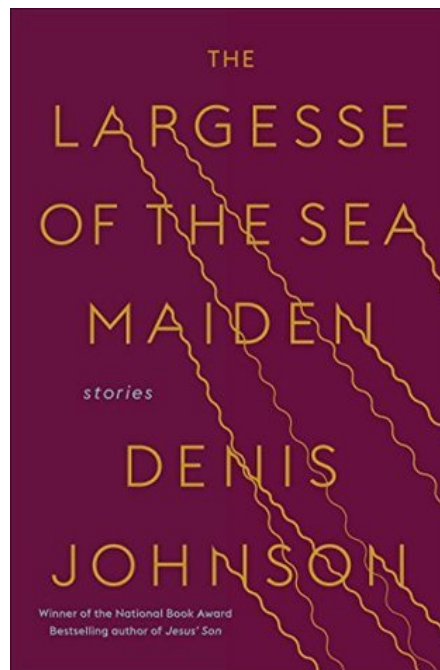




The Largesse of the Sea Maiden

Denis Johnson

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Denis Johnson

The Largesse of the Sea Maiden Denis Johnson

The Largesse of the Sea Maiden is the long-awaited new story collection from Denis Johnson. It follows the groundbreaking, highly acclaimed *Jesus' Son*. Written in the same luminous prose, this collection finds Johnson in new territory, contemplating old age, mortality, the ghosts of the past, and the elusive and unexpected ways the mysteries of the universe assert themselves. Finished shortly before Johnson's death in May 2017, this collection is the last word from a writer whose work will live on for many years to come.

The Largesse of the Sea Maiden Details

Date : Published January 16th 2018 by Random House

ISBN : 9780812988635

Author : Denis Johnson

Format : Hardcover 207 pages

Genre : Short Stories, Fiction, Literary Fiction

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From Reader Review The Largesse of the Sea Maiden for online ebook

Nat K says

"I note that I've lived longer in the past, now, than I can expect to live in the future. I have more to remember than I have to look forward to. Memory fades, not much of the past stays, and I wouldn't mind forgetting a lot more of it."

What an amazing platform GR is! Without it, I'd have been none the wiser, and would have been oblivious as to the existence of the writings of Denis Johnson. And what a shame that would've been.

There is something quietly haunting about these stories. Each one is told from the perspective of one narrator. We're taken on a journey with them, via their raw thoughts. We see the world as they do. Underlying pathos and angst, the characters are all going through emotional situations in their lives. We see the frailty of human life, both in body and mind.

The pain of human existence, the humdrum of the day-to-day, the demons, the obsessions, the addictions. Somehow these stories capture the very essence of their characters' lives. And it's not always pretty. But that's life too.

There is beauty. In a snowflake falling to the pavement... *"Random snowflakes spiralled in the air."* I could feel the serenity in the scene. I could see it slowly travelling to earth. Denis Johnson is a beautifully descriptive writer.

There is also bitter and wicked humour scattered throughout. The story about the awards ceremony. The story about the AA participant writing letters to all and sundry, including the devil. The story of a young man's obsession with Elvis and conspiracy theories, that continues well into adulthood. Life is stranger than fiction?

"Let's just face the music and the facts. Somebody's going out of my mind".

I'm a huge fan of the short story genre, and these five stories re-iterate why it's such an amazing genre. If done well, it's magic on the page. These stories are magic.

While being hesitant to compare one Author to another, I can't help but be reminded of Raymond Carver's writing. Anyone familiar with Raymond Carver will know what I'm talking about. The layers of emotion contained in the stories, where as much as is being left unsaid, makes as much noise as that which has been. For a novella sized novel, these stories pack a depth of feeling into them.

This is the sort of book that will leave me pondering for some time. It's certainly left an impression. Loved.

Thanks to GR friend Cheri for talking about this book, otherwise I'd have missed out on something very special.

Lee says

Set in Bodoni Bold, the same old familiar typeface as *Jesus' Son*, this collection of five longish stories feels like the career-ending bookend that it is. He wrote these stories while alive but now he's not -- the second-to-last story, an autofictional one about a writer friend dying on a hundred-acre place out somewhere south of Austin, not tying-up his robe, seeing ghosts, ends perfectly like this: "The world keeps turning. It's plain to you that at the time I write this, I'm not dead. But maybe by the time you read this." Each of these five stories seemed like an improvement on the last, deepened my engagement and appreciation of his sensibility and approach (at one point he says "Writing. It's easy work . . . Whatever happens to you, you put it on the page, work it into a shape, cast it in a light"). They're all first-person but the fourth and fifth wear a thinner mask than the first three. The first one, the title story, about an advertisement copywriter, I should read again. I can hardly remember it. The second epistolary story, too. I wasn't into them as I was into the others, in part because they seemed like put-ons, that is, that the author was wearing the voice. But after a few pages into the third story "Strangler Bob" I felt the world and spirit of *Jesus' Son* alive and kicking again, that particularly Denis Johnson vitality apparent in the language. The stories are always about moving toward light in the midst of darkness and death, but more so there's a sense of life lived and not just simply caught but *raised-up* in language that feels real but never "energetic" or "voicey" but intoxicated (poisoned), elevated, unpredictable, casually incantatory, wise thanks to misfortune and folly and divine psychedelic intervention and insight. And it all comes together and takes off in service of a bit of a mystery as in the last story about the "real" poet whose real work involves following his obsession with a conspiracy involving Elvis's stillborn twin. I somehow haven't read his novels although I've read *Jesus' Son* thrice. I'll rectify that soon.

Cheri says

*" Gravity is working against me
And gravity wants to bring me down*

*"Oh, twice as much ain't twice as good
And can't sustain like one half could
It's wanting more that's gonna send me to my knees*

*"Just keep me where the light is
Come on now, keep me where, now, keep me where the light is"*
--Gravity, John Mayer, Songwriters: John Mayer

"It's plain to you that at the time I write this, I'm not dead. But maybe by the time you read it."

Not having read anything by Denis Johnson before this, and now having finished *The Largesse of the Sea Maiden: Stories*, I am moved, but also sad that I have missed out on his books all these years before. It reminded me a bit of when I heard that Kent Haruf had passed, only a year or so after I'd discovered him. A gift I'd just been given had suddenly been given a limit. The second posthumously published book I'd read this week.

"This morning I was assailed by such sadness at the velocity of life—the distance I've traveled from my own youth, the persistence of the old regrets, the new regrets, the ability of failure to freshen itself in novel forms—that I almost crashed the car."

I'm not typically a fan of short stories, but these all seem related, if not connected by themes, which I love.

Facing who we are, our transient nature, the elusive ways of love, and life, and all of the ‘unknowns’ of life. I felt a strong sense of being the silent person sitting by and listening, watching, these stories being shared, seeing the events unfurl, weighing in on these people living their rather ordinary, if occasionally peculiar, lives; their thoughts through which they condemn themselves and others, and seek clemency and mercy from the world. In other words, living. Life. Day by day by day.

”I note that I’ve lived longer in the past, now, than I can expect to live in the future. I have more to remember than I have to look forward to. Memory fades, not much of the past stays, and I wouldn’t mind forgetting a lot more of it.”

I am choosing not to talk about the stories individually, but more about the themes that they collectively share, they are simply about life. Complex, messy, sometimes harsh, sometimes comical, even, perhaps, a sprinkling of the twisted and bizarre.

I wasn’t drawn to this book because of the author as I knew nothing about him, and the cover / title certainly didn’t draw me to it. I was tempted by the reviews of my friends Angela and Diane, and with Debbie’s review I finally had to add this, and requested it from my library. I’m so glad I did.

Please check out Angela, Diane and Debbie’s reviews:

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

Many thanks, once again, to the Public Library system, and the many Librarians that manage, organize and keep it running, for the loan of this book!

Angela M says

The reason I wanted to read this collection is because of how much I enjoyed Denis Johnson’s Train Dreams . After finishing this collection of 5 stories, I initially rated it 3.5 stars feeling that some of the meaning had escaped me . But as I’m writing this and thinking more about it and the writing, I have to give it 4 stars. The writing is good and I liked three of the five stories so I’ll comment briefly on those .

My favorite is the first story titled as the book. Bill Whitman, an “ad man” gives us a series of vignettes, depicting events and people in his life reflecting on marriage, divorce, death , careers. I especially enjoyed the discussion with a circle of friends who discuss the loudest sounds they remember or the most silent thing . This is not a typical conversation I could imagine being a part of but wow the responses were thought provoking and fascinating. A focus on mortality and as Whit puts it “the velocity of life.” (5 stars) The second story , “The Starlight on Idaho “is rather dark as we meet Mark Cassandra, “Cass”, in rehab for alcoholism and suffering side effects of the medicine, Antabuse. He writes letters to his childhood girlfriend, his AA sponsor, his father, grandmother, Satan, his sister, “friends and neighbors in the universe “, Rolling Stone and TV guide . It is though these letters that we come to know Cass , a good bit about his past and how he ended up here .(3.5 stars) “Triumph Over the Grave”, about a writer who talks about aging and illness, the death of friends, is depressing and realistic. It was eerie in a way as I read the last sentences: “It doesn’t matter. The world keeps turning. It’s plain to you that at the time I write this, I’m not dead. But maybe by the time you read it.” Dennis Johnson died in May of 2017. (4 stars) The other two stories I rate 3 stars. I just couldn’t connect with the Elvis obsessed poet . This may appeal to readers who really enjoy short fiction and fans of Johnson’s work. I own of copy of his Tree of Smoke, a National Book Award winner and hope to get

to it one of these days soon.

I received an advanced copy of this book from Random House Publishing Group - Random House through NetGalley.

Neil says

The thing is, if, like me, you have read nearly all of Johnson's novels, there is something about his writing that means you feel like you know him. I know that's not true and I know that the "him" I know probably isn't Johnson in truth, but the honesty and rawness of what he writes makes you feel that way.

This means that reading a book of short stories published posthumously (he died in May 2017) turns into a very emotional experience. Especially when that book talks a lot about death. And even more especially when the style and subject matter (and, occasionally, actual characters) of the book echoes what many consider to be Johnson's masterpiece (and just about my favourite novel), Jesus' Son.

So don't expect anything rational here. For large parts of the book, the text seemed to be a bit blurry for some reason.

The Largesse... presents us with five short stories (roughly 40 pages each). The tone and subject matter make for a perfect follow on to Jesus' Son. The first story gives the book its name and is a meditation on mortality as an advertising executive looks back on his life and recalls many of his friends and colleagues who are now dead. It is moving but surprisingly funny in several places. The Starlight On Idaho consists of unposted letters written by an alcoholic/drug addict from a rehab centre. The letters are written to relatives, doctors, the Pope and Satan. Again, there are funny moments but the overall story is a sad one. This made me laugh and I had to read it out loud to my wife:

"But just to catch you up. In the last five years I've been arrested about eight times, shot twice, not twice on one occasion, but once on two different occasions, etc etc and I think I got run over once but I don't even remember it."

In Strangler Bob we read about a man in prison with a cell mate called, unsurprisingly, Strangler Bob. Johnson was a poet before he was a novelist and this shows in a lot of his language (which is one of the things I love about his writing). For example

"He really was enormous, both muscular and overfed, looked fashioned from balloons, at least usually, but at this moment looked sculpted from quivering stone,..."

Quivering stone!

In Triumph Over The Grave we read about a writer falling prey to old age. This includes a quote that describes my feeling about Johnson's novels even if I haven't specifically done what he says:

"I looked back at the novel's opening paragraph, and by midnight I'd read the whole thing again and found myself just as moved as I'd been the first time—the first dozen times—every time."

This story also includes the quote the everyone is using in their reviews. I thought maybe I should avoid it because so many people have used it. But then, it is so apposite it is actually impossible to leave it out:

"The world keeps turning. It's plain to you that at the time I write this, I'm not dead. But maybe by the time you read it."

And then Doppelgänger, Poltergeist introduces us to a poet who believes Elvis Presley was killed early in his life (around the time he was drafted) and replaced by his twin (but less talented) brother who supposedly died at birth but was actually hidden away.

I'll finish with one of Johnson's characters musing on writing. In its poetic way, it seems to sum things up.

"Writing. It's easy work. The equipment isn't expensive, and you can pursue this occupation anywhere. You make your own hours, mess around the house in your pajamas, listening to jazz recordings and sipping coffee while another day makes its escape. You don't have to be high-functioning or even, for the most part, functioning at all. If I could drink liquor without being drunk all the time, I'd certainly drink enough to be drunk half the time, and production wouldn't suffer. Bouts of poverty come along, anxiety, shocking debt, but nothing lasts forever. I've gone from rags to riches and back again, and more than once. Whatever happens to you, you put it on a page, work it into a shape, cast it in a light. It's not much different, really, from filming a parade of clouds across the sky and calling it a movie—although it has to be admitted that the clouds can descend, take you up, carry you to all kinds of places, some of them terrible, and you don't get back where you came from for years and years."

RIP Denis Johnson. You will be missed.

Debbie says

What is the loudest thing you've ever heard? What about the quietest? This collection of short stories starts with a party scene where people are wracking their brains for memories. I want to be at this party! For a second, I forget about the book as I race down memory lane, wondering what I would come up with if someone asked me these questions. Seriously, these are delicious things to ponder! Already this writer has me in the palm of his hand.

Funny, I was dreading this book. First off, what's with the snooty academic title? I confess I didn't even know what "largesse" meant—all I could hear was "large" (which is NOT its synonym, it turns out). And sea maidens--oh no! Are these stories going to be about myths or fairy tales, two of my most unfavorite things?

And then there's the blah cover. I like purple, I really do, but this cover is plain Jane, and the title doesn't stand out enough. It's in all caps, which I hate. And there are lines running through the title—in my editor eyes, lines through text mean throw the words the hell out. Even though I have the Kindle version and don't have to look at the book, I know it has an ugly cover and lol, this made me not want to read it! "You can't fool me, cover! I know what you really look like!" I figured anyone who picked out that blah cover must be peddling a blah book. Plus after reading a few reviews, I worried that this was going to an academic read, that it was Fine Literature full of symbolism and imagery, and I'd feel all depressed because it bored me or went right over my head.

I couldn't have been more wrong. You start reading and wham! You're pulled right into that party scene with the two killer questions. But that scene, as rich as it is, is isolated, disconnected from the story. In fact, all five stories have the meander disease. But what I got instead of clean, clear plots were these brilliant little vignettes embedded everywhere, and I just savored them. There are some long-ass sentences, but who cares. I couldn't take my eyes off his prose.

Each story is narrated by a man who is looking back at his life. There's addiction, obsession, guilt,

estrangement, worry, death. The author has a brilliant sense of the absurd, which is his ticket to my heart.

I ran into sentences like this, which made me swoon:

“How often will you witness a woman kissing an amputation?”

The author died of liver cancer in 2017, and this was his last work. I’m thinking he was beating the clock and maybe he just didn’t have time to go for cohesion.

Death is a theme throughout the stories, though the collection isn’t maudlin. It’s clear that sometimes the author is looking at his own life, and there are pieces of him in his characters:

It’s plain to you that at the time I write this, I’m not dead. But maybe by the time you read it.”

I decided early on that it was okay if plot wasn’t Johnson’s thing. I was mesmerized by his description of complex, down-and-outer characters, by his amazing insight into the human condition. And he’s one of those authors who observes the little things that we want to pretend we didn’t see or feel. Or maybe it’s not that we’re pretending events didn’t happen, maybe it’s just that these little things in our consciousness get trumped by the bigger things. Johnson brings the little things back to life.

As always, I liked some stories better than others. My favorite was “The Starlight on Idaho,” about a guy in rehab writing letters to everyone he knows. I’m always a sucker for letters, anyway, and here I was enraptured.

There was a little work required as I was reading. Whenever I opened the book, I had to reread quite a few pages and concentrate pretty hard. I think this is because the stories don’t have an obvious plot, and without an obvious plot it’s easy to lose your bearings. A minor complaint, however. The language is so rich, I didn’t mind the reread. I did run into the dreaded “try and” crime now and then, and I’d wince, but it was a one-off event.

You won’t find a lot of closure, but then again stories short on plot don’t necessarily warrant closure. The exception is the last story, about a guy obsessed with Elvis. That one had a tight ending even though the inside did some meandering. I wasn’t crazy about the story at first, but it grew on me.

And weird—there are no chicks, anywhere. Don’t ask me why I noticed this! Occasionally a wife or a divorce is mentioned, but that’s the only inkling that another gender exists in the universe. That strikes me as odd, until I remember that we’re supposed to write what we know. Johnson knows men. He knows how to talk about what goes on in a man’s head. Thankfully, although the book is masculine, there is no macho.

I got all busy checking out the author on the Internet, which I usually do when I love a book. I found out that he created this exquisite list:

Three Rules to Write By

- Write naked. That means to write what you would never say.
- Write in blood. As if ink is so precious you can’t waste it.
- Write in exile, as if you are never going to get home again, and you have to call back every detail.

I’m not sure I “got” all the meaning in these stories—was there more to the meandering than I could understand? Dunno. But in any case, I was seduced by the polished prose and the intriguing, offbeat characters.

So where has this writer been all my life? I must read his earlier works. What a shame that the fiction world

lost this master storyteller.

Thanks to NetGalley for the advance copy.

Diane S ? says

Another literary icon has passed, leaving us with this his offering. Five stories, each longer than your usual shorts. The first, the title story, concern a man who works in advertising, he is nearing retirement, and he tells us in short vignettes about his dead or disappeared acquaintances.

All these stories grapple with death in all its different permutations. They oftentimes feature lives that have lost their way, their control of their future. My favorite was triumph over the grave. Where a once successful author finds success doesn't guarantee happiness. It is the most poignant story and the one that closest relates to the author. I had thought I would love the last story with a character that has an obsession with Elvis, as I had an older cousin who was Elvis crazy. Unfortunately it turned out to be the one I liked the least.

This is a strong collection, in my opinion, the stories tell it like it is, sometimes brutally. Glimpses of lives, in all their dark truths. He will be missed.

ARC from Netgalley.

Perry says

Denis Johnson's Sirenic Stories, Visionary Tumulus at Sea

Once in a while, I know my lexicon is insufficient to give a book all due accolades. That, or I'm speechless from its hypnotic effect, or I'm worried I don't have time to write a review succinct enough that a potential reader will read it and be persuaded to read the book ASAP. Right now it's all of the above, so I borrow from others who've more experience and who were paid to review this Absolutely Brilliant book. Thus, below are the best and truest blurbs from reviews I read of *The Largesse of the Sea Maiden: Stories*:

Sam Sacks, WSJ: "Johnson's stories tread a crooked path through illness, addiction, criminality, mania and simple existential confusion. His gift is to extract the beauty in all that brokenness, like the painters who pulled holy light out of the wounds of martyrs. "

Lincoln Michel, BOMB: "My god, that voice. Johnson somehow manages to be both conversational and poetic, simultaneously heartbreaking and hilarious... [with] an astonishing power to turn from one emotion to another in a line or two. His transitions between stories, sections, and paragraphs are worth the study of every aspiring fiction writer. [This is a] terrific book of heart, humanity, and humor. Read and treasure it. It is a final gift from a master."

Maureen Corrigan, NPR: "Like those direct addresses to his future readers that Whitman scatters throughout *Leaves of Grass*, Johnson, in these stories, anticipates talking across the abyss that separates the quick from the dead... [The collection] affirms literature's promise to believers, the gift of eternal voice."

Publishers Weekly: "a masterpiece of deep humanity and astonishing prose ... an instant classic. It's filled with Johnson's unparalleled ability to inject humor, profundity, and beauty—often all three—into the dark

and the mundane alike."

Kevin Zambrano, The Rumpus: "[The characters in this collection] seem to see, as Wallace Stevens put it, 'Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.' Perhaps this point of view comes from proximity to death."

Trudie says

* 2.5 *

Hmmmm... I don't know if I need to belabour the point too much but I simply didn't connect with this short story collection.

Objectively, I can see this is quite "literary" and original writing. There are great lines of dialog and a thoughtful contemplation of mortality. For me it was like a literary version of jazz, all weird dissonances and long improvised rifts seemingly taking us miles from the original path. I might have enjoyed that eclectic style more if I could have rustled up some bond with just one of Johnson's characters but curiously I felt quite removed from them all.

I don't think I was the perfect reader for this book. I am doing this author an enormous disservice to pigeonhole this as "older white American male writing" as if that is a derogatory term, which I do not intend. It just simply indicates a point of reference from which I felt a little alienated. For whatever nebulous reasons there was a raft of indifference between me and the writing. I know this does no service whatsoever to a well respected and immensely talented author but unfortunately it was a feeling I could just not shake.

Never mind ... onwards.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

This posthumous story collection by Denis Johnson is my first time reading him, but it won't be the last. Most of the people who have more experience in the group where we are discussing this prefer collections like Jesus' Son, but I'll have to wait to weigh in on the comparison.

I chose the audio for this collection because of the narrators, so I will discuss both the story and the narrator. Overall, the stories are manly manly stories, but often about lessons learned, lives lived, endings and ghosts. That should be no surprise since the author passed away before these were published. But I do wonder if all his other writing reads as masculine. It's practically Cormac McCarthy in here.

"The Largesse of the Sea Maiden," read by Nick Offerman (text available online via The New Yorker) Absolutely about an older man looking back at his life, navigating his present without always being 100% sure of his reality. Some painful-funny moments stand out, like not being sure which ex-wife is on the phone, or telling a co-worker's son to tell him hello even after they've had the conversation about his passing. Nick Offerman is always good, and a believable voice for this story.

"The Starlight on Idaho," read by Michael Shannon (text available online via The Harvard Advocate) This is my second favorite story, from the point of view of someone who has checked into "Starlight Addiction Recovery Center," told entirely through his letters to others. The audiobook narrator really brought this one to life, through the dry-miserable wit of Michael Shannon. It ranges in tone from sane reflection to

batshit crazy conversations with Satan. I loved it. And the themes of isolation and regret start to feel thematic as they are present here as well.

"Strangler Bob," read by Dermot Mulroney (text available from The New Yorker)

Set in a jail, a man known as Strangler Bob proves particularly prophetic to a man serving a far shorter sentence. No real comment on the narration except I wasn't thinking about him, so he must have gotten out of the way.

"Triumph Over the Grave," read by Will Patton

This is absolutely the best story of the collection, about an aging writer in the desert, but it veers into the magical or horrific or ghostly, depending on how you read it. The narration feels most strongly like it is the author, and with the way the story ends, I just don't understand how this wasn't the last story in the collection. Will Patton is excellent and I would be shocked if he wasn't somehow funneling the voice of Johnson.

"Doppelgänger, Poltergeist" read by Liev Schreiber

Well, this was a strange one about a man obsessed with Elvis, also about the twin towers somehow. The weakest story, but I did like hearing Liev Schreiber as narrator, and I hope he does something else at some point.

I listened to this after its publication date (mid-January 2018) but through a copy provided by the publisher through the Volumes app.

Robin says

Not only had I never read Denis Johnson before this, but I'd never even heard his name before. How's that possible, to live my life, talking books with whoever is willing, not to know of this exceptional writer?

This collection is comprised of five sizeable short stories, written in a style that is conversational, meandering, unsentimental and poetic. These stories touch on the tricky business of living and dying, relationships, the absurdity, randomness and beauty of life, our unknowing and unknowable selves, addiction, among other things. The stories are masculine. They are edgy. They are whimsical and philosophical. I won't go into plots. What I will say is how they made me *feel*.

I felt, in few pages, like I knew these characters, like I was sitting across from them over coffee, and they were talking to ME. I can see up close: a filling, age spots on a restless hand, a stained shirt cuff, a pink cheek at an emotional moment. They're telling me everything that is important to them, their pivotal life experiences. I'm there, with them, just me and them, as their stories unfold. What an intimacy.

At the end of *Triumph Over the Grave*, it was even more than that. I felt it wasn't just a character talking to me, it was Denis Johnson himself, this extraordinary writer who died last year. Realising it was him all along, I was overcome with the beauty of it all. I was sobbing, I was undone. I know! Crazy, right? This is not a common occurrence in my reading life, let me tell you.

What a powerful parting gift from Denis Johnson. While the final story about the Elvis obsessed poet didn't have the same allure for me as the other four stories, I cannot give this collection less than five stars.

I should mention I listened to this on audiobook - and it was excellent, narrated by a group of fantastic actors (Nick Offerman, Michael Shannon, Dermot Mulroney, Will Patton and Liev Schreiber). Highly recommended.

Larry H says

I'm between 3 and 3.5 stars.

"It doesn't matter. The world keeps turning. It's plain to you that at the time I write this, I'm not dead. But maybe by the time you read it."

Denis Johnson's last short story collection, *The Largesse of the Sea Maiden*, was published about eight months after he died from lung cancer at the age of 67. That fact certainly adds a feeling of melancholy to the collection, even when he isn't writing lines like the ones above. It's also a fairly dark book about facing mortality and one's failures.

I first came upon Johnson's writing in the mid-1990s when I read his collection *Jesus' Son* (way back in the days before I wrote book reviews or counted how many books I read), and it has honestly stuck with me all these years later. I forget at times what a phantasmagorical ride he often took you on, and that his stories had such surprising depth, even when they were a little bizarre, but his deft hand with imagery and word choice often had me re-reading paragraphs more than once, simply to marvel at what he had written.

It was certainly inevitable that I'd come to *The Largesse of the Sea Maiden* with higher expectations than I probably should have had, given these stories were the last thing he had written (at least as well as we're aware). Unfortunately, I found the collection somewhat uneven—a few stories didn't quite work for me, but they were bookended by one spectacular story and one really good one.

I liked the story "Strangler Bob," a quirky story about a man in prison. While it, too, has some dark elements, there is more humor in this story than most of the others. But my two favorites in the collection were "Doppelgänger, Poltergeist," in which a writing instructor looked back on his relationship with his most gifted student, who became a famed poet, but who also had a strange obsession with Elvis Presley, and the exceptional, unforgettable title story, in which an aging ad man reflects on his life, his successes and his failures through the years, and some of the more interesting people and situations he encountered.

In that story, Johnson shares some truly poignant lines which make it more evident he knew this was his final book. "I note that I've lived longer in the past, now, than I can expect to live in the future. I have more to remember than I have to look forward to. Memory fades, not much of the past stays, and I wouldn't mind forgetting a lot more of it."

The literary world has lost a true treasure in Johnson, and if offbeat, beautifully written fiction appeals to you, I'd encourage you to pick up *Jesus' Son* and *Train Dreams*, his more recent novella. Those of you who are short story fans might enjoy this collection as well, if only for a few of the stories, but some may find it difficult to follow.

RIP, Mr. Johnson, and thanks for sharing your immense talent with the world.

See all of my reviews at itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blogspot.com, or check out my list of the best books I read in 2017 at <https://itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blogspot.com/2018/01/the-best-books-i-read-in-2017.html>.

Trish says

I'd never read any Denis Johnson before this, though of course I knew of his work. I thought I had endless days to finally show my appreciation.

A GR friend describes the eponymous first story as if watching a magician at work. That story is actually a set of very short stories, each so well-conceived and trimmed of fat that worlds are conveyed in a sentence. Perhaps he could have been a lyricist; another GR friend says he was a poet "first and foremost." Yes.

Both these GR friends cite that first story along with "Triumph Over Grave," the penultimate story in this collection, as their favorites. So it is with me. These two stories are worth seeking out the collection to read. Probably you will not get a better idea of the art and the man than these.

"What have you been doing with yourself out here?" one character asks another who is naked beneath his open lab coat.

"Thangdoodlin'," the other man replies. —from "Triumph..."

Johnson knew too much about addiction. It saturates his stories and while in some we get the sense of a understanding compassion for fellow sufferers, at the same time it gives us the claustrophobic I-can't-breathe quality of hearing the same goddamn story again in its millionth iteration, perhaps even from the same person. Empathy, even sympathy, turns sour over too much time with addicts.

"We alkies are just a tangle of lies like the insides of a golf ball."

At the same time I want to press this book into the hands of AA & NA attendees to talk about at their choreographed meetings. Surely the vision of someone managing to describe their common symptoms and regrets is restitutive, reflexively imitative. But how would he know these things except to have succumbed more times than can be counted? Some folks manage to escape. We have to hold onto that. Besides, he never asks for more.

Penguin Random House does a magnificent job on the audio of this collection, and provides some Soundcloud clips for stories read by different actors. Nick Offerman reads from "Ad Man," one of the very short stories in "Largesse..." My favorite voice among all these favorite actors is Michael Shannon reading the first page of "The Starlight on Idaho," sounding so much like Sam Shepard in voice and subject matter that we remember a time when these men roamed the earth. They meant something to us, addictions or not. Will Patton reads the first pages of "Triumph...", his voice all shaky and smoky like someone who will never lose the jitters anymore; the first page of "Strangler Bob" read by Dermot Mulroney sounds all brawny and seen-it-all. Liev Schreiber reads the last story in the collection, "Dopplegänger, Poltergeist."

The Audible edition of the complete audiobook also has all five actors reading one each of five different stories. But be careful with this listen: Denis Johnson's work is so unflashy, its skill can be easily overlooked when someone reads it aloud just right. The book is small and easy to carry: it allows one to appreciate the shortness of the stories, the way he laid it all out and wrote it down, and what he didn't say.

Jill says

What an amazing gift it must be to take instances of everyday life and infuse them with lyricism and meaning.

Denis Johnson, in this posthumous collection, expands on this head-on in a story that is appropriately titled, “Triumph Over The Grave.” His narrator confides, ‘Writing. It is easy work...Whatever happens to you, you put it on a page, work it into a shape, cast it in a light.’”

For those who have ever tried their hand at writing—I count myself among them—it’s evident that writing is anything BUT easy. And who knows whether it was for Denis Johnson? His writing would give testimony that it appears so.

Death is not far from the thoughts of characters in thee stories, completed shortly before Johnson’s own demise from liver cancer this year. In one of my favorites, “The Spotlight on Idaho”, an alcoholic in rehab who is coping with the side effects of Antabuse, writes a series of revealing letters to everyone from siblings to his sponsor to Satan. In the process, he lays himself bare and reveals the forlornness and yearning of his character. “Hey God where is you you ain’t nowhere”, he writes poignantly.

Another story is focused on an aging and damaged writer, whose own life – and that of two close friends – are all spiraling toward death. “The world keeps turning. It’s plain to you that at the time I write this I’m not dead. But maybe by the time you read this””, he tell shis audience.

There’s a story titled Doppelganger, Poltergeist about a writing professor’s star student who is convinced that Elvis Presley’s stillborn twin never died and actually took his place after Elvis’ stint in the army. And then there’s the eponymous “The Largesse of the Sea Maiden”, composed of moments both big and small from the life of an ad man.

All these damaged characters are at the edge, seeking meaning or at least, cohesion in their lives. Denis Johnson was an astounding writer and he leaves behind a last gift. I owe a debt of thanks to Random House for sending me an ARC in exchange for an honest review.
