



## Book Review

### *You Only Get Letters from Jail*

Fiction

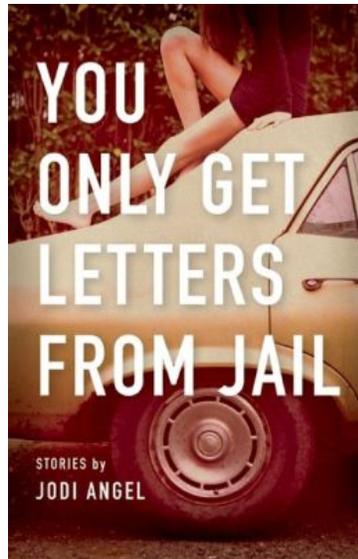
By Jodi Angel

Reviewed By Jane Rose Porter

Tin House Books (2013)

288 pages

\$14.95

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Jodi Angel's characters cannot be saved. They cannot get laid. They cannot buy a drink at a bar legally. Instead, they can get in their borrowed or broken-down cars and try to run away, which is what most of the protagonists in Angel's newest collection of stories, *You Only Get Letters From Jail*, do—but they never quite escape.

The first-person narrators of these eleven stories are all teenage boys who collectively have faced every manner of familial dysfunction—from Roy in the opening story "A Good Deuce," estranged from his father and dealing with his mother's suicide, to Robbie in "Field Dressing," who moves in with his Uncle Nick after his mother drinks herself to death with Listerine, only to discover Nick in the woods with his face blown off during a deer hunting expedition.

Each of Angel's narrators teeters on the awkward cusp between adolescence and adulthood—that unsettling period of waiting for your body to break into its adult self. And story after story,

Angel's characters do a lot of waiting. Yet, instead of creating narrative stagnation, this waiting actually holds the collection together and propels the stories forward.

Take, for example, the opening paragraph of "A Good Deuce," which sets the tone for the collection. We enter the story with what seems to be a fairly run-of-the-mill teenage scenario: "I was on my second bag of Doritos and my lips were stained emergency orange when my best friend, Phillip, said he knew a bar in Hallelujah Junction that didn't card and maybe we should go there." In the next sentence, Angel establishes that sense of confinement felt throughout the book by using surprising, unexpected descriptions: "We had been sitting in my living room for eighteen or nineteen hours watching Robert Redford movies, where Redford had gone from square-jawed, muscled, and rugged to looking like a blanched piece of beef jerky, and we had watched it go from dark to light to dark again through the break in the curtains." It's not just the passage of time that Angel captures, but a sense of entrapment, as though that "break in the curtains" is the only access Roy has to the outside world. And then, as happens repeatedly throughout these stories, the remainder of the paragraph takes a sudden and unexpected turn:

The coroner had wheeled my mother out all those hours ago and my Grandma Hannah had

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stalked down the sidewalk with her fists closed and locked at her sides, insisting that a dead body had every right to stay in the house for as long as the family wanted it there. My mother was no longer my mother; she had become Anna Schroeder, the deceased, and my Grandma Hannah had been on the phone, trying to track my father down. The best we had was a number for the pay phone at the Deville Motel, and only one of two things happened when you dialed that number—it either rang and rang into lonely nothing or someone answered and asked if this was Joey and hung up when the answer was no. My grandma called the number twenty-two times and the only thing that changed was the quality of the light, and my mother went out, and Phillip came in, and my sister, Christy, packed her things so she could go, and I did not.

In the span of a single paragraph, Angel builds a world, breaks it down, and rebuilds it anew. Within a single sentence, she syntactically recreates Roy's entrapment—her long rambling sentences leaving the reader gasping for air. Angel knows how to tease tension out of moments of stillness, using visceral descriptions of time, so that it is felt (“Time had turned soft and minutes felt stretched and pulled”), seen (“I lay on my bed and didn't fold the covers back, just waited for the light to come back to the sky and for another day to start”), and heard (“Now the water just dripped onto the bare cement floor so that there was the constant sound of water drops marking time and I could hear them ticking off the seconds...”). And even when nothing actually takes place, her prose is fraught with the tension of expectation met by disappointment: “I wished that it would rain, that clouds would just muscle up and unleash, but the sky was empty, hard blue, and unbroken as the lake in the distance and it was August and rain was nothing more than a dull ache like thoughts of the impending threat of school.”

This “dull ache” runs throughout the collection—a sense of inescapability that comes through both in syntax and setting. As in the above excerpt, lengthy sentences heavily marked with conjunctions hold the reader captive. And the confined spaces in which characters are often placed add to that sense of restriction. In many of these stories, the protagonists are in cars, trying to run away or escape their lives for even a few hours. Yet, in story after story, something gets in their way: storms, dead animals, a stalled battery.

In the final, titular story, “You Only Get Letters From Jail,” the narrator, his brother and friends are in a car that's stalled, waiting with the collective hope that it will somehow magically start again: “Kenny said we would sit there and let the battery charge itself, it would just take a little while, and even though I knew that wasn't true, it sounded good to me.” Read in close succession, the relentless hopelessness of her characters' circumstances runs the risk of becoming repetitive. Yet the varied forms of resignation and rebellion that materialize out of these teenage boys' misfortunes make these stories compelling. And Angel's visceral and surprising descriptions keep the collection fresh throughout. In *You Only Get Letters from Jail*, the characters may get stuck, but Angel's inventive, frank and unexpected prose certainly does not.

**Jane Rose Porter is a 2013 Emerging Writer Fellow with the Center for Fiction in New York. Her writing has appeared in *The Kenyon Review*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *BusinessWeek Magazine*, *Men's Health*, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Her fiction is forthcoming in *Fourteen Hills*. Jane has an MFA from Warren Wilson College and a B.A. from Brown University. She lives in Brooklyn and is completing her first novel.**