



The Used World

Haven Kimmel

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It was mid-December in Jonah, Indiana, a place where Fate can be decided by the weather, and a storm was gathering overhead.

So Haven Kimmel, bestselling author of *A Girl Named Zippy*, prepares us to enter *The Used World* -- a world where big hearts are frequently broken and sometimes repaired; where the newfangled and the old-fashioned battle it out in daily encounters both large and small; where wondrous things unfold just beneath the surface of everyday life; and where the weather is certainly biblical and might just be prophetic.

Hazel Hunnicutt's Used World Emporium is a sprawling antique store that is "the station at the end of the line for objects that sometimes appeared tricked into visiting there." Hazel, the proprietor, is in her sixties, and it's a toss-up as to whether she's more attached to her mother or her cats. She's also increasingly attached to her two employees: Claudia Modjeski -- freakishly tall, forty-odd years old -- who might finally be undone by the extreme loneliness that's dogged her all of her life; and Rebekah Shook, pushing thirty, still living in her fervently religious father's home, and carrying the child of the man who recently broke her heart. The three women struggle -- separately and together, through relationships, religion, and work -- to find their place in this world. And it turns out that they are bound to each other not only by the past but also by the future, as not one but two babies enter their lives, turning their formerly used world brand-new again.

Astonishing for what it reveals about the human capacity for both grace and mischief, *The Used World* forms a loose trilogy with Kimmel's two previous novels, *The Solace of Leaving Early* and *Something Rising (Light and Swift)*. This is a book about all of America by way of a single midwestern town called Jonah, and the actual breathing histories going on as Indiana's stark landscape is transformed by dying small-town centers and proliferating big-box stores and SUVs. It's about generations of deception, anguish, and love, and the idiosyncratic ways spirituality plays out in individual lives. By turns wise and hilarious, tender and fierce, heartrending and inspiring, *The Used World* charts the many meanings of the place we call home.

The Used World Details

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From Reader Review The Used World for online ebook

Julie says

Most of the time I was reading this it bordered on two or three stars, but now that I'm finished I just can't give it more than one. I just didn't like it. I tried to like it. I tried to get into it. I just couldn't. I was disappointed. I love the other books by Kimmel that I've read, *A Girl Named Zippy and She Got Up Off the Couch*. These are laugh-out-loud great reads that I'd recommend to everyone.

*I don't feel like all books need to be wrapped up in a nice, neat package by the end, but *A Used World* left me feeling a bit disconnect by the last chapter. I felt like there was too much of the story that didn't get told and I didn't really like any of the characters by the ending. I felt like Kimmel was trying to hard to make some social statements and forgot to write a good story.*

I'm sad that I didn't like it more.

Rebecca says

I bought this audiobook because I like Haven Kimmel so much, and I'd just reread *The Solace of Leaving Early*. Listening to it over the course of two weeks was a little tricky, since Kimmel's structure is convoluted: flashbacks, dream sequences--I'm sure in the book some were even in my much-despised italics!--and antecedent-free discussions about "him" or "her" plus the usual and much-in-vogue varied narrator approach. However, the story is Kimmel's usual blend of funny one-liners, straight-on grappling with the dark corners of human nature, and subtle inclusion of plotlines from other books, topped off with a strong helping of belief in human goodness and resiliency.

If I were Kimmel's editor, though, here would be my advice: 1. Don't use CJ Tritt as a narrator. Kimmel is a dry, understated writer, and Tritt's over-the-top delivery is grating. If I'd known she narrated, I'd've chosen the print edition. 2. Pare down some of those Hazel dream sequences. Yikes. How weird were they? The woo-woo astrology crap clouds the focus of the story, and the dreams don't help. 3. Give Amos, the one good man in the book, something to do. That might counteract the fact that all the other men are weak and annoying, or strong and downright terrifying.

I guess I'd also like to reread the book in print. It's a mixed bag as an audio experience, but it has kept Haven Kimmel's reputation as an interesting and rewarding writer intact. I'm curious what she'll come up with next!

Bucket says

The Used World is as much about plot as it is about character development, but the characters suffer only a little for it.

Kimmel reminds me of Marilynne Robinson, especially with her focus on religious struggles her characters face, but Robinson is better. For my taste, Kimmel seems to leave the big ideas she delves into (religion, homosexuality, how we view others) hanging, in order to focus on the big climactic moment in the plot.

Don't get me wrong, the climax is well done and exciting, but it's not haunting or thought-provoking the way a continued view of the characters' internal struggles could be.

The theme that was particularly fascinating, despite its incomplete handling, was the idea that who we see other people as or who we want them to be isn't who they are. I liked the phrasing the characters used: that the Rebekah Claudia sees is just "a story that Claudia is telling about Rebekah," for example. Ultimately, Hazel is the one telling the story about everyone else in the novel and, despite her misgivings toward the end, I think that she ultimately succeeds. The story she is telling about Rebekah and Claudia does become them. This is interesting, and confirms Hazel's hope (and fear) that she holds a lot of power. However, I think Kimmel intended to show how people differ so dramatically inside from how we see them, and this intention is lost in order to allow for a satisfying ending as far as the plot.

Themes: women, family, love, support, religion, homosexuality, mysticism, the past, loneliness, how we perceive others

Claire says

Haven Kimmel is my girl.

This book was astonishing. The mysteries of these women's lives sort of weave in and out of each other so all these different stories pop up and you see, at the end, how they're all connected. Beautiful, beautiful writing. It's not laugh-out-loud funny like "A Girl Named Zippy" or "She Got Up Off the Couch," but there's plenty of wit and quirky character development. The story is so moving and poignant, and the characters are so human that I would recommend this book to anyone who liked her other two novels and the way they explore people's real lives, with all their past baggage and trauma and fears and weaknesses, in a generous and sympathetic way. This book made feel like Haven Kimmel just really loves people. I totally want to be her best friend.

Jennifer says

To me, reading this book was a little like taking a risk, simply because I love Kimmel's Zippy memoirs and feared that this might lead to disappointment. Turns out it was, in fact, a huge departure from Zippy, but I loved it anyway.

There are some fantastic observations (I loved the part about women plucking their eyebrows until looking like they were in a permanent state of shock), and a plot as eclectic as The Used World Emporium, where the three female characters work. Past and present weave in and out, which can be admittedly frustrating to follow, but eventually pays off. There is a sumptuous twist towards the end that made me yell, "Ah ha!" at the book.

That said, you have to suspend reality a bit to enjoy the story, and I did some skimming when the prose takes off into a theology lesson. There are still a few parts that I didn't ENTIRELY understand, but that didn't injure my appreciation of the book. Now I'm all the more anxious to read the other two books in this "loose" trilogy.

cat says

i am so excited for this book...haven kimmel read an amazing passage yesterday about the hurt one of the character's experiences in being shunned by her faith community, and how that allows her to experience anew all the memories, good and bad, of that community. it was incredible - everyone was totally silent the whole time...

[edited to add]

I finished this book a week ago and it completely changed my dreams. I had dreams about these characters, about the many intersecting plotlines, and the many challenges they face. That's how real Haven Kimmel makes them - you can utterly believe that they lived on after the end of the book, learning from their mistakes and making their lives better. It's a beautiful and tragic story, but ultimately spiritually uplifting...

Heather says

There's "hitting too close to home" and then there's "hitting your house with a missile." With Kimmel, this time, it was like fucking nuclear proliferation.

"What *do* you love?" Finney asked, still looking ahead.

I love -- Hazel thought - -your parents' farm and the tone of the voice you use with animals. I love that you have stolen your father's cardigan and made it look like the most feminine sweater in the world. I love the way your curls hang against your neck, and how you are the one true thing I have ever known, and how if I were captured by pirates and didn't see you for a hundred years I'd still recognize any part of you, even an elbow. "I love Johnny Cash. I love the music from the war and before the war. I love *The Steve Allen Show* and the smell of kid leather in my mother's car. Oh, and toasted marshmallows."

"That's a lot."

Lisa Weber says

I had a hard time with this book. I almost decided to quit several times out of frustration, but I found there were some parts that really touched me. For the record, this is my first Kimmel book, and might be the last, except that so many here value her work so highly. I listened to this on audio, and mostly thought the narration too cutesy and cheery for the text, although she lent Rebekah an appropriate sense of innocence. The time frames were confusing and sometimes hard to follow, the multiple points of view were sometimes hard to follow as well. I found the overly-flowery writing annoying in the extreme most of the time, I didn't

always care about the sound, smell, and sense of every tiny scene. Conversely, sometimes it was perfect. The constant digressions into religious philosophy made the book seem a bit like a soap box for the author's concepts, and although I don't disagree, I didn't want to hear all of that in the middle of a story most of the time. It didn't usually enlighten me as to who the characters were. The most annoying features for me were Hazel's weird dream interludes, and her blatant manipulation of her friends. Her personality and "voice" as a young woman are distinctly different from that as an older woman, and except for the name, I would never have realized the two characters were the same. That was immensely unsettling. Through the whole book, Hazel never mentioned hating her father, or the relationship between her father and mother, which turned out to be important. Vernon's personality also seemed completely out of keeping with certain of his actions as well, which left me very confused. The end of the book bugged me completely, I still don't know what happened with the baby at the end, how Hazel ended up in a relationship with Ruth, why she never told Rebekah..... A very confusing and unsatisfying ending. I also still can't figure out exactly who's gay and who's straight, and while I know that lines aren't always clear, there was enough attention paid to the issue that I would have appreciated a better understanding of what was going on. From the outset, I found that the story had a dreamy and annoying drifting quality, as though it couldn't pin itself down, and I almost didn't bother continuing. With all of the frustrations I still found enough moments of beautifully written and sometimes startling truth and clarity that I can understand Kimmel's following from that perspective. It really left me not knowing how to rate it, a 2 was sort of arbitrary. For the first time in a long time, I found I wanted to come to Goodreads to hear other opinions and try to understand this book from another perspective. And it does help shed a little light, thanks all!

Regulator says

I imagine books are all like old wardrobes, or the newer invention, closets. The front cover is a door behind which we never know what exactly we'll find. In her latest novel (new in paperback!) Haven Kimmel delves into the hidden lives of three women living in Jonah, Indiana. These women all work at the Used World Emporium. As the Christmas season ramps up their lives become entangled in ways none would guess. Haven Kimmel writes beautifully of people living 'normal' lives who are going through periods of transition wherein they must open doors behind which the past and future stories of their lives await them. After reading Haven I am always left wishing for more time spent getting to know her protagonists. The Used World completes Haven's loose trilogy of Hopwood County, Indiana. The first two installments are The Solace of Leaving Early and Something Rising. All are achingly beautiful investigations of lives everyone can recognize, and after reading no one will forget.

----Recommended by David Felton

Bethany says

I am a fan of Haven Kimmel's, and was excited to read her latest novel *The Used World*. It follows several women who live in a smallish Midwestern town, chronicling their adventures (or lack thereof) while showing them coming to terms with who they are. The imagery here is - as always with Kimmel - beautiful; every word is necessary, which is all too rare in books these days.

If you haven't read any of Kimmel's fiction, I would recommend *Something Rising Light and Swift* to give you a sense of what you're getting into before you start *The Used World*. Her non-fiction and fiction are both

incredibly well-written, but are very different from each other. If you like her fiction, you won't be disappointed here.

Laurel-Rain says

Almost immediately, I became totally immersed in the “used world” of the primary characters, all of whom are part of an antiques emporium in this small Indiana town. We have the owner, Hazel Hunnicutt, whose own history is presented to us in flashbacks; her voice is revealed through descriptions of her life – her parents, who are deceased, and her sister, whose drug abuse has complicated Hazel’s life, provide the backdrop for her choices – and now, her employees at the emporium assume the role of family for her.

Claudia, a large woman who is often mistaken for a man, has lived a loveless existence, but then an unexpected blessing arrives in the form of an infant – a new life that she takes responsibility for – and when she adds Rebekah to the mix, she has a family of her own.

Rebekah, abandoned and cast out by her father, a fundamentalist Christian who expects her to abide by his rules and restrictions, accepts the love and support of Claudia – and later Hazel – in order to create an acceptable alternative to the life in which she was born.

These three characters could be metaphors for the “used” goods that they sell in the store – castoff individuals – unwanted, but serving a purpose of their own.

The three women, who support one another, serve as a balm for the ills of the world in which they live.

Tamara says

Did not love this book. Sad, since I have loved every other Haven Kimmel book until now.

It's not that it wasn't well written. But it was written like a disorienting dream, which is not my favorite style. I like to have at least a smidgen of an idea of what is being referred to in long prose.

Having said that, there were times when the clouds cleared and the poetic nature of the author shone through. And you do have to appreciate a book in which the women are ordinary heroes.

Favorite quotes:

"Finney blinked, her eyelashes damp with tears, and Hazel could see Finney was happy to be so sad, because he had made her sad, he had sent her away. In turning his back to her, he had told her something intimate and they hated it now, and the most Hazel could wish for was to witness it."

"You have somehow come to believe that there's such a thing as 'love,' such a thing as a *feeling* that is also a priori truth, rather than an invention by the courtly poets. And you've got movies and music and books

confirming for you that romantic 'love' is the highest good and it's what everyone is seeking and should be seeking. But it's a meager justification for what you've traded your life for. If there is any such thing as that sort of love, as opposed to the perfectly obvious and real love between parents and children, between friends, this ain't it, Finn, and you damn well know it."

"Whose idea was this, anyway? Who would think that the best way to propagate the species would be to grow a new one inside a used one? She imagined a white-coated scientist in a laboratory saying to another, 'Yeah, yeah- that's a good idea. Let's put it in...what part isn't doing anything else? And it'll be too big to get out? Perfect."

Lulu says

The recommendation on the book jacket from Jacquelyn Mitchard, starts, "No one can evoke a universe with a safety pin holding up its hem in the way Haven Kimmel can. In her third novel, she tells a story of an eccentric collective of women with the majesty of a parable and the poignancy of a country song."

(I can't even write a jacket blurb like that, much less hope to ever be an author. :))

I loved this book. I admit that Haven Kimmel is one of my favorite authors, and that every single time I walk in the bookstore I head to the fiction shelves in the hope that she has somehow written a book a week. And I also admit that some of the coincidences in the book gave me a slight twinge.

But I am a character addict - I love to understand the inhabitants of a book as much as I adore witty dialogue, and to my mind, no one puts the reader in the heads of her people like Kimmel.

As one of the characters - Hazel - states, "Do you know that our lives don't exist, really- or, that's not exactly right, we exist but only as a story and we are the ones who tell it?.....telling the story of your life requires will, and openness, and very often Nature overwhelms our narrative with a narrative of her own." Kimmel allows us to see her characters as they are, even if they find different levels of will and openness to do so.

Beth says

I hate it when people who are really smart (and know they're smart) write a fiction book. I am well educated (i.e. perfectly capable of using big words) and I wanted to gouge my eyes out due to the RIDICULOUS amount of large words and complex sentences in this book. It just seemed like the author wanted to use EVERY SINGLE SAT word she ever learned in the course of one sentence.

The plot is long and drawn out, complicated, and overly difficult. I THINK you are supposed to feel sorry for these characters due to their personal struggles, but it was more of a pitying sympathy than anything. Don't waste your time or your energy on this one....

Marvin says

Another miraculous book by Kimmel. Again set in east central Indiana (probably Muncie), this is the story of 3 misfit women with pasts that haunt them. Like Kimmel's other books, it takes religion very seriously, with

a Church of the Brethren pastor of a very small congregation (about 30 attend worship) who quotes Stanley Hauerwas & Martin Buber in his sermons. (It's the same pastor who was the one of the two main characters in *The Solace of Leaving Early*.) But it takes on other big issues, too: abortion, gay assimilation, etc. It gets off to a slow start, & all the men except for the aforementioned pastor are jerks or worse, but once you get involved in the lives of these women--and Kimmel is a master of characterization--the novel is heart-rending.
