



Demons in the Spring

Joe Meno

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Demons in the Spring is a collection of twenty short stories by Joe Meno, author of the smash hits *The Boy Detective Fails* and *Hairstyles of the Damned*, with illustrations by twenty artists from the fine art, graphic art, and comic book worlds--Todd Baxter, Kelsey Brookes, Ivan Brunetti, Charles Burns, Nick Butcher, Steph Davidson, Evan Hecox, Kim Hiorthoy, Paul Hornschemeier, Cody Hudson, Caroline Hwang, kozyndan, Geoff McFetridge, Anders Nilsen, Laura Owens, Archer Prewitt, Jon Resh, Jay Ryan, Souther Salazar, Rachell Sumpter, and Chris Uphues.

Oddly modern moments which occur in the most familiar of public places, from offices to schools to zoos to emergency rooms: a young girl who refuses to go anywhere unless she's dressed as a ghost; a bank robbery in Stockholm gone terribly wrong; a teacher who's become enamored with the students in his school's Model United Nations club; a couple affected by a strange malady—a miniature city which has begun to develop in the young woman's chest, these inventive stories are hilarious, heartbreakin, and unusual.

Joe Meno is the best-selling author of the novels *Hairstyles of the Damned*, *The Boy Detective Fails*, *How the Hula Girl Sings*, and *Tender As Hellfire*. He was the winner of the 2003 Nelson Algren Award for short fiction and is a professor of creative writing at Columbia College Chicago.

A portion of the author's proceeds from the book will go directly to benefit 826 CHICAGO, a nonprofit tutoring center, part of the national organization of tutoring centers with branches in San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York City, and Seattle.

Demons in the Spring Details

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From Reader Review Demons in the Spring for online ebook

Imogen says

I know that I just kind of run around goodreads yelling about stuff, but I feel like I need to do a good job with this one. 'Cause it was so good, y'know? But it's very early and I'm sick and only awake because my girlfriend is sicker than me and I want to be able to shut the dog up if the dog starts flipping out and barking. So my girlfriend can keep sleeping.

Yesterday my boss got married. Well, two days ago, but yesterday was the reception, and anyway, two days ago I was too busy being a drunk rock star mess playing a festival two hours North of here to go to the wedding even if I had been invited. But he is the sort of boss whose wedding reception barbecue I'd have loved to attend! So I took the bus to Tilden Park, which is all I knew of the reception location, and then when I got there, I remembered: Tilden Park has got to take up at least half of Berkeley. It is like the size of Northern California! So I poked around for a minute, then gave up and sat on the bus bench waiting for the bus for an hour, glad I had a book. Even if it was this one.

I'd been trying not to read more than one story a day! Because short stories are like wine. The last book I was into enough to restrain myself like this was Kelly Link's Magic For Beginners. But since I only had the one book and could only make faces for so long at the children of Obama supporters walking by me towards the Berkeley nature, I read maybe the last quarter yesterday.

All of which is a long leadup to me saying: Joe Meno is so good. I think this is my new favorite book of short stories, which is weird, because the Girl in the Flammable Skirt has been kind of my default favorite for something like a decade. (You are no longer ten, Imogen. Maybe it's time to get over having a favorite book, favorite singer, favorite dinner and favorite shirt.) And there are similarities in what Mr Meno's doing here and what Ms Bender was doing there: these stories, mostly, could not literally come true. "There's a little city growing in your heart. They've just had their industrial revolution and, in a couple hours, when they've built skyscrapers and airports, you will die." You can see the lights through her ribcage and skin! And even though she's one of a parade of perfect women who exist in relation to a boy protagonist, you still fall in love with her and with the fact that that is happening.

These are the saddest stories. Well, except maybe for the Boy Detective Fails, but we've established already that that book is the number one saddest book ever, and it's longer, so it can be sadder. In these stories amusement parks crumble, hearts break, dads disappear to the moon no matter how hard you try to keep them here, and there's nothing anybody can do except bravely mope on through it. This is not Fitzgerald's america, or Hunter Thompson's, it's the one I live in, even though y'know not literally.

I've never really been able to get into Dave Eggers- the self-consciousness and self-consciousness that feels like it's trying to be un-selfconsciousness turns me off- except I guess I kind of liked What is the What- but there's something in Demons in the Spring that reminds me of, like, what if Dave Eggers worked for me? This kind of intentional, plain language that takes its time to get where it's going without actually getting ornate or lengthy.

Anyway, yeah. These stories are on the same team as Judy Budnitz and even Kelly Link, in terms of the way that metaphors tend to be literalized (and literalized on bodies), but also are very much coming from the same broke, bleak, dusty place as the way more literally realistic Tender As Hellfire. Every star in the sky.

Anina says

Eh. I enjoyed the pictures a lot more than the stories.

Nikki McDaniel says

Most of the characters were depressed or despondent or at least unhappy. I didn't really enjoy the stories.

Shawn says

not to sound too hokey and dramatic but this book changed my entire perspective on what i may or may not like to read.

first off, i got the audiobook only to discover that the real deal was more of an "event" book with different fonts and illustrations by some of my favorite artists. so i was bitter right away. i LOVE that kind of stuff where the form and function of a book is experimented with and feel it can change the entire experience one has with the stories within.

but about half way through i decided had i been actually reading this and not listening to it i wasn't sure i would have made it through.

i wasn't so sure about some of the more dream-like, abstract stories and was getting a little fed up with the book as a whole. the more straight up fiction bits were depressing as hell and it didn't seem worth it to trudge through the strange bits to get to something i was more familiar but still uncomfortable with. it's like trying to get out of some weird hippy summer camp where you have to call each other by native american names and give hugs to each other only to discover when you leave you're not going home but to your weirdo grandma's house for the rest of the summer instead of just going to your house. and you're not gonna be watching cartoons and hanging out with your friends, buddy. she ain't got a cable and you're miles from civilization.

so if that makes any sense at all i just stayed at camp and listened on.

a little over halfway through i got to the story, "I want the quiet moments of a party girl." while easily the most heart wrenching of any of these stories it was also the most realistic and made me feel, somehow, like i understood the author's voice a little more clearly now. everything else just kind of clicked. the stories from before i now examined a little deeper and the stories after i listened to with much more attention. it was worth being challenged by these stories as i knew their was honesty in them.

overall, i think the real tie that binds all of these stories together is loss. and while that can be difficult to get through if you stick around until the end you'll see it's not all as hopeless as it originally seems.

i'm going to pick this one up as a hardcover and pour through it again and i would encourage anybody else that wants a challenging read (which i never thought i would) to check it out as well.

Steph says

It has been awhile (high school) since I've read anything written by Joe Meno. The short stories in *Demons* are just as inventive, charming, and quirky as I remembered his writing to be. Each story was modern but surreal, and I found myself wishing many of them wouldn't end. My favorite shorts included "Frances the Ghost," "What A Schoolgirl You Are," and most of all, "Miniature Elephants Are Popular." The illustrations and typography by different artists that were provided for each story also added to the charm of this quick read. Rachell Sumpter's illustrations for "Iceland Today" stood out to me specifically. While some stories were less captivating than others, I enjoyed this book overall and I am now anxious to catch up on Meno's newer works: *The Great Perhaps* and his most recent, *Office Girl*.

Ron says

I'm still actually only about halfway through this collection, but so far I've loved every story in it, even though they've all been wildly different from one another. It's like Meno is daring himself to be a new kind of storyteller every time he starts up a new story.

Jason Jordan says

A mixed bag, this one.

While I enjoy the different fonts and illustrations, I prefer the latter to actually pertain to the story at hand. Many do, and are great, but some are too random for my tastes.

Stories I like: "Frances the Ghost," "The Sound before the End of the World," "Animals in the Zoo," "Ghost Plane," "Miniature Elephants Are Popular," "The Unabomber and My Brother," "Art School Is Boring So," "Oceanland," "Get Well, Seymour!," "Airports of Light"

Stories I don't like or don't particularly care for: "Stockholm 1973," "An Apple Could Make You Laugh," "It Is Romance," "People Are Becoming Clouds," "What a Schoolgirl You Are," "The Boy Who Was a Chirping Oriole," "I Want the Quiet Moments of a Party Girl," "The Architecture of the Moon," "Iceland Today" (why was this even included?), "Winter at the World-Famous Ice Hotel"

In the end, I still think "Bluebirds Used to Croon in the Choir" is Meno's best work by far.

tee says

I loved some and hated others. Some of the illustrations were fabulous, others were shit. I loved, "I Want the Quiet Moments of a Party Girl", "frances the Ghost", "The Unabomber and My Brother" ... actually, I loved a lot of them. Particularly the one about the miniature elephant.

I am a fan of Joe Meno. I'm sure that If I had read this book when in a more sour state of mind, this review would be an entirely different thing but I was totally up for hipster quirk, it was much enjoyed. I do, however, feel like I need to wash down its sickly sweetness with a good gritty horror novel or something though.

o says

This book has been on my to-read list for nearly six years, so i was beyond excited to see that it was available at the library in my new city. Some of the stories in this collection are SUPER WEIRD and I'm not sure if it's me simply not getting the point of them or they're legitimately nonsensical, but I certainly didn't find myself bored a single moment while reading. Some of my favorite stories in the anthology were "Ghost Plane", "What a Schoolgirl You Are", "Miniature Elephants Are Popular", and "I Want the Quiet Moments of a Party Girl."

Nick says

A little bit of a let down, considering how excited I was about it's release. This book ebbed and flowed for me: some of the stories were tops, some of Meno's finest short work, and some just weren't all that great.

Highlights included: Frances the Ghost, It Is Romance, What A Schoolgirl You Are, Miniature Elephants Are Popular, The Architecture of The Moon, The Unabomber and My Brother, Art School Is Boring So, Oceanland, and Airports of Light.

Cherie says

I'm going to stop reading him. Joe Meno (in my opinion -- sorry, V) is clever-clever, the kind of writing you encounter in MFA programs. Nothing that is really sustained. Sometimes when you're reading it you might enjoy it, but ultimately, you feel similar to how you feel post-Chinese food - hungry, sick, and bleh.

Brenna Sydel says

Some solid pieces in here but also some that left my desiring. Art was fantastic however.

Jenny says

If Zooey Deschanel were a book, this would be that book. Annoyingly twee, dripping with smugness and predictable whimsy. I really, really wanted to like these stories. I did not. They read like overly earnest undergraduate prose. He does have creative ideas at times and I'd still like to give his novels a try, but my expectations have been lowered.

Daryl says

I have sort of a thing about fiction author Joe Meno. Years and years ago, a friend gave me his short story collection *Bluebirds Used to Croon in the Choir*, and I loved it (and much later, after a reread, reviewed it here). On the basis of my liking that book, I more recently read his novel *The Great Perhaps*, which I liked much less (reviewed here). Meno for me is much like Richard Powers, in that I think there's a lot of potential there but he fails to live up to it, so far, more than he lives up to it. Having recently read and not much liked Powers's *Gain*, I'm on the brink of giving up on him. After reading the first few stories of Meno's collection *Demons in the Spring*, I began to fear I had reached the same breaking point with his work. The jury's still out.

Meno's short stories are quirky, often outlandish, and I like that. But in this collection, they seem very uneven. Some of the stories seemed half finished and some simply not good. I felt at times as if I was reading unrevised workshop material, and I occasionally thought Meno was doing the cutesy, quirky thing without the literary punch that earns you the right to play such games. These stories I found myself reading hurriedly, just hoping to get to the next (and hoping it would be a better story).

But there were some stories that I liked, some of them very much. As in *Bluebirds*, Meno writes often of loneliness, of people just trying to peer through the murk of their alienation and make a connection with somebody. Among them, we meet in "Miniature Elephants are Popular" the sad man made happy at last by the possession of a tiny elephant whom, for the sake of helping another person, he drives to a bad end. Here Meno may pull a bit too much of the cutesy-pie business, but ultimately the story redeems it.

In "I Want the Quiet Moments of a Party Girl," we meet a not-terribly-likable couple who endure a tragedy and find a way through it. It's a rare dip for Meno into something resembling realism, and he does it pretty well. It occurs to me only now that he ends the story in the way certain types of thematically similar movies that make me want to wretch tend to end, but here, with these characters, it seemed a good ending.

"The Architecture of the Moon" is a fanciful piece in which all nighttime light (including that produced by the moon and stars) is extinguished, the city reconfigures itself at random, and people wander around lost at night. The main character of the story speaks with his wandering father on the phone nightly, often trying to guide him homeward. It's easy enough to read this as a story about Alzheimer's and a son working to shepherd an afflicted parent through the confusing mess of it all, though it could also just be a fanciful story. There's a simple tenderness and innocence about it that I found very appealing.

In "The Unabomber and My Brother," Meno treats us to an unlikely juxtaposition of his burn-out brother and the Unabomber. It's another story that has a soft, unexpected landing at the end, and I thought the Unabomber tie-in and the way in which Meno handles an emotional finish in a weird emotional-and-yet-still-detached way was pretty nice.

It's hard to read "Oceanland" without hearing echoes of George Saunders's various stories about theme parks in which he depicts sorrow among the shabby ruins of tourist destinations designed to -- and of course failing horribly to -- provide pleasure. Saunders does it better, but I thought this one was ultimately pretty satisfying.

Until I read the last line or two of "Iceland Today," I wondered what the point was. It's a funny, fictitious history of Iceland in which we learn all sorts of zany facts. It's the kind of little sidebar I'd expect to read

nestled in almost as a sort of set piece within one of the sorts of sprawling encyclopedic novels I tend to be fond of (as, e.g., a student term paper). But however much I chuckled while reading it, I couldn't quite figure out why Meno had written the thing or put it in a collection instead of on a blog. He punches you in the gut with the point at the very end of the piece, and I'm ambivalent about how he handled it. This story I regard as a curiosity, neither exactly a failure nor exactly a success.

Meno finishes strong with "Children Are the Only Ones Who Blush," which has sort of a *Juno* vibe to it. It's easy enough to envision the main character played on the screen by the ever-baffled, eager-to-please, neurotic screw-up type best given life in recent years (and in *Juno*) by Michael Cera. This story manages to be both delightful and sort of sad, which I suspect is pretty hard to pull off.

The stories I've not commented on here generally left me cold or frustrated.

I made a note at one point that Meno dwells a lot in this collection on architecture and city-planning type topics. We also see action at several art schools, and if ever there was a collection about family members betraying or disappointing one another, this is it (though we do also see the occasional redemption). Of the collection's title I can make little sense, though the wry dual-meaning (are the demons in the season or in the water?) I suppose is cute. Each story had accompanying illustrations by a different artist (hence, perhaps, the preoccupation with art schools, though the artists Meno portrays are almost all wretched folk), and some portion of the proceeds from sales of the book is being donated to 826Chicago, a branch of the student writing outreach organization Dave Eggers founded.

On the basis of this book, I'm still a little unsure how I feel about Meno's work. I loved *Bluebirds* so much that the two things I've since read and found at best uneven have left me leery. Maybe he wrote just the one outstanding book. Do I dare risk the disappointment of buying others and confirming that *maybe* to be true (as, so far, I seem to have done with Powers)?

Jason Pettus says

(Reprinted from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com]. I am the original author of this essay, as well as the owner of CCLaP; it is not being reprinted illegally.)

Earlier this year I was asked by our pals at Akashic Books to contribute a review of a single short story as a promotional project for Joe Meno's 2008 collection *Demons in the Spring*, recently reissued in paperback form as a fundraiser for the very worthy 826CHICAGO. And that garnered me a review copy of the entire book, which is why I thought I'd get a review of the entire book posted before the end of the year as well, although regular readers can of course already see the problem; that since I'm an unusually analytical reviewer, I have a hard time coming up with much to say about story collections, which to me always seem to consist of some pieces that are great, some that are terrible, and none long enough for me to really sit and sink my teeth into. So instead this is mostly a reminder simply that the book exists, gorgeously illustrated by a series of hipster artists like Charles Burns, Ivan Brunetti, Jay Ryan and Archer Prewitt, and that the profits go to a great organization that deserves your time and money. I'm giving it the standard score I give all story collections here, although will give you ample warning that the quality of individual pieces are all over the board.

Out of 10: **7.5**

