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Anne Lamott

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Joe Jones is Anne Lamott's raucous novel of lives gathered around Jessie's Café, "a restaurant from another era, the sort of broken-down waterfront dive one might expect to find in Steinbeck or Saroyan." Jessie, "thin, stooped and gorgeous at seventy-nine," inherited the café years before and it has become home to a remarkable family of characters: Louise, the cook and vortex, "sexy and sweet, somewhere on the cusp between curvaceous and fat"; Joe, devoted and unfaithful; Willie, Jessie's gay grandson, ("I thought he just had good posture," said Jessie); Georgia, an empress dowager who never speaks; and a dozen others all living together in the sweet everyday. Lamott's rich and timeless themes are also here: love and loyalty, loss and recovery, staying on and staying together, the power of humor to heal and to bind.

Joe Jones Details

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Wendy says

After reading Anne Lamott's non-fiction book, *Bird by Bird*, I was interested in trying one of her fiction titles. *Bird by Bird* was funny, irreverent, and very entertaining so I expected some of the same from her other work.

Joe Jones (if you can get past the blah title) is a meandering tale of a man named, you guessed it, *Joe Jones*, and the people in his life. Actually, the book focuses more on his semi-ex girlfriend *Louise*, the cafe she works in, the cafe's geriatric owner *Jessie* and *Jessie's* homosexual grandson *Willie*. Somewhere along the way, someone performed a plot-ectomy on the book as there was just not much going on from start to end. The book could have been 50 pages or 500 pages long and the story line would have been the same.

I struggled to get through the book. Some of the writing is really lovely and the characters are well-developed, I just didn't much care what happened to most of them. I found the eponymous character to be a rather unlikeable self-indulgent, whiney, narcissistic loser. Speaking of whiney, the characters spend a lot of their time whining at each other - "Willie!", *Louise* whined. "Leave me alone *Louise*," *Willie* whined. "Quit whining, all of you!" I whined as I read it. As long as I'm whining, I might as well mention that the ubiquitous partial-word italics really became annoying. I mean, *really*, does *anyone* talk this way *naturally*?

Judy says

I actually read this a few years ago and still think about it fondly. The reason I fell in love with it is that the characters become my friends, and that is rare indeed. I loved all of them and was quite sad when the book was finished and I didn't have them around me anymore. No too cerebral, but still a great read, I highly recommend it.

H says

Anne Lamott has a wonderful and teaching sense of humor. Her grasp of character is amazing and ultra-real. She comes from the cusp of traditional storytelling form while using modern techniques of execution. This is a gently moving novel.

But John Gardner would hate her. She has a knack for colloquialism, but she loses the authorial voice in the process because she's too in love with her language. She distracts from the clarity of the narrative with poetic interjection and wordplay, which would best be restricted to the dialogue. Also, her attempt at Salinger-style italics does NOT work; it just slows everything down and makes people sound sarcastic.

She's a little like Tim Burton, in that Burton's films are best if viewed scene by scene as individual performances. As a whole, this novel is fragmented without a larger vision. She's putting wonderful characters together and seeing how it plays out, but the whole package is loose and full of excess. If some choice changes had been made to chronology, POV, and transitions, this could have been a fantastic novel. Right now, it's mediocre with great moments that tend to be unrelated to one another.

I have a feeling that her nonfiction is really amazing. She has that style, and seems to want to teach more than she wants to portray.

Janelle says

I had to change this from 3 to 4 stars; by the end of the book I was entranced. It starts slow with not much of a plot to move it along. I was hooked by the aura of being a fly on the wall in other lives so different from my own. I was a little put off by the deep CONNECTIONS between the characters with out any BACKGROUND about how they developed into this oddball family of sorts. That is all revealed gradually, but not completely. If you are not a person who develops odd attachments to certain people, this is not the book for you. You won't get it.

If you are still enjoying the meandering story by the time people start to actually do things and make some decisions, you will be gratified by ending. It is not perfect, but it is hopeful, and comforting in an odd way, like potato soup.

Lorraine says

"Joe Jones" is a novel or maybe more of a descriptive narrative that centers on Jessie's Café. It is a rough and tumble down old place on the waterfront of San Francisco. Jessie inherited that café and at 79 lets Louise run the place while she sits at her favorite table at the window with her best friend Georgia who is mute and senile.

Louise is a rather sexy 40-ish woman who is the cook, pop philosopher/psychologist, and mother to all. Willie is Jessie's 20-ish gay grandson who is trying to stay off drugs and develop some kind of relationship; he is waiter, dishwasher and pastry chef. Joe is Louise's hypochondriac, drifter boyfriend whom she sends away because he has been unfaithful. In the meantime she pines over him. Everything that goes on in the café is centered on these characters. Later, Eva is introduced and becomes part of the "family." She has a life threatening illness and is a rather fragile high school science teacher.

I read this book knowing that it was not one of Ann Lamott's finest pieces, but I was curious about what she could do wrong as a writer. What's wrong is that the images and metaphors are beautiful, but far too plentiful and forced. Reading some of them, I was reminded of a creative writing class where you practice writing descriptive passages.

Too much of the novel is over the top—like a mediocre soap opera. I was grateful to see that writers have their pitfalls too when starting out. This is one of Lamott's pitfall. Ironically, I'm glad I read it.

Diane Barnes says

Not my favorite Ann Lamott. I like her non-fiction better than her fiction. This was written in 1985, so it was early in her career. The characters were great, but it never jelled into a story for me.

Laura says

I have LOVED Anne Lamott's more recent writing, but I just liked this one. Some of the same themes are here - bad things happen but we can still find moments of grace if we look for them, sometimes the best thing you can do to help someone is just show up. I enjoyed the quirky characters but couldn't muster up much sympathy for Joe. Her writing is great, but this one didn't have me laughing out loud or in tears as most of her others do.

Teri says

This book is probably my favorite Lamott novel. It went out of print and did not get great reviews, but I'm not sure why.

I loved it.

Breedeen says

Didn't finish--but I'm done with it. Made it about 3/4 of the way through, but still didn't have enough to latch onto plot or character wise to push through to the end.

Probably a 1.5 star would be more accurate, based mainly on language, but since I didn't feel it was worth finishing, I rounded down.

Knucklefish says

What a pleasure, and what a relief that the woman who gave me "instructions on writing and life" in *Bird By Bird* can practice what she preaches. I think in my mind I expected Lamott to be a second Elizabeth Berg, but she's actually not at all. An Elizabeth Berg book is a perfect snapshot of the human race that makes you feel good about the world. Anne Lamott is a little coarser, a little more loose in her prose style, a little more off the wall. She is also quite referential, but in this really amazing way. Somehow she creates a lexicon of quotes and stories that are important to her characters, and by the end of the book, the reader understands their references like they are best friends.

I also found it to be a religious book in the most nontraditional sense. The main character Louise was almost Christ-like in her love for the flawed people in her life. It said all the things I don't dare say about God, and it was more faith-affirming than a Dee Henderson book. This novel certainly wasn't plot-driven, but it went somewhere all the same.

Ket Lamb says

Joe Jones is a bittersweet story about a bunch of misfits at a San Francisco cafe who are all jonesing for something out of reach. Pockets of brilliant observations keep the pages turning, but this slice of life story feels like a reworked, extended AA meeting. What is Eva dying of, or is she simply a sadomasochist? Why name the book after such a narcissistic character, when it focuses on a collection of oddballs?

Having spent my Wonder Years in the Bay Area, I couldn't help but ponder exactly where this elusive cafe is supposed to be located. The descriptions were so vague, it was impossible to anchor it.

After reading Bird by Bird, I expected more than this. Yet, I'm jonesing to read something else from Anne Lamott.

Liz says

I have read and loved many of Anne Lamott's non-fiction books, but Joe Jones is the first I have read of her fiction. What a delight. She is such a wonderful writer, both in voice and in her amazing ability to develop detailed, real characters. You can easily visualize the restaurant in which most of the book takes place, and will find yourself rooting for every one of these likeable, flawed people. There are two older women in the story whose friendship is based on an intuitive kind of communication (one is a Bronx cheer) and love, which still makes me smile when thinking about it. She fills the story with her trademark life-observations and learnings, so that you come away from it with some truths about yourself.

Ghylée says

this was a rough one. it was like a train wreck. i didn't want to look but couldn't help myself. and the end just... disturbed me. i was a little pissed.

Judith Shadford says

It's a rather odd book, actually. Slim, superficial in many respects. But it has enough of its own flavor to linger in my imagination. The title is awful. Should have been Jessie's Cafe. Lamott's cast of characters is wonderfully drawn, even memorable. Yet we never get past the level of their interaction with each other. Even the moments of interior monologue don't take me past their relationship issues.

Since I had just finished Justin Cronin's Summer Guest--brilliantly written/told--he provided the scale/standard to sort out depth of characters. Cronin shows the whole person--how they feel about trivial things as well as plot issues. Lamott never tells us how Louise, her protagonist, feels about cooking, for instance. Yet Louise cooks some pretty interesting stuff for a diner grill. Showing her attitude toward food would reveal just as much as a chapter-full description of how she and Willie and Joe are getting along these days.

Still, Georgia, the old old lady who never speaks, who only blows pszts instead of language--Georgia is good. Very, very good.

Steph says

I really came to care about the characters who hang out at Jessie's cafe. Lamott's beautiful use of language only enhances this read.

Charlotte says

Anne Lamott has a very engaging writing style. Her similes and her characterizations are spot on and funny. How her characters relate to each other and their dialog in particular is extremely realistic. It reads as if you were over hearing old friends chat, complete with the conversational shorthand and in-jokes all close friends have. Her characters feel very true to life and easy to empathize with and care about.

For all of that, though, I thought the plot was lacking. The novel is a depiction of a couple of months at a cafe and while the months were exciting, the plot drifted and there was neither tension nor resolution. Without a plot to keep the story going or a promise of some sort of growth or closure, it became harder for me to stay interested. I'm very glad I read it but I am not necessarily going to seek out more books by the author.

Jenny says

Spoiler alert- Don't read this if you don't like spoilers. This is not a review. I write these summaries just to keep track of what I have read. * I am listening to this book. It is a small story- in that it feels like a slice of life of a close group of people who work in and frequent a small restaurant/bar in California. The heartfelt love the main character has for her friends is palpable as I listen. I can totally relate to her feelings, even the back and forth yearning and fear around her love interest.

Finished it. Liked it, the story never got very "big", just the lives of friends who are family to each other. One death, one moved away, all through the eyes of a couple main characters. Showed the difference between a person who loved whatever and whoever came her way, and another who lived in fear and self-loathing (almost). It was a joy to listen to.

Susan says

Anne Lamott is a favorite of mine mostly because I feel deep in my soul her warped sense of humor. She writes from a San Francisco/Marin County point-of-view, which is uniquely skewed, screwed, and loving, and she does that better than anyone. This is a novel reminiscent of Alice Hoffman's "Sad Cafe", only happy. I had a smile on my face the whole way through.

"Really, she thinks to herself, you ought to be in love with someone you wouldn't mind being.' ..AND...

"She will go home and put on her pajamas and crawl into bed with a book, and will look up with a start from

time to time. It is like when the bell has been ringing outside your window for years and suddenly stops, and you look around puzzled and wonder, What's that?"And this gem.....

"I have plenty of peace of mind. I'm just edgy."

Elizabeth says

A pleasure to read because of the beautiful, vivid, complex characters, who offer a lot of wisdom for lost souls like me. Every time I opened it, I felt excited at the idea of spending more time with them - Lou is the Madonna of the Tidepool and Willie is the heartbroken angel. Only four stars instead of five because I felt that one read was enough to glean everything the book had to offer, although I might read it again, if I miss the people.

Mary Kay says

My favorite Lamott novel - the characters are made perfect by their flaws.
