

Trumpet
Kay, Jackie
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Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* is largely a retrospective of Joss Moody's life – that of a biracial (African and Scottish) transgender and transsexual jazz trumpeter who married a woman with whom he adopted a son. The plot centers the growing tension between Millie, Joss' widow, and Coleman, the adopted son, because Coleman, angered by his shameful discovery of his father's biological sex, threatens to sell his story to a tabloid reporter. The story is told from various points of view, including the wife, child, doctor, registrar, funeral director, Joss' mother, Joss' friends, and the tabloid reporter.

With the exception of the brief section "Last Word" which appears near the end of the novel, Joss' autobiographical silence might be viewed as problematic, as this is a tale which on one level speaks to the otherness of those who dare to live transgender and transsexual lives, an otherness which has yet to find a proper and substantial home in the mainstream of literature and life. More important here for the subject lives his life in music, a universal language which intends to unite beings on shared experiences. Here Joss is both a transgender and transsexual: he lives his life as a man, breasts bandaged meticulous layer after meticulous layer underneath suits, starched shirts, and ties, and he lives his gendered life of masculinity – assuming a husband role to Millie, a father role to Coleman, a male trumpeter in his band.

Yet, his autobiographical silence is replaced with his record of performance, a third-person narration of his solo virtuosity. We learn about Joss through those who

knew him, a polyphonous telling of his genius, his “blood dreaming.” It is an interesting authorial choice, as this polyphonous telling is rendered by each character’s first-person recount of individual grief and loss. Here, we do not live Joss’ own telling of his own experience, but rather we live his life through the telling by others. On another level, this record of performance – Joss’ life in and as music – creates the great mythos of Joss, and by extension, the great mythoi that typically surround canonized jazz musicians. To the extent that Kay was inspired by the story of Billy Tipton (the infamous jazz pianist who lived her life as man and whose sex was discovered after her death), the retrospective telling of Joss’ life by those who witnessed and participated in his life preserves the sanctity of his story – a biography of psychic and physical vulnerabilities always threatened by public disclosure.

And perhaps this is the rationale for Kay: to tell this unlikely story in a likely way, to not foreground Joss’ otherness, but rather to showcase his familiarity, to make known out of the unknown. The regular political showcase associated with interracial love, transgender and transsexual existence, and children adopted by beings involved in such circumstances is not the meta-narrative here; rather the story generally focuses on the nuances of love, loss, and memory. Meditation on these themes is most salient and the reader is drawn easily into the psychological spaces of characters close to Joss – Millie who misses him dearly as any loving wife would miss her loving husband; Big Red McCall, Joss’ drummer who remembers his particular brand of verve; Coleman, Joss’ adopted son who struggles between the memory of his father’s careful love and the present angst over his discovery of Joss’ biological sex; Edith Moore’s, Joss’ mother, nostalgia for Joss’ youth. As Millie states, “Loss isn’t an absence after all. It is a

presence” (Kay, 12). And so Joss’ story, his loss, is lived through in the present lives of those who survive him, privileged over his own mediations of his past life.

With respect to Joss’ relationship with Millie, we witness an intricate portrait of their love wherein meditations on race, sex, sexuality, and partnership are presented more on the basis of normative ideas, rather than on conceptions of the marginal or fetish. Some of these meditations range from the ordinary to the political: “Joss used to comb my hair every night. It was one of the few feminine things he did. I loved it. Him sitting behind me, pressing against me, combing my thick dark hair in firm downward strokes” (Kay, 8). And then, Millie, recounting the preparations for her marriage to Joss, states, “I didn’t want to believe it of them. I didn’t want to believe my own mother could be prejudiced in that way....People should keep to their own, she said. Then she said the word, ‘Darky.’ ‘I don’t want you marrying a Darky’” (Kay, 26-27). There is a moving account where Millie is upset that Joss cannot father her child: “Why can’t he give me a child? He can do everything else. Walk like a man, talk like a man, dress like a man, blow his horn like a man. Why can’t he get me pregnant....Will I ever get to push a baby carriage?” (Kay, 37) Later in the novel Millie vividly dreams within the “stupid hope [and] violence of remembering”:

Joss is wearing a pinstriped suit. His shirt has little buttons that hold his collar down. He wears the cuffs I bought him. He carries his trumpet....He gives me a large plastic bag with *Selfridges* written on it. He shoves me into the Ladies and says, “Quick! Get changed!” There’s a pale green dress in the bag, a bit like the dress I wore on my wedding day. I put it on and Joss looks horrified. “What do you think you’re playing at?” he shouts at me, grabbing my wrist. I look down at myself and see that I am wearing a pinstriped suit. Not the dress at all. I look at Joss and giggle. He is wearing the green dress. But on his feet are men’s shoes and on my feet are women’s shoes. We both look ludicrous. I point at his feet, laughing hysterically....I put my arm around Joss’ shoulder to comfort her. She cries and dabs at her eyes.

Then she starts to shrink. I am terrified. I want to tell somebody, but there is nobody to tell....There are no real people....A big yellow and orange bus comes toward us. I look at the driver and the driver is Joss. He is heading straight for us. I shout to him, "Joss, you're killing yourself!" (Kay, 96)

Here, Millie's plaintive cry to and participation in a transgendering experience with Joss signify Kay's emphasis on the power of love and partnership, against the marginality and fetish Joss himself presents as a transgender, transsexual being, especially as "[t]here are no real people" – people unencumbered by virulent homophobia who would support their love if the truth were known. Moreover, Millie's cry, "Joss, you're killing yourself!" sounds out Millie's desire to love Joss for who *he* is now, rather than the *she* he was born as.

Kay also presents her emphasis on what *is* as opposed to what *was* in her portrait of Joss' adopted son, Coleman. Coleman, struggling with the discovery of his father's sex, inebriates himself with whiskey (brands of which his father once drank) and fantasies of a very masculine ravaging of the would-be tell-all tabloid reporter, Sophie Stones:

He settles himself down, knocking back his drink and pouring another one. He imagines lifting Sophie Stones onto the desk in the office he has not seen. He pulls down the zipper of his jeans. He gets it out....His cock seems bigger since his father died. Bigger and harder....How many kids could he make with that? A fucking population. He could make a whole generation with that. There's more come since his father died. (Kay, 140).

Here, Coleman, who grieves the loss of his father in moments of both anger and sadness, is presented as the man his father could never be: a man with a penis; a man who can divulge. Coleman's masturbatory, seeming pornographic act is an act of masculinity against his father's now known femininity. Coleman's ejaculation is a symbolic act of

his disclosure, a masculine act, of his father's privacy, a feminine mystique of sorts.

Eventually Coleman comes to terms with his father's life and his own memories of his father, yet Kay is sure to investigate notions of father and son, particularly as they revolve around received ideas of fatherhood, maleness, and masculinity.

Kay continues her careful creation of Joss Moody as a three-dimensional, complicated being through the portrayals of Edith Moore, Joss' mother who "hates the foods that repeat themselves, just like she hates people who repeat themselves...."; Big Red McCall who believes that nicknames "were magic; they let people know what they were in for"; Joss' childhood friend and latent crush, May Hart, who practiced kissing with Joss; and the other characters who knew him peripherally or only after his death. Within the lives of these characters we witness their own contradictions and dissatisfactions, individual flaws of depth which collectively speak to the wholeness and wholesomeness of Joss Moody. Against the backdrop of their lives, Joss is revealed as the healthy sum of her parts, rather than the broken curio.

Trumpet is progressively recursive, facilitated by language that is both languorous and urgent. Imbued with a blues and jazz idiom, chapters speak to and among each other in the call and response pattern endemic to blues and jazz. Characters speak only once, while others speak many times, sometimes contradicting or revising themselves.

Sometimes paratactic leaps occur, beautifully incorporating a jazz modality to establish a character's stream of consciousness, as in the following example where Millie mourns

Joss' death :

The Lair bus stops and a man gets on who looks the double of Joss. I feel myself go weak. For a split second, I tell myself my nightmare is over. Joss is back. Joss is alive. I follow him around the corner. He turns for a moment and looks through me. He has the wrong nose. I

feel sick with disappointment.... If Joss hadn't died. I had died first. The bus for Kepper arrives and I consider getting on it, then getting on another bus, and another till I am finally someplace I never heard of. I summon every bit of strength in me and make myself go and get my vegetables.... I don't know why I am still alive. If I had died first I wouldn't be going through all this. What does Joss care? The dead don't care, do they? I hate Joss. (Kay, 90)

And when the syntax is linear the lines are usually troubled, revised, riffed on because this story is "familiar the way a memory is familiar, and changed each time like a memory too" (Kay, 92).

Ultimately *Trumpet* aspires to do what we in real life have yet to do: envision and live in a world where people can be who they want to be, love who they want to love, and be remembered for the gifts they give to the world. A forward-thinking book, *Trumpet* emphasizes the past so that we find ways to create a better, equitable future for us all. In this context of elegance, we listen to the jazz man himself: "All jazz men are fantasies of themselves, reinventing the Counts and Dukes and Armstrongs, imitating them. Music was the one way of keeping the past alive.... There's more future in the past than there is in the future" (Kay, 190).