



SHANE JONES

author of *Light Boxes* and *Daniel Fights a Hurricane*



Crystal Eaters

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Remy is a young girl who lives in a town that believes in crystal count: that you are born with one-hundred crystals inside and throughout your life, through accidents and illness, your count is depleted until you reach zero.

As a city encroaches daily on the village, threatening their antiquated life, and the earth grows warmer, Remy sets out to accomplish something no one else has: to increase her sick mother's crystal count.

An allegory, fable, touching family saga and poetic sci-fi adventure, Shane Jones underlines his reputation as an inspired and unique visionary.

Crystal Eaters Details

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Author : Shane Jones

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From Reader Review Crystal Eaters for online ebook

Josh Luft says

Crystal Eaters is an inventive fable. The inhabitants of a village believe they're born with 100 crystals inside of them. As they age, get hurt, etc., the count's depleted until it reaches zero and they die. The story centers on a young village girl named Remy, whose mother is sick and closing in on zero. While Remy's plot concerns her quest for mythical black crystals, believed to add to one's count, the narrative also focuses on her imprisoned older brother, Adam (a/k/a "Brother", a/k/a "Pants"), the head of the defunct cult the Sky Father Gang, as well as Z., the default head of an idle cult called Brothers Feast. Black crystal is what brings all these characters together, drives them, as does the city, which is encroaching upon the village, literally, threatening to consume it.

While I enjoyed and admired the book, there was something missing for me that prohibited it from fully capturing me. What that something is is a bit ambiguous to me. Perhaps it needed a bit more style in the prose? More world-building? Maybe the allegorical aspects, while creative, were too obvious and took away from some of the book's magic? I can't fault it much, though, for whatever I perceive to be missing. This is a work with imagination and heart and deserves to be read.

Samantha says

Light Boxes will probably forever be my favorite work by Shane Jones, but with Crystal Eaters, he's achieved the same urgency and magic as his other books. He continually takes the experimental side of contemporary fiction and grounds it in accessible allegory, making his work more interesting than most of what's out there now. I usually don't care for child protagonists, but in Remy, we get (for once) an atypical adolescent narrator. And where many contemporaries writing in this vein don't elicit empathy for their characters, Jones really evokes a sadness for this family that readers will feel, despite the unreality of the story's setting and premise.

I'd been waiting for this book all year, and it didn't disappoint.

Amy says

I do wish this book had lived up to its jacket description, which focuses on Remy and what she supposedly sets out to do. The story's strength *is* Remy, as well as this interesting idea that a city is each day growing closer and closer to her little crystal mining village. But, sadly, these elements are not the focus of the story. The blurb makes the book's plot seem more tidy and succinct than it is.

Instead, the book diverts and starts to follow other characters, switching POV at every tiny chapter - to the mother, to the father, to Remy's brother, to a random kid named Z, perspectives which are not as compelling as Remy's. The plot element of the city is lost too and never fully fleshed out, which left this book with little to keep me going from chapter to chapter by the end.

Perhaps the story could have benefited from some better editing, someone to say, "Tell this same story (the

troubled marriage, the brother in prison, the sick mother who was raped years ago), but make it so Remy is the one to tell it all." And someone to make sure that the clever, hard-hitting literary sentences Jones writes at the beginning of the book continue through the end.

Other issues: I'd heard this book was allegory, which ended up distracting me as a reader instead of compelling me. Also, I could never understand why everyone in the village thought black crystals didn't exist when everyone in the city prison seemed to know they did, and Remy herself ran through the village mines barefooted and got high off the black crystals that had embedded themselves in her feet.

This printing had some copy errors as well (as instead of gas, breaths instead of breathes).

Overall, 2.5.

Bert says

A dense work of hallucinogenic fiction that at times feels whimsical, psychedelic, and then hits you in the dick with stark reality, death and horror, like a good trip gone hellish bad. What Shane Jones is doing feels new and strange, the mental images he creates are technicolour and nostalgic, crystals embedded in skin, horse-reflections, Remy the dog-child, there's something elemental about them. It is also unexpectedly harrowing and bleak in places, and that lends the whole fable-like, made-up-worldness of it real pathos, I felt this novel in my stomach, I felt those crystals. Whilst Light Boxes brought to mind Tim Burton or a Richard Brautigan, I guess this was closer in spirit to JG Ballard's 'catastrophe novels' from the early 60's, visually beautiful but also nightmarish, there's something a bit more childlike and sad about Jones' language though. He is an original, and this is a novel full of mystery and wild imaginative leaps.

Full Stop says

<http://www.full-stop.net/2014/07/01/r...>

Review by Eleanor Gold

Dear Reader: consider this your first and last warning: Crystal Eaters is not psychological realism; it is not epic fantasy, though there are myths and a quest of sorts; it is not YA, though its ostensible protagonist is a young girl; nor is it precisely a coming of age novel, though perhaps it is closer to that than any of the others. Shane Jones' writing does not fit into any of those easy — though perhaps mistaken — genres by which we categorize books and sort them on our shelves. That is, unless you have a bookshelf specifically for "Weird, Delightful, and Sometimes Painful," where this book might just fit in next to *The Orange Eats Creeps* and *The Soft Machine*.

Crystal Eaters is the story of a strange and wondrous village near a city (called "the village" and "the city") — and the city, it appears, is growing closer every day, encroaching on the villagers via tourists, surveillance, and the literal and uncanny growth of buildings. The villagers' economy and culture centers on a crystal mine, which produces red, green, yellow, blue, and perhaps even the mythical black crystals. Everyone is born with 100 crystals inside them; throughout your life accidents, traumas, and the mere accumulation of years gradually deplete your crystal count until you die. Animals have fewer crystals than

humans; the sun has enormously more, though these, too, might be running out.

Read the rest here: <http://www.full-stop.net/2014/07/01/r...>

Tucker Leighty says

I feel so drained after reading this. It's so filled with beauty and imagination and sadness and I can't help but love it.

Chuck Young says

goddamn. my favorite book of 2014.

Lauren Dostal says

I loved the premise for this book, however the style for me was lacking. The hallucinogenic flights were vivid and interesting but became overwhelming. I lost the thread of the story several times and the characters got diluted in favor of experimentalism. For pure inventiveness and imagination, this one gets full marks; but the style, for me, kept the story from being fully realized.

Judy says

I had a tough time with this novel. I checked it out because I admire indie publisher Two Dollar Radio and I had listened to a podcast interview with the author on Other People. Set in a speculative world, or perhaps allegorical would be a better word, its gritty, even gross details actually made me feel yucky.

A small extremely poor village with seven dirt roads lies outside an ever encroaching city. The villagers mine crystal and sell it to manufacturers in the city for technological uses. They have mythical beliefs about crystal's properties, the main one being that every living creature is born with 100 units of crystal in their bodies. As life goes on this count steadily lowers due to accidents, injuries, illness, punishments, and emotional turmoil, until all the crystal is gone and death ensues.

Remy is sad throughout the book because both her dog and her mother are dying, her dad is stoically distraught, and her brother is in jail. The most mythical belief of all is that the crystal count can be replenished by ingesting a certain rare and hard to mine color of crystal.

At least that is what I could figure out. The chapters are numbered from 40 down to 0. Remy and her brother love their parents, death is inevitable, but also brings sorrow. The city controls anything that is good in the material world but the powerless villagers still have feelings.

I admit that the conceit with the crystals is original but the plot is not. If I had to live in that village I would

welcome death.

In a Paris Review interview, Shane Jones says, "...prayer, crystals, myths, folktales, the universe as a system of life and destruction--I'm attracted to these things and they are players in the book."

The book garnered some highly positive, even adoring reviews, but it did not work for me.

Jennifer Sundt says

Again drawn to a book because of its cover and its crispness, again - like Loteria - driven away by characters I can't relate to as well as a plot that winds, and the abject misery of everyone involved (including myself).

I wanted to love this book because of the way it intertwined modern reality with science fiction and then combined that with prose that curled and yawned and stretched in all sorts of delicious ways. But the thing was, the aspects of this story's tilted world that did fascinate me were blatantly tossed by the wayside in favor of, say, describing in detail just how far the black crystal dug into the skin beneath of Pants McDonald's toenail. Capiche?

This book ends up being less about a rich, vivid, strange world that I want to learn more about than a psychological study of family dysfunction. Or modern society and its deterioration thanks to yoga studios and wifi and all those luxuries that make upper class folk feel so god damn pretentious, take your pick.

I couldn't stand Momma Bear and Poppa Bear's misery. I've seen it all before, and in reading about these people I - to quote There Will Be Blood - see nothing worth liking. Poppa Bear, surprise surprise, stuffs his feelings and then punches walls...dear old dad. Momma Bear manages to top his theoretical constipation by pitching herself in the opposite direction of detriment: dying of some mysterious disease (Preventable? Curable? Incurable? we'll never know) in which her life trickles away uncontrollably.

Given that the majority of the characters in this book are boys or men, I really do not appreciate how this Mom, as one of the only two women in the book, exists solely to suffer - first to give her entire self to her messed up family, then to be gang raped (and no one gives a shit - even Pants, watching, by his wording seems to think she likes it), then to waste away from some from some disgusting mystery illness (as per "the process" according to the village's assumed book-of-death type tome.) All throughout, she is a mere plot point... not an actual person, just the pivot upon which everyone else cycles into despair.

As you can see, I'm one of those readers who, upon realizing that this work is more a "heart-wrenching tale of family grief" than a foray into a world worth exploring (what was that dark red crystal that several miners discovered? Are there pink crystals, purple crystals, clear crystals?) realized that this was actually a waste of time.

Which is too bad. This book's magic did not work on me, and boy, did it try.

Lee says

May appeal to César Aira fans? This novel and some of Aira's stuff share a "flight-forward" (*fuga hacia adelante*) improvisational whimsicality that can seem exciting/liberating/new or cloying/indulgent/dull, often on the same page. Aira's translated language seems to me a little more locked down than SJ's in this, and Aira often inserts essayistic stretches -- particularly upfront -- that read like postmodern literary theory. But I think they share a similar instinct when it comes to their conceptual spark, sense of fun, and willingness to follow the flow.

Otherwise, I like the page-numbering conceit (the book starts on page 183 and the numbering descends to page 1). In general, crystal count is a damn good idea for a novel. I love the Breaking Bad-esque (black instead of blue crystal), psychedelic, existential, environmental, videogame, and incarceration-related thematic overtones. I'll continue to read whatever SJ writes since he's on an odd, interesting path that may very well lead to unseen territories described in crystalline clarity.

Regarding the all-important provision of stars, my rating represents the overcast sky of my reading obscuring the streaking of a five-star comet of conception.

Matthew Gallaway says

Another great book by Shane Jones -- surreal, funny, and heartbreakng. I wrote a full review for Electric Literature here: <http://electricliterature.com/review-...>

Sabra Embury says

Try not to laugh when you meet Jugba Marzan who "smells like hot dog water and mouth mints." Or a girl named Remy's second dog, Dog Man.

Line by line it's tough to break away from Shane Jones' best book yet. Ball it up and shove it in your guts through your belly button.

My review at the L Magazine <http://www.thelmagazine.com/newyork/c...>

Andrew says

"You wanted to see."

Remy's shoulders fold inward and her stomach absorbs a hammer. Sharp pieces of crystal trickle down inside her. She's never seen a body get this far.

Mom's face has lost meat the skull once held. And Dad was right, something is wrong with her mouth, as if she chewed bricks. Her eyes are glazed and rust-colored. Soon, her left eye will drip crystals (Chapter 5, Death Movement, Book 8). Her nose is hardened ash that Remy imagines if she touched would crumble. Gray hair gunked with shit fans her pillow. Dad repeats Can you hear us? Can you? Are you okay? and Remy thinks Don't leave me. Smell of dead dogs. Smell of burning. She peels the blanket from Mom's feet and sees the skin is a darker red compared to her face and neck, and even her veins, once strong and blue,

have disappeared beneath this new red shell. A lack of circulation results in the color red drying everything up, erasing the last crystals in the body (Chapter 9, Death Movement, Book 8). The red is moving toward her chest and aiming to stop her heart.

“You don’t have to be here,” says Dad, in a softer tone now that he’s seen Remy’s reaction. “I know you’ve heard this before, from me, from books, and maybe you don’t believe it, but it’s never been disproved. Parents go and their children step into their place. There’s nothing wrong with just letting that happen.”

And then there are the books you desperately want to like, though they just never seem to work, no matter how interesting the central conceit first appears.

Shane Jones’ *Crystal Eaters* is more of an attempt at crafting a modern-day fable than it is a novel. The story focuses on Remy, a young girl living in a nameless village that believes in the crystal count—that everyone, when they are born, has one hundred crystals inside of them, and that through illness, disease, accidents, etc., their count gradually plummets toward zero—toward death. The count never increases; life moves in only one direction. In many ways, the imagined system is similar in concept to the lives in a video game, though considerably less structured.

Early on, we discover that Remy’s mother is dying—her count is almost down to nothing (reflected physically by the book’s unconventional structure—beginning at chapter 40 and page 183, and counting down to the end). Her brother Pants is in prison, and her father is distant. Therefore, it is up to Remy to do what no one else has ever done and find a way to increase her mother’s dwindling crystal count. Meanwhile, the city—the world outside—is encroaching on the village with abject disregard (and confusion) toward the crystal mine and the village’s seemingly absurd beliefs.

As implied at the start of this review, I had a great many problems with *Crystal Eaters*. The story offers a unique idea at its core, but it doesn’t manage to grow beyond the gestation stage—the concept just never takes hold. Much of the issue rests with the fact that Jones never seems to fully commit to the strangeness of the crystal count culture. The people in the village, as it is described, see and interact with the crystals, though to the outside world it is a baffling, illogical conceit. And even among the outside world there seems to be different levels of acknowledgement—from the guard who tells Pants that the village’s problem is that it believes in rocks and not God (thereby acknowledging the village’s belief in the crystal count) to the people at the hospital at the end, caring for Remy’s mother in her final moments, who appear to be utterly confused by even the mention of crystals.

To take this a step further, the comment made about believing in God versus believing in rocks illustrates an even deeper problem with this book. Jones presents the city at one point as a godless device—evidence of secular humanistic progress threatening to overwhelm an old-world belief structure (development crushing religion beneath its thumb)—but then introduces the concept of God in the aforementioned conversation with Pants, revealing that the crystals are not, as initially assumed, an analogue for faith versus science/technology/progress, but are their own isolated offshoot akin to a splinter group of a larger faith, one nearing the end of its existence. And then, later, when it’s revealed that while the crystals are the very essence of life to those in the village, they also market them to the outside world for use in jewellery or New Age yoga practices. This again shatters the analogue by stripping the metaphor—the crystals—of any semblance of otherworldly impact or effect, turning them into little more than a trinket.

Short of the outside world feeling confusion at the village dwellers, there’s also little to no indication that

they are even grounded within the same reality, and that all that is different between them are their beliefs. The village in this story seems to exist in a bubble, which I found frustrating and negatively affected any hope of narrative cohesion. It's as if the city (the outside world) isn't so much a threat to the village as it is a character in a different story altogether. What this all means is that Crystal Eaters never successfully marries its metaphor to the story being told. It never goes far enough with the conceit, preferring to leave it as a surface-level idea unwilling to throw enough of its weight in any one direction. It's like a designer setting an image deliberately off-centre in an attempt to unsettle its viewers, but not going far enough that it doesn't appear to be a mistake.

It's stated somewhere near the start of the book that "*The village survives on myth*," but myths generally have a root to them, a set of rules, and the village in Crystal Eaters doesn't ever establish its own rule set, rather it seems to exist both in its mythology, but also attempts to have a place in the real world. Jones attempts to blur the lines with things like the black crystal, which is analogous to both addiction and faith-based reliance (providing the illusory effect of one's crystal count increasing—like someone getting high and believing they are invincible). But the black crystal is a myth within an already loose mythology, and never seems like anything more than a red herring to distract Remy from the reality of her mother's approaching death.

I feel as though I could have forgiven many of the book's storytelling faults had I found more to love with its moment-to-moment writing. Here, too, Crystal Eaters falls unfortunately short. I found little to love in Jones' often staccato writing. Ordinarily I am drawn to writing that breaks with convention, but in Jones' case what was left out seemed essential. The conversations feel broken and fragmented, as if critical strands of dialogue have been unnecessarily excised in favour of abstraction. As a consequence of this, not one character voice seems different from another—everyone bleeds together in forced, truncated tones stripped of all colour (which is somewhat ironic given the attempt to flood the world with colour via use of the crystals). I also found much of the sentence structure to be distractingly passive and just not engaging.

When all is said and done, Crystal Eaters feels less like a novel, or even a fable, and more like a short story blown out but not filled out. It reads like the first pass of an idea that might have proven interesting had it been more thoroughly/tonally developed (the imagery is too one-dimensional—throw in the word "crystal" and suddenly everything's weird and metaphorical!). I do appreciate what I think Jones was going for on a conceptual level, but it just never arrived at its destination for me. The book felt, sadly, like an idea executed but not ever realized.

Michael Seidliger says

Whether you take precious care of every crystal you have or you watch them disappear before your very eyes, they will dwindle, and when they're gone, you'll have to believe in something. Believe in the beauty of a well-written masterpiece like this. Believe in what you read with concentrated care because when your count reaches zero, there's no telling what happens next.
