

I'm sure I read about "I was Amelia Earhart" when it came out, but this one passed me by, maybe because its title is too generic and too evocative of that Violent Femmes song for me to remember it. But this is a really satisfying read, and I'm glad to have stumbled across it.

The basic premise centers on the growing relationship between a massage therapist and the Gulf War vet she helps move toward a recovery. As she works on him, narratives somehow submerged in his body are brought to the surface and the two of them experience them as memories. Most of the stories, as it turns out, link rather directly to Honor, the massage therapist character. Some of them extend further than that, including a long past digression into the development of cymbals in 17th Century Turkey, and this dovetails into the role of the cymbal in the development of swing music. Most of the stories, though, stay in the 20th Century and NYC, though there are also some startling resonances beyond that, recurring images and historical ironies that are deeply satisfying-- the range of the book is perhaps more narrow than it should be, and maybe a bit solipsistic, but the writing itself is fresh and varied, smart and poetic and self-aware in ways that makes this a real pleasure to read. And there are surprises here, ellipses like the final fate of the soldier and the lovers in Turkey that do somehow reach outside the plotted scheme of the rest of the book.

Kate says

How to make a Crappy American Quilt

American Music is another one of those multi-generational epics that try to encompass a period of history (in this case, America in the 20th century) through the interconnected biographies of a select few who live through it. I really didn't like this book, and I like everything that I read. The title doesn't make sense - except that one character is a jazz musician . . . until he becomes a lawyer. I don't know how you cover the lives of a group of Americans living from the 30s to the aughts and barely give mention to the second world war or Vietnam. These characters barely seem touched by their times; aside from a macramé dress and a rotary telephone, these women could have all walked out of 2010. Also - two or three teenage mothers (I lost count) and no mention of *Roe v. Wade*? And they all go on to college and live lives with no more than the normal amount of financial difficulty? Its though the author wants us to believe that women who lived through these eras weren't affected by anything more than fashion trends. One of the main characters is an Iraq war veteran, severely injured in combat. We hear next to nothing about the war or Milo's experience, and to include an Iraq war veteran in your story and make his horrific injuries the point on which the plot pivots but NEVER mention anything about his service or life outside of the military hospital to me just seems exploitative. The stories are supposed to fit together somehow, but are completely disjointed - you never figure out how Parvan and Hyacinth fit into the whole story, except that maybe they founded Ziljian cymbal makers and Joe, the sometime jazz musician maybe plays on them. The whole exercise just seems busted from the beginning. [Don't get me started on the massage therapy as window to the past - as I said in my updates, my suspension of disbelief was broken.] I'm still going to try reading Mendelsohn's *I Was Amelia Earhart*, which also got good critical reviews, just in case the author had a bad year at the editor's with this attempt, but I'd recommend skipping this one - life is too short.

Mary Beth says

At its center are Milo, a severely wounded veteran of the Iraq War confined to a rehabilitation hospital, and Honor, his physical therapist, a former dancer.

Ron says

A bit hard to get into at first, perhaps, but when you accept the story's rhythms, and the way its multiple, overlapping timelines impinge upon the woman at the novel's center, you'll look forward to seeing how everything comes together in the final sections.

Tracey K says

Beautiful and poetic prose. Loved the writing and I loved how the story weaved music into every aspect, because music is central to my life as well. I had a hard time keeping up with all the jumps in time though. The ending felt unresolved for me. This is the first book I've read by this author and I am looking forward to reading more.

Kaley says

Winding through several generations, and told in a unique and enchanting style, *American Music* is a mesmerizing and mysterious love story. In 2005, a war veteran and his physical therapist realize that together they have the ability to see into her past. As the stories unfold, the two share a tender but peculiar relationship, until their own tale comes to a surprising end. *American Music* is beautiful, exquisitely crafted puzzle, the pieces of which come together to remind us that we are more connected to our past and our future than we realize. Highly recommend.

Melissa says

I absolutely loved these characters (theirs are the stories you want to read forever) and I loved the writing. Jane Mendelsohn writes in short, spare sentences, almost a perfunctory style. Normally this wouldn't be that appealing to me, but in this novel it works so very well. Because woven throughout are phrases and passages of pure grandeur, and that makes for an incredible literary experience that only the best of authors can do well.

It is so hard to describe the wonder that is contained in these pages, but it is magical and sad and supernatural and oh-so-real and filled with love and history and so very much more.

It is the story of the rhythm of our lives through time, how our stories and our songs echo and reverberate from one generation to another and another. We think we are the only ones experiencing what we are going through, but in reality, the song has been sung before, perhaps in a different way and by different people. Still, it is the same song.

"He had seemed ordinary. But then the way he had looked at her in the kitchen had moved something inside her and she had felt seen although she had hidden that from him. She was still very young. Younger than either Pearl or Joe and they had struck her at first as old and sad and only later as experienced. She had traveled. She had been educated. But they had experience. They had sorrow. Maybe it was his sorrow that was looking at her in the kitchen and found hers. A sorrow that lifted when it felt his and soared like a note of music soars." (pg. 107)

American Music soars like very few other books have the power to do.

"A note of music soars, she thought, because it is trying to find its way back." (pg. 107)

You should find your way toward this incredible novel.

Robin Friedman says

Milo And Honor

Jane Mendelsohn's evocative novel "American Music" (2010) is a story of American loves, American dreams and American music, as exemplified by the saxophone, the cymbals, Count Basie, and Billie Holiday. The short book becomes far-flung in time and place, but the primary setting is New York City in 2004-2005 in the midst of the Iraq War. The primary characters are Milo, 25, who has received a severe spinal wound while on military service in Iraq, and Honor, 21, a dancer and a physical therapist. Milo is in a New York City veteran's hospital where his injury is not responding well to treatment. The hospital hires Honor to work with Milo's back once a week. The therapy proceeds for about one year as the two gradually fall in love. The book is recounted from a variety of perspectives and in many different voices, as befitting the yarn-like character of the story.

Milo suffers from deep emotional traumatization as well as from spinal injury. At first he resists Honor's therapy. Then, when Honor is massaging and rubbing his back, arms, and hands, Milo begins to tell lengthy, involved stories that get embellished as time goes on. Honor too begins to tell stories, as she and Milo connect emotionally.

The primary story that Milo tells involves a young man, Joe, who is studying law while working as a saxophonist in a swing band in the 1930's. For Joe, music is his first love, and he will become a reluctant lawyer. Joe is married to Pearl, a lovely, faithful woman who has suffered several miscarriages. When Joe meets Pearl's educated and artistic distant cousin Vivian, Joe and Vivian begin a romance. The triangle gradually plays itself out as Milo develops his story.

Further embellishments carry the tale back to 17th Century Istanbul, where an alchemist is shown to perfect the making of cymbals that will later have a strong place in the development of American swing. Another strand of the tale involves a gifted woman photographer whose photos are mysteriously stolen from her apartment after she has been scheduled for a show at a major New York museum. Still more, Milo tells the story of an Army physician, and his estranged wife. During the Vietnam era, the physician is court-martialled for alleged conduct unbecoming an officer.

The strength of the book lies in the lyrical character of Mendelsohn's writing, which often adopts itself in rhythm and language to her varied stories and people. At its best, her writing has a shimmering and musical quality. Mendelsohn develops scenes and characters poignantly and in detail. The weakness of the book lies in its miniaturism. In spite of the author's efforts, the stories do not pull together convincingly, and they do

not fully connect to the relationship between Milo and Honor. The stories often take the focus away from these characters. There is a sense of disjointedness when the different stories and flashbacks are introduced, and these stories and flashbacks don't entirely tie-in with the story of Milo and Honor. The sense of mystery and passion the book often conveys thus in places deteriorates into confusion.

The book offers a picture of American romance and hope against backgrounds of loss and tragedy. It emphasizes the power of music to the American heart. Although marred by diffuseness and top-heaviness, "American Music" offers a lyrical, emotionally bittersweet portrayal of American dreams.

Robin Friedman

snowplum says

As a deeply passionate advocate of *I Was Amelia Earhart* and as a serious music lover, I find *American Music* terribly disappointing. It's difficult to say whether it's just an unfortunate case of feeling as though Ms. Mendelsohn and I were kindred souls in our youths and then grew apart, or whether this book is far less exceptional than her extraordinary debut.

I Was Amelia Earhart reads like effortless magic -- it has the sensual lyricism and linguistic innovation of a work that was initially conceived in a dream or in the best of all drug trips, then finely honed in the light of day by someone with a fearless romantic spirit and sharp intellect. *American Music* reads like the work of a fine arts grad student who is trying too hard to write a marketable work of contemporary American literature, and who vaguely remembers that she used to love magical realism, but lately her professors and classmates have been beating up on her drafts and she's lost all joy in her art.

I find the core idea of this novel intriguing and I think it has potential: a magical/romantic premise that physical contact between Honor and Milo (especially in the places where Milo is wounded or scarred) causes them both to see and hear Visions of a past that eventually cause them to become intimate with one another in the present because they *need* each other to find out how the story ends. And they *need* to find out how it ends.

The problem is, I as a reader didn't remotely share that need. I'm sure that if I were actually experiencing a magic/psychic phenomenon with a wounded-yet-handsome and taciturn young veteran, I would want more and more and *need* to pursue it. But watching from the outside, I just see how cliché and predictable Honor and Milo's trip through the twentieth century in America via the well-traveled streets of jazz-as-the-quintessential-American-art-form, Hollywood-as-the-two-faced-American-myth, and black/white-race-relations-as-one-of-our-great-shames is. I kept waiting for the magic, and it never came. I kept waiting to feel like Mendelsohn was visited by the Muses and discovering new ways of putting words together that can give me shivers. It didn't happen.

This book just completely lacks the joy of writing that burst forth from *I Was Amelia Earhart*; and furthermore, the plot of the book lacks the joy and optimism that both the young Mendelsohn and her Amelia clearly had.

Maybe if you don't love *I Was Amelia Earhart*, you could be as enthusiastic about this book as some of the other readers who are giving it five stars here on GR... but I really don't see how you could love Amelia and believe this book is even written by the same person.

Barbara says

American Music was an A+ audio book! It addressed a relevant, but sad issue for our times in a very positive, lyrical way. The story involved an Iraq veteran and a massage therapist who is working with him at a Veteran's hospital. The plot is presented in dream-like and/or jazz influenced sequences, that are sometimes sweet and sometimes discordant. As a reader, I was able to follow the melody of the story through flashbacks and what seemed at times to be flash-forwards. It is a story of healing and of being healed, of love through several generations, and the repercussions of both love and war. Definitely a great listen!

Bonnie says

A beautiful little book about love, and loss, and impermanence, and the way in which all decisions bring pain, and sometimes beauty. Imperfect, but still affecting, and insightful, and the prose is gorgeous.

Paula Schumm says

American Music tells the story of Milo, a military veteran, and Honor, his physical therapist. When Honor touches Milo, several stories come to life. In the end, it's Honor's history that Milo is seeing. Recommended.

Ron Charles says

Right next to those mature, realistic novels you've been reading with a nagging sense of weariness lurks a small collection of books with a dash of magic. Don't worry: No vampires, no space aliens, no time-traveling Scottish hunks strut through these pages. I'm talking about perfectly respectable-looking novels in which strange things take place out of the corner of your eye. These subtle surrealists describe domestic life just one turn of the screw away. If you find yourself in the elevator wistfully looking for floor 7 1/2 , stop and get off here.

Two odd and oddly beautiful novels this month will tempt you to see what talented writers can do when they rip little tears in the fabric of reality. Each in her 40s, Aimee Bender and Jane Mendelsohn are not particularly prolific, but they've earned lavish critical praise. Mendelsohn's first novel, "I Was Amelia Earhart," became an unlikely bestseller in 1996, and Bender's weird short stories, most recently in "Willful Creatures," already seem destined for anthologized immortality.

Their melancholy new novels depict young women overwhelmed with extrasensory impressions, a burden of sympathy and insight that's as revelatory as it is painful. In Bender's "The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake," 9-year-old Rose Edelstein sneaks an early piece of her birthday cake and feels her mouth "filling with the taste of smallness, the sensation of shrinking, of upset." She can't articulate it yet, but she knows instinctively that she's detecting the state of her mother's soul. Experiments conducted with a friend at school confirm that Rose can taste the feelings of anyone who prepares her food: Oatmeal cookies from a rushed baker taste "like eating the calendar of an executive"; soup at the hospital "tasted of resentment, fine and full"; a depressed woman prepares a sad pie. As Rose's friend says, "She's like a magic food psychic or something."

Too much of this could quickly overwhelm the flavor of a story with the cloying aftertaste of Alice Hoffman's most overcooked novels, but Bender is sparing with the pixie dust. And besides, what really interests her is the sympathy Rose feels for her family, shown in a series of small, delicate scenes that convey the loneliness of these lives. Rose's father behaves like a polite guest in his own house. Her mother manically jumps from hobby to hobby while clinging to her two children with desperate, almost panicked affection. She seems like one of those women who would breastfeed her son till second grade. Rose's uncanny taste buds aren't really such a stretch beyond most children's ability to detect the strains in their parents' lives, those flavors of guilt, disappointment and resentment that we try to overwhelm with suburbia's artificial sweeteners.

But the most moving section comes in the latter half as Rose grows more aware of her brother's troubles. He's never diagnosed -- his mother won't tolerate that -- and Bender never pins down his condition with a label like Asperger's or agoraphobia, but clearly something is wrong. "All that came through," Rose says, "was that he just wanted to be as alone as possible, aloner than alone, alonest." His agony has nothing to do with food, but in a way he suffers from Rose's hypersensitivity toward those around him. It's here, in a climactic scene that's creepy and delicate, that the real magic of Bender's writing takes place, a tribute to the struggles of people who feel the world too much.

Jane Mendelsohn is a different kind of writer, more openly romantic and lush, but you'll detect a similar strain of the surreal in her new short novel, "American Music." At the opening, Honor, a physical therapist, comes to the VA hospital in the Bronx to work with a badly injured vet. "She possessed an uncommon discipline of mind," Mendelsohn writes, "and a fierce sensitivity to the physical world." The soldier, a young man named Milo, is suffering from a spinal injury and post-traumatic stress inflicted by a roadside bomb in Iraq. At first he won't speak to Honor. "She knows only his back, his neck, his arms, his legs," but as she massages him, she begins "to feel as though she could read him, as she could interpret the meaning in his knots and sinews. Sometimes, and this was not the first time she had questioned her sanity, she received visions from his limbs, his muscles, his bones."

My daughter once had a craniosacral therapist like this who totally freaked me out, but Mendelsohn isn't really writing about a clairvoyant masseuse anymore than Bender is writing about psychic taste buds. Honor articulates how both these novelists might defend their odd pursuit: "She didn't care if none of it seemed possible. It wasn't possible, but it was true."

As Honor continues to work with Milo, therapist and patient become aware of three different stories that emanate whenever she touches him: One involves a childless marriage breaking down during the Depression; another describes a famous but lonely photographer in the 1960s; and the third one takes us back to 17th-century Turkey, where a sultan's concubine struggles to survive court intrigue.

These various sections are helpfully labeled, so keeping them straight isn't a problem, but deducing their meaning is a mystery to Milo and Honor -- and us -- a mystery only partially explained by the end of the novel. What's clear, though, is what a captivating storyteller Mendelsohn can be, and ultimately "American Music" is a novel about the power of stories. She's remarkably good at setting scenes quickly and evocatively, raising up characters we care about immediately and drawing us into their conflicts. And like Bender, she's willing to break our usual three dimensions and let something miraculous slide along the margins: a winged man, a porous wall, a body like a haunted house. If her affection for rich, epigraphic lines sometimes tempts her to sound pretentious, more often she writes the kind of lovely, wise phrases that will have you underlining passages.

Ultimately, this is a romantic story of romantic stories, full of love and longing, despair and loneliness, and one woman's connection to all of them. Milo faces a "cold and unlit [life] lived in a small room," but the tales he experiences with Honor gradually draw him out of the myopia of his own pain. When she asks how he knows he's getting better, Milo replies, "Because I want to know what's going to happen next." That, don't

forget, is the reason we started listening to stories in the first place, and here are two sophisticated novelists who can still cast that primal enchantment.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/...>

Kelli Pearson says

This one, I really wanted to love. Several generations of stories are woven together and are supposed to result in a major a-ha at the end. The premise is odd, but with some suspension of belief could be cool--a massage therapist sees these stories happen when she touches her traumatized patient. Not only his own stories are in him, but also the stories of people long past who he doesn't know of. Unfortunately, the disjointed stays disjointed for most of the book, and somehow when the connections start happening, you really don't care. I sort of wanted to say, "so what?" The main relationship, between the therapist and her patient, also kind of stagnates. I was disappointed. I would give it 2 stars, but I threw in an extra one for potential.
