



Young Man with a Horn

Dorothy Baker, Gary Giddins (Introduction)

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Rick Martin loved music and the music loved him. He could pick up a tune so quickly that it didn't matter to the Cotton Club boss that he was underage, or to the guys in the band that he was just a white kid. He started out in the slums of LA with nothing, and he ended up on top of the game in the speakeasies and nightclubs of New York. But while talent and drive are all you need to make it in music, they aren't enough to make it through a life.

Dorothy Baker's *Young Man with a Horn* is widely regarded as the first jazz novel, and it pulses with the music that defined an era. Baker took her inspiration from the artistry—though not the life—of legendary horn player Bix Beiderbecke, and the novel went on to be adapted into a successful movie starring Kirk Douglas, Lauren Bacall, and Doris Day.

Young Man with a Horn Details

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From Reader Review Young Man with a Horn for online ebook

Matt says

Underrated, arguably the first Jazz novel in America ever.

Subtle, tough-minded, racially wise, and stylistically concise to the point of terse, which is kind of the problem for me. I'd have appreciated it if Baker had cut loose to describe Rick Martin and the band's cutting loose. I appreciate the power of understatement, but if you're writing about early 30's jazz, why not go all out? Make it sing on the page. Oh, write that thing!

Here's a couplea clips from the tragic, brilliant Bix Beiderbecke, the inspiration (though NOT the basis) for Baker's protagonist:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Ue9i...>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oW7YY...>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2_Ai...

So if you're going to write about the guy who made this glorious music (none other than Satchmo himself said, re Bix, "those pretty notes just went right through me") you may as well swing in a mid-tempo kinda way, even if it's only on the page.

Fran says

Non sono proprio tre stelle. Mi aspettavo più atmosfera jazzistica, mentre è incentrato solo sulla storia personale, di formazione più che altro, di Rick Martin.

Come Musica says

Raggiungere quella nota, simbolo della perfezione, una nota che non esiste, che non può essere suonata con la tromba. Rick Martin si avvicina così al burrone, prima dello schianto finale.
Una vita brillante, con un talento, che lo conduce alla deriva.

Nicholas During says

Young Man with a Horn takes a long hard look at the individual whose life is controlled around art, and then of course must suffer for it, in a very American way. What makes it good, is it acknowledges this, and even admits that writing is not necessarily the best form of art that creates a national culture. In this case, and Baker I think is saying in America's case, it is jazz.

Which is pretty cool for a reader who isn't really that in to jazz. In fact, I hadn't heard of Bix Beiderbecke before but I'm definitely a fan now. And whether jazz is the epitome of American culture or not—though I think there's a strong argument to say it is music, in all its C20th forms—it also gives Baker some serious advantages when writing this book. One is she can tackle race in a new way for a white person writing in 1938, that jazz is great and American and new and creative and improvisational and from the heart and can be felt; and while jazz is definitely black originally and maybe at its heart, it also crosses the racial divide, both for audience and artist. And secondly jazz provides a new language, not just musically, but linguistically. Mostly through African-Americans but also a new America language sprouting out of early jazz. And since this book is about young jazz musicians, she's aloud to let it rip.

The other theme, of artist controlled by his art and unable to fit into the real world and therefore must suffer and die, is not new at all, think of Vincent van Gough and Caravaggio, etc. But I think Baker does a good job with it here since it is an original American artist, partially because of his art. Russell Martin has talent, he doesn't study music, doesn't have to go to college, doesn't need to know the history of classical music or politics of the day. He can just pick up the chorus and verses, and then when it's his turn turn them into something new every night of the week. He doesn't need to explain it, the audience recognizes the standards he's playing, but they also know that he is going to make it his own. And even he doesn't know how yet. This is a pretty good point on inspiration I think. And it's hard to see the contemporary set of young authors writing fiction about young authors trying to become young authors has much to say about their inspiration. (Perhaps I'm being too harsh). But Martin doesn't have an answer either, he just is and the music flows through him and changes as it does. I recently went to hear Tom McCarthy talk about his idea of literature and this is pretty similar to what he thinks. Artists aren't coming up with new ideas, they are picking up on universal themes and changing them in their own expression and form. Russell Martin, Bix Beiderbecke, and Dorothy Baker all do that as well.

Sara says

I picked this up because a) Dorothy Baker and b) there were some interesting stories attached to the film adaptation; namely, the Jean Spangler disappearance, and Lauren Bacall's oft talked about role as a mad lesbian femme fatale.

What a marvelous book and so startlingly different from Cassandra at the Wedding. Take that, writing workshop art police! Even more proof that you can write about gays and jazz and alcoholism and shockingly not be gay or an alcoholic or a jazz musician, although maybe Baker had a few aliases. It's oddly structured in that most of the conflict and drama come in the last fifty pages. Unfortunately, the movie stretches those fifty pages into a ninety minute combo of whitewashing and schmaltzy moralizing with a side of good music. Bacall gets in a few zingers though, far too few.

In fact, read the book and watch this clip and you can skip the movie altogether.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Vdle...>

Lars Meyer says

Deze roman is als een dubbele espresso: mijn hart gaat er sneller van kloppen.

Leonard Nakamura says

What is it like to have a talent that takes you higher and higher? I am not sure Dorothy Baker exactly knew, but she does an amazing job of giving you an idea of it that seems like the real thing. Short and on point.

Ali says

Young Man with a Horn. The novel catapulted Baker into the literary limelight – and for many years it remained her best known work having been made into a film starring Doris Day, Kirk Douglas and Lauren Bacall. I read her later novel Cassandra at the Wedding (1962) a few months ago – and loved it. Cassandra at the wedding remains my favourite of the two – but Young Man with a Horn is a brilliantly assured novel, wonderfully atmospheric, it simply oozes jazz. Although not in any way biographical, the novel is said to have been inspired by the life of legendary horn player Bix Beiderbecke.

“Our man is, I hate to say it, an artist, burdened with that difficult baggage, the soul of an artist. But he hasn’t got the thing that should go with it – and which I suppose seldom does – the ability to keep the body in check while the spirit goes on being what it must be. And he goes to pieces, but not in any small way. He does it so thoroughly that he kills himself doing it.”

The young man in question is Rick Martin – who we are introduced to by an unnamed narrator. From the prologue we know that Rick has already come to a sad end – and that the story of his all too short life is being told by someone who witnessed his rise and fall.

Full review: <https://heavenali.wordpress.com/2016/...>

Daniel Polansky says

Hoo! Excellent! Wait, this is the same Baker who wrote the likewise excellent but otherwise in tone, structure, character and story entirely dissimilar Cassandra at the Wedding? Weird! Weird world! You haven’t even written one stellar novel, and she wrote two! **WHAT ARE YOU DOING WITH YOUR LIFE?**

Right, well, basically every jazz cliché was, so I gather, created in this book, so much so that later generations (this came out in 38) of Jazz aficionados were prone to look back on it with some contempt. Which is too bad, because it’s the rare sort of book which inspired a lot of imitators but still holds its original power. Baker understands jazz as an art form, writes about it intelligently, but more than that she understands what it is to be driven by the act of creation beyond the capacity of the human organism, to focus the entirety of your existence on the single, pointless activity of art, art for its own sake, art for its creators sake, art

irrelevant to the audience. I'll admit I'm just pretentious enough to feel like it had some relevance to my own life and trade.

Also, that's a hell of a last line. Damn, but this woman could write.

AC says

Disappointing. I didn't quite buy into the tone, and a bit hollywoodish. It could be it was just me, though.

rosamund says

Dorothy Baker's first novel follows the short life of Rick Martin, a virtuoso jazz musician at a time when jazz was not taken seriously. Rick Martin is white, but most of his friend and fellow musicians are black: Martin intuitively understand that black musicians play the best and most innovative jazz, and this allows him to move beyond the prejudices and racism of the 1920s. The novel is narrated by an unnamed man, a friend and admirer of Rick, although the focus is exclusively on Rick's life. Baker's main interest is in music: in the development of a musician and the single-minded obsession of someone who is a passionate and talented artist. The story itself does not feel new -- we are all familiar with stories about talented people who drink themselves to death -- but Baker's writing is fresh and insightful. We care about Rick, and the people in his life, particularly his best and oldest friend, Smoke Jordan, a black jazz musician who introduced Rick to jazz clubs. Although the narratives suffers from 1930s racist language and attitudes, *Young Man with a Horn* is full of measured and nuanced portrayals of black characters, which allows the novel to feel modern and gives the jazz world depth and insight. Although it is not a novel about racism, an examination of racist attitudes is constantly in the background of the text. For the most part, though, this is a novel about the transformative power of music and is a celebration of jazz.

I did not find it is revolutionary or full of emotion as Baker's last novel, *Cassandra at the Wedding* which was written twenty years after *Young Man with a Horn*, but in both she creates an authentic and compelling narrative voice, and both feel unique. She is an astonishingly talented writer.

lucas spiro says

I had no expectations when I picked this book up. All I knew was that the back cover said it was the "first jazz novel," and that was good enough for me.

It's an odd little number, but manages to reflect the artistic striving that the jazz form embodies. It's incredibly well crafted with moments of raw humanity and feeling, but still manages to convey the idea that that Baker couldn't quite hit that high, previously unheard of note, just as her protagonist falls short of a note that everybody says doesn't exist on a horn.

Annerlee says

Excellently written account of the life of Rick Martin, a young jazz trumpet player who is devoted to his music.

It's not easy to capture the essence of music with just the written word. It's hard to capture the atmosphere of the swing era, the banter and comradeship of the musicians for an audience that hasn't experienced it first hand. Dorothy Baker manages both in an easy and accessible style that drew me in from the first page.

The main character, Rick, dies young. We are told this in the first few pages, so it comes as no surprise. But the book isn't about burning out or dying before your time. For me, the book is a celebration of living life for something you believe in.

Rick's final words 'The GOOD thing, finally, is to lead a devoted life, even if it swings round and strikes you in the face'. This is what his life (and the book) is about.

Bert says

Full of zing, it practically comes with a gin fizz, a dingy stage and a band, it makes you feel and hear every single note of the music and the telling of it feels like you're reading scripture.

Larry says

Among this book's distinctions are that it is the very first jazz novel, as well as one of the rare novels up until then by a white author to portray black people as just people, without misspelled dialect or caricatured actions, and without trying to make a political point. It also alludes to drugs and homosexuality in a straightforward, matter-of-fact way that was revolutionary for the time.

On top of all that, it is a very good novel. A young white man from a troubled background finds friendship and his calling as a musician among the black jazz scene in Los Angeles and New York. The struggle he goes through to root himself as a man and realize himself as an artist without thinking in lofty terms of art, is deeply felt on every page.

Although later authors found better ways to use language to express the feel of jazz, Baker has a ventriloquist's ability to portray the banter of musicians: the reader can hear each voice, practically see each character sitting, slouching, polishing their instrument.

For such a short novel, I felt that a couple chapters went a bit long onto other tangents, yet the writing is consistently good. Recommended to anyone who enjoys stories involving music and musicians.
