



A first look at Jayber Crow

by

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Wendell Berry's new novel, *JAYBER CROW*, is an observant and agreeably rough-hewn book that relates the life story of a young man who abandons his plans to become a minister and becomes the town barber instead. Like so much of Berry's fiction — he has also written many volumes of poetry and acerbic social commentary — “Jayber Crow” is set in the fictional small town of Port William, Ky. We suffer with Jayber as he watches the object of his affections, a young woman named Mattie, marry her high school sweetheart, Troy Chatham. Troy exploits her father's land and betrays her. Mattie's marriage to Troy becomes a metaphor for the dying prosperity of small southern towns like Port William, and for the withering of family ties. But as Jayber, a bachelor who is losing his hair, narrates his own tale of unrequited love, he reflects upon the stories he hears as he's giving a shave or a haircut — and he is somehow buoyed. “The world doesn't stop because you are in love or in mourning or in need of time to think,” he says. “And so when I have thought I was in my story or in charge of it, I really have been only on the edge of it, carried along.” The novel's digressive structure makes for a slow start, but by the end this melancholy barber has won both our attention and our hearts.

NOTICE

Persons attempting to find a “text” in this book will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a “subtext” in it will be banished; persons attempting to explain, interpret, explicate, analyze, deconstruct, or otherwise “understand” it will be exiled to a desert island in the company only of other explainers.

BY ORDER OF THE AUTHOR (p. ix)

Please join me on this island!

--- **HERE WE GO** ---

"I am an old man now and oftentimes I whisper to myself. I have heard myself whispering things that I didn't know I had ever thought. 'Forty years' or 'Fifty years' or 'sixty years,' I hear myself whispering. My life lengthens. History grows shorter...I have in my mind word-of-mouth memories more than a hundred years old"¹ (p. 352).

Dedication

Of course this is dedicated to my barber Gene Hartman! He and I are about the same age and when he opened the Campus Barber Shop one block off of North Texas State he kept a list of the guys that showed up the first day for a haircut. I had forgotten but a few years ago on an anniversary year he slipped the list to me and sure enough I was about number seven for a haircut that day. We have had more than one discussion about life, kids, families, and Oklahoma vs. Notre Dame Football. He always said "May the best team win!"

To show how close we are his daughter Jeanna and my youngest daughter Lisa went to high school together. Jeanna is God-mother to Lisa's two children and we had the honor of her giving the eulogy for my wife Jeanne in 2014.

Over time the stories in Gene's barber shop have been like the stories Jayber talks about in his book. We have shared our tears with what has been given us but we both say thanks for the light we have seen and shared for over these forty years.

I was sitting in his barber chair one day a long time ago and commented to Gene: "You know, I am a little uncomfortable in this chair while my gun is over there with my coat. Would you mind - just in case I needed it - if I just keep my Kimber in my lap under your barber cape? He said, "That is a good idea. If something happens I can just hide behind you in the chair and you can blast away!"

I will say I am proud Gene didn't have the issue of "stopping now and then to let fly a streak of amber at a spittoon under the backbar" (p. 64).

Not far from Port William

A long time ago I moved my family where it "was a right smart ways" from where Jayber lived. They used some of the same words like "feesh" for fish...maybe this is a good reason to discuss and re-read this book? Course, I will never get to the bottom or match his whit – no way...and won't even try. Will just read and bask in his light...Actually "I really feel like a worm in an apple."

¹ Wendell Berry (2000). *Jayber Crow*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint.

Why read this book?

“I’d had the idea, once, that if I could get the chance before I died I would read all the good books there were” (p. 47), and so when this book came along I added it to my list of must read books. First time through I marked and highlighted it like I have done all my books noting:

- a. This guy really does know how to put a sentence together!
- b. Berry drags us through life with his birth, struggle, and death – as a barber, grave digger, and church janitor.
- c. Jayber decided **with his 11 questions** about “the call” and “Ole Grit” freed him up (pp. 50-54).

Try as I might – perhaps like you too – going back and forth over the pages looking for that word, that sentence, that paragraph, that carries the weight of clever thought that could cement the lucidity of the quarry and thrust of this paper...but ends up asking

“How long will it take?” (p. 54).

And the answer is the same:

“As long as you live.”

“That could be a long time.”

- d. The trees, the forest, and bull dozers.
- e. Answering a phone. What phone? I don’t have a phone!
- f. And Mattie...
- g. How is a barber shop like a cancer treatment center?

This book was suggested to me by a dear friend who has had cancer and suggested reading or listening to Jayber Crow, driving back and forth for my treatments. She said it would not be a waste of time and would contribute to some joy, repair, and healing.

Seeing some of the parallels about life, light, love, and death, darkness, and dependence I have shared the book with Kelly and Lisa, friends, my Rifle Brigade, and the staff/therapists at the Texas Center for Proton Therapy (they will surely see the connection of barber and therapist).

The sharing has been just short of phenomenal; indeed, the greetings with “I am on page xx!” “I just started Part III!” “Helluva book!” – and on it goes.

So the reason(s) for sharing the book lets us contribute to a story, struggle, and sacrifice about who we are, what we read, what we do as people, and wonder – I mean really wonder – about ole Jayber and Mattie. Is this what the book is about? ***If so, again, join me on the island!***

The fuse is lit

Did you see: “This book is a work of fiction. *Nothing is in it that has not been imagined.*”
Do you believe this?

Pithy (first half) sayings by ole Jayber Crow (who will add the second half sayings?)

“He’s got little enough sense to think he’s smart” (p. 21).

“It is another of those moments long past that is as present to my mind as if it is still happening” (p. 26).

“I don’t think I had even begun to have an idea where I was going, but wherever it was, that was where I want to go” (p. 76).

“It started some things that kept happening, and continued some things that were already happening and that went on happening afterward” (p. 119).

“You could no more have kept that quiet than you could have prevented thunder from following lightning” (P. 119).

“She always went by without looking at me, her head tilted to indicate not that she did not see me but that she had *already* seen me, and once was enough” (p. 123).

*** **“Things went to the grave with them that will never be known again”** (p. 127).

“...I was a young man. I hardly knew what I knew, let alone what I was going to learn” (p. 129).

“Often I have not known where I was going until I was already there” (p. 133).

“You can sometimes tell more by a man’s silence and the set of his head than by what he says” (p. 137).

“The mercy of the world is you don’t know what’s going to happen” (p. 149).

“Like certain women I had encountered out in the great world, it would not be available unless paid” (p. 167).

“Her hearing was as sharp as Miss Sigurnia’s was dull. Aunt Beulah could hear the dust motes collide in a sunbeam; she could hear spiders chewing on flies” (p. 173).

*** **“The best equipment he’s got is his wife”** (p. 189).

“Burley came on in. ‘I need to get my hair cut bad,’ he said. And I said, glad of a reason to grin, ‘Well, that’s the way I cut it’” (p. 195).

*** **“Why can the world not permit two lovers (any two) a moment of escape, free of all its claims, to be in love, just the two together, each the other’s all?”** (p. 197).

Theme - LIGHT and great TREES

Jayber brings out the sight, smells, and significance of the light and great trees. From seeing them float down The River, sleeping under them, and meeting Mattie amongst them, to seeing the destruction by Troy and his machines bulldoze them down.

I was moved reading how the highways were ripped through Port William. The ole super slab I-35 was built just west of Ardmore but did not really rip up the community. The old 77 Highway we used to use going to Oklahoma-Texas football games is just west of my house now and has become an untraveled road. Today, the trip to the Proton Center is four stop signs, a traffic light, four (and five) lanes, and an overhead toll road making the journey in just minutes maneuvering mightily to keep from being run over by the passing automobiles and 18-wheelers.

Lisa and I have an ole man in our cancer tree shown below with the LIGHT shining down as the leaves fall from the trees this November. At least we do not have a road(s) cutting through my forest but I will tell you, when this big ole tree decides to go, I too will leave.



Mattie, Jayber, me, and you...

“But I saw Mattie Keith then, and after that I would be aware of her. Seeing her as she was then, I might have seen (had I thought to look) the woman she was to be. Or is it because I knew the woman that I see her now so clearly as a child?

She was a pretty girl, and I was moved by her prettiness. Her hair was brown at the verge of red, and curly. Her face was still a little freckled. But it was her eyes that most impressed me” (pp. 9-10).

“...I was aware of her. She would have been only fourteen years old, and I had no extraordinary affection for her in those days. But anybody who saw her then, I think, would have seen that she was a standout – a neat, bright, pretty clear-spirited girl with all her feeling right there in her eyes – and would have hoped, as most of us do for things that are young and fine, that the world would treat her kindly” (p. 134).

Wait!

This is not a book review. I have to remind myself we are talking about being on an desert island and deconstructing ole Jayber Crow. The NYT book review said “The world doesn’t stop because you are in love or in mourning or in need of time to think.” We are speaking metaphorically (well, Berry is) and Jayber is breaking our hearts with his maybe weird way with Mattie.

We read with tears how Mattie handled her five year old girl who said “Momma...Look how beautiful I am!...and saw Liddie in the air like a tossed doll...beautiful indeed with the asters all awry in her hair, and small, and without life” (p. 199).

They met in the forest – by random chance – and Jayber helped Mattie bail Jimmy out of jail. I won’t even get into Troy. We all know about him from “Why, you impudent son of a bitch!” (p. 138) to “how I could nick his throat with the razor and make it look like an accident” (p. 342).

For drill go back and read page 351 where Jayber dreams he was Mattie Chatham “the bones took life and flesh” and ask “Is this book about Heaven?” Maybe we need more time in the desert. Maybe not. What we need is to look at the end and see (maybe) what the meaning of the last paragraph is.

First, for amusement and closure, look at how Berry leads, uses, and ends his book with the word ‘light.’ Did you see this while reading the book? “...which passed over the years like a moving beam² of light” (first paragraph) to:

Then, in the loss of all the world, when I might have said the words I had so long wanted to say, I could not say them. I saw that I was not going to be able to talk without crying, and so I cried. I said, “*But what about this other thing?*”

She looked at me then. “Yes,” she said. She held out her hand to me.

She gave me the smile that I had never seen and will not see again in this world, and it covered me all over with light (p. 363).

[Some of us will end this reading here and go on. This is fine but there is more than one ending...]

² Of course, those of us at the Texas Therapy Center can correlate this maybe as proton BEAM...

“...this other thing...’Yes’...covered me all over with light”

Remember we are standing on an island in the desert banished by the author for trying to explicate and deconstruct the ‘text’ or even the’ subtext.” We are prosecuted and banished! The word to finish this short paper has to do with **“Grace.”** As we say on my Brigade range “Watch this!”

On page 4 I listed:

c. Jayber decided **with his 11 questions** about “the call” and “Ole Grit” freed him up (pp. 50-54).

What this means is Jayber had spent some of his time in the struggle to find out about the issues of God, prayer, the abyss between him and God, suffering, “thy will be done,” three days in the belly of the great fish, and life itself. Jayber said “I knew a lot of hearsay about God speaking to people in plain English, but He never had (He never has) spoken so to me” (p. 52).

This is the set up for all of us – has to be us or we would not have struggled through this book. One has to have struggled in life to understand when life smacks us in the face, there are answers. What I am saying is we cannot go to the punch line of the book and get it - or understand it - unless you have knocked down some trees, cut some hair, picked some white-petaled asters, or perhaps buried someone you have loved. You cannot get there from here without talking about the issue of dried bones coming to life...

Jayber cried.

He had given up³.

Then he was told his life, regardless of what he had done, was approved.

He was loved.

He was accepted.

He heard the Word

– finally, the Lord God of light, life, and love said to him: **“YES”**

³ The sentiment for being accepted is from this essay by Paul Tillich:

<http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/383693/9154847/1288214160857/You+Are+Accepted.pdf?token=mmJyuzBDmlbCfQtBymnnJTAQ1EI%3D>

The grace for Jayber’s **YES** is found in paragraph (12): See Addendum on next page.

Addendum

15 For if we accept without grace, we do so in the state of separation, and can only succeed in deepening the separation. 16 We cannot transform our lives, unless we allow them to be transformed by that stroke of grace.

17 It happens; or it does not happen.

18 And certainly it does not happen if we try to force it upon ourselves, just as it shall not happen so long as we think, in our self-complacency, that we have no need of it.

19 Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness.

20 It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life.

21 It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged.

22 It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us.

23 It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage.

24 Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted."

25 You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know.

26 Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later.

27 Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much.

28 Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything.

29 Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!"

My epiphany - and at the same time a Johannine moment

It happened last evening as I had paused to take a break with this paper. I was still pondering what Sara and I had talked about with the final paragraph. We both asked about "this other thing" I told her I would have to study it because up to then I still did not know what Jayber was asking.

I was paused thinking, asking about what the heck he was asking. Had my bright reading lamp over my head and I was just playing and fiddling with my wedding ring now on my right hand. It is silver with three small diamonds in it that Jeanne picked out for me for 12 June 1960. It is actually a pretty ring as each one of the diamonds has a very flat but small facing on each top.

For two years I have been asking about his question and now it was really bothering me. How am I going to answer this with "Well, I guess we will need to spend more time in the desert and maybe it will come to you!" And then it happened. YES, was his freedom. YES, was his answer to his life. YES was his approval. The YES was finding Jesus! --- and then Tillich's YES, "simply accept the fact."

I looked down at my fiddling ring and a reflection of light from my lamp bounced off one of the stones. I was struck with the beam. I was astonished. I moved it just a bit again to replay the light and it flashed again off of either the same stone or another. I said to myself this is approval! – it has to be approval. She knows! She says **YES!**

This was the first time in 57 years I have seen this reflection of light from my ring.