



## Hummingbirds

*Joshua Gaylord, Alden Bell*

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"Those of us who love Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* will now have to make room next to it on our shelves for Joshua Gaylord's winning debut." —Brock Clarke, author of *An Arsonist's Guide to Writers' Homes in New England*

"*Hummingbirds* positively glistens with erudition and insight. Whether writing about prep school girls or the adult men who walk among them, Gaylord's stunning writing elevates his subject matter with equal parts humanity and elegance." —Jonathan Tropper, author of *This Is Where I Leave You*

In the tradition of Francine Prose's *Blue Angel*, Curtis Sittenfeld's *Prep*, and Alan Bennett's *The History Boys*, Joshua Gaylord's *Hummingbirds* reveals the intertwining—and darkly surprising—relationships between secretive students and teachers at an all-girls prep school in New York City.

## Hummingbirds Details

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## From Reader Review Hummingbirds for online ebook

### Maren says

As a former all-girls school student at a New York City prep school, I was probably more engaged by this book and for longer than I would have been if I weren't compelled naturally by the subject matter. It was an interesting exploration of the awkward tension between the often-rare male teachers and the adolescent girls at schools like this but the writer seems to suffer from a poor balance between "showing" and "telling" - too often, he manhandles his characters into forced revelations and moments heavy with meaning that could have been gently inferred rather than tacked on at the end of every single chapter within the final 4-5 sentences like clockwork. Also, the rampant references to fragile masculinity and fearsome femininity were both tiring and trite. While I "liked" the characters (in quotation marks because likable characters doesn't for me gauge the success of a book), I didn't really care what happened to them because they were fairly obvious set pieces to the greater themes the novel was exploring and those themes were so heavy handed that it was hard to ignore the flat though pleasant nature of the characters supporting them.

Also, there are some weird cameos by characters who ultimately don't matter enough to be there yet are. And one or two chapters are told from the point of view of the wife of the main male protagonist but seemingly for no reason, especially since the rest of the chapters are almost entirely told from the point of view of one of the two school girls or the male protagonist. The sole female teacher of note also gets one or two chapters' worth of POV and it was just as stark a jump every time it happened. While the nature of her pathetic-ness and pathos certainly rivals that of her male compatriots, it's handled so much less deftly than theirs is making her more pathetic and less noble, despite the fact that the male characters are far more obviously despicable and the female ones just....pathetic.

So, yeah, mostly pathetic people loftily aiming for ambitious, Joycean epiphanies but the pawprints of the writer are all over the narrative so few surprises here and not enough ease in the writing or narrative to make it a wholly worthwhile read. Promising start but unsatisfying.

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### Dani says

It took me a long time to finish this book. That's pretty normal for me, since I am a student and generally have a lot of reading on my plate to do that isn't just for fun. However, I had to actually goad myself to keep reading this book instead of reading another because I just didn't see the *point* in it. Sure, there was conflict, but I wasn't sure where the book was trying to go with it.

I also had a problem with some of the character development. Although the book tried to get me to sympathize with Binhammer's wife, I couldn't. There was not enough reason for me to enjoy her as a person to either feel sorry for her or understand her point of view. I also had a hard time understanding why other characters were placed in the book. Sibyl, for instance, was one character that just completely disappeared about 2/3 through the book, and nothing more was said about her interactions with the other characters after that.

The students seemed to be placed there (with the sole exception of Liz Warren, perhaps) to be used for plots involving the adults or teachers. I wouldn't normally mind this--not every character has to be essential to the plot--but I don't know why the author actually put some of them there. I understood the character

personalities or types, but wasn't sure why they actually mattered or were important.

My last criticism comes from the fact that the emotions and behaviors in the book seemed very shallow. Teenage girls are grittier, more emotionally charged, and deep than the book tries to depict. The only mean thing that I ever heard come out of a student's mouth in this book sounded like something I might have said as a teenager while gossiping to another friend, not in an angry confrontation with someone I disliked or was jealous of. Overall, the students seemed way more innocent than they should be in real life, and seemed to pay way too much importance to their teachers.

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### **Emily Crow says**

I didn't care for *Hummingbirds*. It's a novel about teachers and students at an exclusive all girls prep school in New York City, and about the gossip, jealousy and speculation that runs rampant after a new male teacher joins the faculty. Once again, I have to concede that the book wasn't bad, *per se*, although I found it rather tedious.

My internal conversations tended to go like this:

Would I rather watch *Desperate Housewives* on Netflix or read more of *Hummingbirds*? (*Housewives* won.)  
Would I rather watch a house sparrow eat a potato chip or keep reading *Hummingbirds*? (The house sparrow won.)

Would I rather go to bed early or read another few chapters of *Hummingbirds*? (My bed won.)

And so on.... So why did I finish it? Well, the book wasn't terrible. And it wasn't all that long. But the characters were insipid and unconvincing, nothing much ever happened, and the writing style was so distant and "clever" that I could picture the author congratulating himself on his wit while he wrote it. (Whether he actually did or not, mind you). Final criticism: the POV ping-ponged randomly from character to character on each page, which drove me crazy after a while.

On the other hand: Would I rather clean my toilet or read more of *Hummingbirds*? The book finally won a round!

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### **DW says**

I picked this book up because I thought the cover looked old, but it turns out it was published in 2009. Huh. The word that comes to mind is "labored". It had an interesting story, but every page had about fifty metaphors and similes and every detail felt so conspicuously placed so that the reader could pick it out and savor the meaninglessness or something. As if it wasn't enough that the book is by an English teacher and about an English teacher, the main character thinks of his life as if he were a character in a book. Gag. I guess I have a short attention span for "literary" writing. Too much time spent reading to-the-point easily-digestible magazine articles.

Dixie is a high school senior and she wears pigtails and most of the time has a lollipop in her mouth? Are you kidding me? I identified more with Liz Warren (until the end). The entire school seems to consist only of the English department, which is okay for the teachers but when it is following the girls, they should have

some concern about other classes. (And isn't the English department huge for a school of 400 kids?) Also, I don't remember gossiping that much about the personal lives of my teachers when I was at school. And just for the record, in all our high school productions, the on-stage couples would always hug instead of kiss. Paid actors are one thing, high school kids actually kissing a scene partner (and taking direction in doing so) seems like going too far. Binhammer sounds like a terrible teacher - he dismisses them fifteen minutes early, and by the end of the book he's cutting class? Wouldn't they fire a teacher for not showing up to class? And I really don't get why Binhammer keeping Sarah from meeting Ted was an offense anywhere near what they did.

One thing I will say for this book, though, is that it does a good job of alluding to things, making the reader guess - is that his wife? Why is he upset? What's going to go wrong at the Christmas party? I feel like I should go back and study how he does it (because it's so transparent) in case I ever want to write a book. And there is not a whole lot of detail about the sex scenes or the fight or the death, which is much nicer than actually having to read about those things.

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### **Julie says**

The writing captured teenage girls in an evocative, Nabokovian (Is that a word? It should be. . . ) way. And the plot kept me asking "What's next?" And the writing was exquisite. But the resolution veered off in an unrealistic way. I thought the climatic scene where everyone's identity was revealed didn't make sense. Why were the two infidels (I know, it's not the right word, but it should be . . .) made at the man they had betrayed? It seemed odd that after all that time, they would immediately form an alliance against the husband. And more importantly the he would immediately feel he had wronged them. Did anyone else find that an odd reaction by all the characters?

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### **Donna says**

I had a lot of thoughts about this book but still cannot put all of them into words but first I would like to say I like the voices of the book. It is very contemporary. Even though there is a lot of poetic scandal (?) in the book you are never quite on anyones side and that is what I liked most about the book. You didn't hate anyone nor did you feel bad for anyone. Things just happened and I never really felt against anyone and I thought that was kinda nice.

It's nice to read a book for pleasure and feel for everyone as a whole but not hate them or love them. It kinda felt like everyone is your friend and you are hearing all sides of the stories.

I liked it and I recommend it to people who enjoy a nice read. There is nothing too complicated about this book and no one drives you mad but there is this beauty in the way Joshua writes and you will not know it until you indulge yourself in it!

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### **Danielle says**

Joshua Gaylord is a fantastic writer. There are paragraphs in *Hummingbirds* that I reread 2 and even 3 times because they were just so well written as to warrant it. For the use of the word "palimpsest", which is one of

my favorites and criminally underutilized, 10 points are awarded in my book. However, just as man does not live on bread alone, the author does not work with words alone, he must also be a storyteller. This, in my opinion is where Gaylord is less strong.[return][return]I have to admit that through much of *Hummingbirds* I found myself longing for it to be over. Gaylord seemed unable, even with all his fantastic words, to develop emotions fully. I thought that this might be because so many of his characters are conflicted, trapped in developmental and relational limbo, but even when the scene evolves to true climax, such as Binhammer throwing out Sybil, the emotions seem muted. Even when the characters are angry or hurting, it is through some narrative scrim.[return][return]I feel like I have to get my dislike for the manner in which Mrs. Mayhew is dispatched off my chest as well. I know it is not particularly central to the plot, but I reached that particular point in the story and had to go back and check what had just happened. One paragraph she is reading desk graffiti and the next she is gone, with seemingly no lead up.[return][return]The book did wrap up into a somewhat appeasing story. Ted Hughes is dealt with in a way befitting of the ridiculous and large character he is by that point. Dixie and Liz learn they are not really so different. Liz, who was disappointingly unrelatable to me considering I was an overly self-aware, judgmental, withdrawn teenage girl, gets her fulfillment and her disappointment. And Binhammer seems just as far from reaching real, solid happiness as he always was, but also just as far from misery. The problem, to me, was that while the ending is acceptable I doubt I would have gotten there had this not been part of a personal reading challenge. I would have succumbed to the screaming desire to return Carmine-Casey high school to the library shelf whence it came.

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### **Kwoomac says**

I just learned that Joshua Gaylord and Alden Bell are one and the same. This is way different from zombies but I have to check it out.

Okay, so now I've read it. It's possible I would have given this book 4 stars if I weren't reading it on the heels of *Exit Kingdom* by Alden Bell. I could find no commonalities in writing style between the two. Gaylord said as much in a review. He took on the name Alden Bell when he wrote *The Reapers...* because he knew he was writing for a different audience. Fans of Joshua Gaylord may not be fans of Alden Bell.

The author is a teacher at a private girls high school on the Upper East Side. The story takes place in a fictional private girls high school. I really don't know how male teachers manage the girls, who are practicing their flirting and trying to exert power over the males in their life. When I was in high school, an all girls high school, I had a math teacher who was fresh out of college. He asked us to call him Mr. Saff because he had a long unpronounceable name. He was young and cool and probably a little flirty. At least half the girls I knew had a crush on him ( including me) and looked for reasons to talk to him after class. Anyway, he was not invited back at the end of the school year. I don't know if anything happened or if the administration was afraid something might happen.

This story involves teachers and students trying to maneuver their way through a difficult place. Two teachers. Leo binhammer has always been the only young hip teacher and the girls are all half in love with him. Along comes new teacher Ted Hughes. Leo can feel the girls transferring their crush to Hughes do he ups his own flirtatious behavior. No good can come of this. To complicate things further, Leo's wife had a short-lived fling with Hughes while away at a conference two years ago. Leo wants to hate acted, but he also finds himself failing under Ted's spell.

Obviously, Gaylord knows teenage girls and has created some very real characters here.

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### **Stephanie says**

Hummingbirds was not the book I expected it to be, and I am unsure whether it is a good thing or bad thing. The point of view and author's voice takes a different look at the all-girls prep school narrative that has been examined and re-examined in the Gossip Girl series and the like. If you enjoy references to classical (Western) literature then this book might be right up your alley. I liked Gaylord's poetic style of writing with tons of imagery and creative language. I wasn't exactly sure where the story was going and some parts are difficult to follow. It is a very plot-based book and the conclusion came quickly and without much fulfillment to the reader. Overall, I would say this is a good casual read for enjoyment in a unique style, rather than one that will be thought-provoking.

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### **530 Book Club says**

This man [Joshua Gaylord/Alden Bell] can write a menu and I will read it. I want to be him when I grow up. I want to write like him. He is my hero.

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### **Colleen Rockafellow says**

Very descriptive with most of the book taking place in the minds of the characters. I felt empathy towards Binhammer and confusion when others were upset with him. Ted Hughes just seems like a teenager himself and I found their friendship unlikely in the real world. The girls of the prep school seemed more adjusted than the instructors teaching them.

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### **Jess says**

I've been reading a lot of books this summer. And since I love writing reviews on Goodreads, I've been looking for ways to make my reviews more comprehensive. So I've started carrying my little yellow and black Charlie Brown spiral notebook and a pencil with me wherever I'm reading my current book and jotting down ideas, likes and dislikes, themes, and quotes to put in my reviews. It has been very useful, and I planned to continue with my writing while I read *Hummingbirds*.

But unfortunately, I did not write one word in my notebook. The page with the underlined Hummingbirds heading remains blank. I've discovered it is hard to write commentary on a novel when you can't even put it down.

Gaylord's only other novel is "The Reapers are the Angels," written under the name Alden Bell and encompassing quite a different tone and theme. *Hummingbirds* is not a post-apocalyptic revenge story but rather a tale of the line between adulthood and girlhood in an all-girls private school in New York City. Mr. Leo Binhammer is the sole male English teacher at an all-woman institution and he revels in this environment, basking in the attention he receives from students and teachers alike. But when the aptly named Mr. Ted Hughes comes to Carmine-Casey and starts taking the girls' attention, Binhammers feels his firm

grasp on his lady-centric life is starting to slip, especially when the intelligent, charismatic Ted Hughes ends up being the man Binhammer's wife Sarah had a short affair with. Meanwhile, two bright, polar-opposite students--Dixie Doyle and Liz Warren--navigate their last year of high school, work out their admiration and devotion to the two male teachers, and learn a lot about themselves and each other.

I loved Gaylord's characterization of everyone in this novel--I truly loved all of it. There is not one character who did not provoke sympathy, empathy, or insight and by reading this novel you can tell Gaylord has such an intense relationship with his characters. He knows them so well and he wants us to know and love them too. In another novel by a different writer, Binhammer could have been this really gross, jaded, cynical man who craves the attention of women and has all these rivalries with men because he is looking for fulfillment in life, but this novel is so far from cynical and jaded. There is just so much *life* in every character, so much potential, and even as Binhammer feels jealousy and betrayal and anger, we never get the feeling that his life is taking a downward turn.

My favorite chapter was the one where Binhammer and Ted Hughes, taking a short trip to another school on assignment, meet a young woman named Dora who they befriend and walk around town with before letting her crash at their hotel with them. I've never read a book scene like this before--there is usually so much heavy, palpable male-female tension, the smell of rivalry or alpha-male emotions, the hint of after-school special "two men one girl DANGER DANGER" alarm bells, but this scene was so damn *unique* and well-written and we learn so much about these two men in this short scene. Binhammer could just be an every-man Decent Guy who gets shit on by life and Ted Hughes could just be this slightly-odd Manic Pixie Dream Guy, but we never feel like that, even with the thick homoerotic tension between them that makes us believe a Fuck or Fight scene is coming up. They are two guys cut from the same cloth, navigating the same world, and by the end of the novel, we realize it was a race the whole time, and the book ends with no real winner.

It took me until the end to realize this, but what Gaylord has done is written two real characters, not archetypes. It also made me realize how many books nowadays rely on two-dimensional characterizations that leave me cold.

And I haven't even started on the girls yet. I applaud Gaylord for the way he writes teenage girls, because a long line of poorly-written YA novels show that oftentimes not even young female authors are able to write believable young women. Dixie and Liz are so realistic as 18-year-old girls that it makes me smile to even think of them--confident and self-conscious in alternating bursts, flitting in and out of fads ranging from speaking French to renting foreign films, having hobbies and talents and goals outside of men and boys, having *personality*, having *agency*, feeling sure of who they are as people even when they aren't sure what their futures will hold. Young girls making choices for *themselves*. Teenage girls are pretty much the #1 target audience for consumerism in America, yet they are shit on constantly. But this novel doesn't abide by that. Teenage girls are deep, multi-dimensional characters, just as real and interesting as Binhammer and Ted Hughes. I kept expecting to feel a slimy, *Lolita*-like victimization of the two girls by the men, but that was so far from happening, because Gaylord realizes that teenage girls are not innocent little kittens who are unaware of the world around them. They may be even more cynical than their older counterparts, something I loved about this book.

This book left me pensive, satisfied, smiling, and very surprised. I have a feeling *Hummingbirds* is my summer Dark Horse read, similar to last summer's *The Good People of New York*. I wasn't even expecting a walk in the park and I got a damn parade. Also, if possible, invest in the Harper Perennial P.S. copy of this novel, because there are some great little extras in the back--interviews with Gaylord, a novel soundtrack, and a recommended reading list.

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### **Tara says**

Zzzzzzzzzzzzzzz. Overly crafted, pretentious, writerly writing. I suppose I'm not "Liz Warren" enough to get it. Honestly, from the character names to the neurotic main character...what was there to like? Everything in this book took forever and yet...*nothing happened*. Some characters seemed to be forgotten by the end. I couldn't care about anyone, even when I wanted to.

I can just see this book forced upon an English class somewhere, as the only people I think would like it are sadistic English teachers who will love the tendrilly organic writing which lumbers along like some mechanical bovine in the hallways of girlflesh.

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### **snowplum says**

I think JG is a better writer than this is a book, and I would recommend it to someone who can enjoy a book for its prose even if they aren't really enthusiastic about the characters or plot. I do think it works well as a character study of a man who is dealing with growing up (as an adult), identity and jealousy -- but the circumstances are a bit contrived and it's never a total delight to read a book with no character you can just outright love. Not a strong recommendation, but I'd borrow it or buy it at a sale price and give it a try if you can sympathize with a rather neurotic and intelligent 30-something main character and if you generally care more about prose than plot.

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### **Elena says**

- 1.) Horribly poetic. Too many metaphors.
- 2.) Each chapter started without any indication as to who was speaking, thinking, observing, etc.
- 3.) As a teacher, I was very uncomfortable with the parts of the book that implied teachers are attracted to their students.
- 4.) Constantly predictable. You know exactly what's going to happen way before it happens. Makes for a very boring read.

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