

## Blue Like Jazz

Donald Miller

### Review by Hansen Wendlandt

Pop sensations in Christian spiritual literature rank just above overflowing toilets on my list of desirability... Considering further that the editor of *Blue Like Jazz* includes on its back cover stock phrases like “relevant in a postmodern culture”, “a genuine encounter with a God who is real”, and—pass me the plunger—“a fresh and original perspective on life, love and redemption”, it is amazing that a vague acquaintance could convince me to pick up this book. Talk about learning my lesson!

#### My biggest surprise

You can read novels with better stories or essays with more profound messages, but there is not much writing out there today, Christian or otherwise, more clever than *Blue Like Jazz*! Imagine the levity of Douglas Adams, paired with HL Mencken’s biting cultural commentary, and put to a faithful agenda in the style of Anne Lamont’s charming personal narrative. At his best, Donald Miller is a storyteller with a voice of JD Salinger, especially in the brilliant, stunting inner monologues of a character (himself) with whom we dread to associate, because we share such immature habits, yet somehow we love, because he stumbles into the simplest truths we long to embody. At his worst, a paragraph or two can limp into an all-too-straightforward “infomercial for God” (97), but even in those rare moments, this is preferable to just about anything you see people read on airplanes.

What makes *Blue Like Jazz* such a literary masterwork is that few writers—again, those with religious or “nonreligious thoughts on Christian spirituality”—capture our attention so skillfully in diverse ways. Plenty of authors might connect us more emotionally to characters, or paint more vivid images, or inspire our excitement. But Miller’s rare gift is being able to choose just the right word, craft realistic, powerful dialogue, clarify with catchy, clear sentences, prepare and present ideas sharply and boldly, *and* shape short, meaningful stories. An unexpected homage to these different literary locales, my copy is as filled with marginalia of all shapes and intent, as any book on my shelves. Prior to any comment to the content, I would offer that the writing here is unsurpassed in modern Christian literature.

#### The second surprise

Instead of preachy aphorisms and kitsch self-help, Miller really does offer the ‘relevant’ and ‘genuine’ thoughts on faith in the modern world that the back cover peddles. His message is consistently this: that addiction to self is *the* impediment to our relationship with God. For him personally, that plays out in strained relationships, a self-centered distrust of the world, and a stubborn resistance to abandon childish images of religion. For us, we might judge one another, or live selfishly ignorant of our indirect influences on neighbors near and far, or transfer our egoism to all sorts of more tangible addictions. Whatever the symptom, the cure is to turn ourselves over God, to recognize how deeply infused with spirituality are our most mundane experiences.

In a coarse but apt phrase, Miller’s advice is to be “willing to own your own crap” (53). Somehow, he can say that with a pastoral patience unusual in Christian writing, by sharing such personal stories as radical public confessions and ridiculous summer camp pride. Then he can challenge the way our beliefs about salvation often lead us to be “too proud to receive free grace” (83), and implore us to a deeper penitence than using church simply to “hose things down” (8). Much as jazz resists a certain stiff

prescription, Miller's enduring message of Christian spirituality is that "Self-discipline will never make us feel righteous or clean; accepting God's love will." (86)

Most of *Blue Like Jazz* reads from a the perspective of a rogue critic of faith, the sort of author who can title a chapter "Faith: Penguin Sex", the sort of critic who can blame the devil for trying "so hard to get Christians to be religious" (13). The last third shifts, however, to something slightly more like establishment Christianity. Perhaps this allows, on one hand, secular liberals to find an ally and reason to soften their stance against faith, while on the other hand, inviting the reasonable right to question their unfazed certainty in parroted religion. Perhaps because his audience is so broad, Miller does not confront us, as a Rob Bell, for instance. But if you have ever been disillusioned by formulaic church-iness or put off by the hypocrisy of Big Religion, there is an unmistakable call to action here, one that promises to offer all that the back cover promises, "a fresh and original perspective on life, love and redemption."