

on the bookshelf

‘Charlie Jones:’ A Fundamental American Masterpiece

Reviewed by Bud Navero

“Charlie Jones”
by Ben Harrison
Amazon.com, \$19.99

About mid-way through “Charlie Jones,” Susan, Charlie’s wife, is commissioned to create a mural. It’s her first. Up until this point she’d been a painter. She finds the new task aesthetically inspiring and physically daunting. Handling small pieces of colored glass and cutting them to variously expressive sizes is murder on her hands until she arrives at the idea of wearing a glove on her left hand while she cuts with her right. Before actually applying the stonework to the wall she draws a charcoal sketch of the mural on the ground and arranges the pieces so that they form

the visual narrative and effect she has in mind. The mural is a stunning success, suffused with the light of Corpus Christi, Texas — the “Sparkling City by the Sea.”

We often hear that the sign of a truly great athlete or artist or craftsman is that they make the difficult look easy, that the lonely, sweaty hours of trial and error, cuts and knuckle-busting, result in an apparently effortlessly smooth, one-of-a-kind articulation.

Twelve years in the making, “Charlie Jones,” Ben Harrison’s debut novel, is just such a creation, arriving like a fellow-traveling fast friend — immediately connecting, open hearted, generous, intimate, honest and forever memorable.

Herein the shining moments abound. Set



Ben Harrison and his latest book.



against the truth, justice and American way of World War II, the Sputnik and naively innocent ’50s, the “find yourself in strange places” sixties of Vietnam and hip-piedom and the adult times since, “Charlie Jones” tracks its title character and his universe of disparate characters through a lifetime of joy, sorrow, good and bad luck, tragedies overcome and devastating, great sex and hard work centered in the author’s hometown of Corpus Christi. These flawlessly wrought moments, at once so familiar yet utterly renewed, resonate with the reader long after the page has been turned. There’s the inadvertent, adolescent boner at Methodist Sunday school, the accidental touch of a teenage arm setting off pangs of True Love and the risk of unrequited Valentines. There’s young Charlie’s conflicting opinions about his “normal” behavior as “a serious young man” and the “artistic behavior” of his parents’ a jazz ’n blues piano-man father, a Mexican movie-star mother and their off-beat house guests. There’s the nuts and bolts of life

on the oil rigs. There’s honky tonk love at first sight. There’s a Baptist wedding and furtive teen sex while the folks are out. There’s rekindled love, unlikely friendships, “cows, cowshit, trees and a windmill,” art classes, hurricanes and skinny dipping, set in a world of unquestioned loyalty, grit and affection.

At the center of it all there’s Charlie, at first glance the least interesting character in the book. He who “smelled like Mennen and shined his shoes” and the unquestioned “Mr. Jones” of his law office is the stick-in-the-mud Charlie of his social circle. His wife is an artist, his best friends are rednecks and everyone in his family but Charlie smokes pot. Even so, in many ways he is the strong, silent type familiar from previous American classics. He is a measured man but an extremely tolerant one. And he is an attentive and virile lover. Sex, like everything else in this book, is detailed, embraced lustily and truly shared. While explaining to his wife why he could never be unfaithful, Charlie agrees with her that the act of making love entails “baring a little piece of your soul.” His is a world of acceptance of differences, of mutual respect and admiration. What he doesn’t accept is people who are

lazy, spoiled, dishonest or irresponsible. And he won’t accept failure. He is the often self-deprecating glue that holds his loved ones together. Though somewhat methodical, he is willing to re-examine his first impressions.

Having initially regarded the book’s grandest proposal as a “huge irrational commitment” he then becomes its undeniable catalyst, galvanizing a group effort toward its completion, embodying the book’s underlying principle that dreams can outlive their dreamers and become the transformative achievements of others. This is a story of American dreamers who don’t doubt or quit on themselves or each other and find a mutual strength that allows them to exercise the inalienable right to pursue happiness.

“Charlie Jones” is a poetic celebration of Life in all of its fullness. In fact, the only two villains in the book are the final two words: “THE END.” They force us to abandon the lives of people we’ve come to love, leaving us wistfully waving goodbye from the dock.

In a recent conversation, Ben Harrison noted that he was the only one of his hometown acquaintances to leave Corpus Christie. That solo flight was certainly Key West’s gain. For the people of Corpus Christie it’s an affirmation that absence does indeed make the heart grow fonder.

There will be a book signing for “Charlie Jones” by the author at the Harrison Gallery, 825 White St., on the Third Thursday Walk on White, Dec. 20, from 6 to 9 p.m.

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