



## Jazz Moon

*Joe Okonkwo*

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## **Jazz Moon** Joe Okonkwo

*In a lyrical, captivating debut set against the backdrop of the Harlem Renaissance and glittering Jazz Age Paris, Joe Okonkwo creates an evocative story of emotional and artistic awakening.*

On a sweltering summer night in 1925, beauties in beaded dresses mingle with hepcats in dapper suits on the streets of Harlem. The air is thick with reefer smoke, and jazz pours out of speakeasy doorways. Ben Charles and his devoted wife, Angeline, are among the locals crammed into a basement club to hear jazz and drink bootleg liquor. For aspiring poet Ben, the swirling, heady rhythms are a revelation. So is Baby Back Johnston, an ambitious trumpet player who flashes a devilish grin and blasts jazz dynamite from his horn. Ben finds himself drawn to the trumpeter—and to Paris where Baby Back says everything is happening.

In Paris, jazz and champagne flow eternally, and blacks are welcomed as exotic celebrities, especially those from Harlem. It's an easy life that quickly leaves Ben adrift and alone, craving solace through anonymous dalliances in the city's decadent underground scene. From chic Parisian cafés to seedy opium dens, his odyssey will bring new love, trials, and heartache, even as echoes from the past urge him to decide where true fulfillment and inspiration lie.

## **Jazz Moon Details**

Date : Published May 31st 2016 by Kensington

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Author : Joe Okonkwo

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## From Reader Review Jazz Moon for online ebook

### Jeff Adams says

Okonkwo created such a complex, compelling character with Ben. This young man had a difficult childhood, a decent life he gives up to take a chance on a life where he can be more himself and ultimately ends up in a place he hadn't planned on (at least that's my interpretation). At the same time, all the settings become characters of their own. Ben's childhood (which we get through stories he tells) is very different from Harlem which is different than the sailing to Paris which is different from Paris. Each place adds to the story, and makes Ben evolve his personality.

You can read the complete review at <http://www.jeffandwill.com/2016/05/21...>

NOTE: I received a free ebook for an honest review for "Jeff & Will's Big Gay Fiction Podcast."

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### Sherry says

A fine book of 1920s Paris, with glimpses of brilliance in its writing. But the hero is not anyone I would root for, so poor are his choices and so badly does he treat those who love him, and -- I cannot believe I am saying this -- I didn't care for the poetry inserted rather gratuitously, I thought, into the narrative. It only interrupted the flow without adding to the story. Yet I will look forward to the next book by this author.

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### Erin says

*"Perhaps it wasn't that people changed, but that they revealed themselves; that fertile ambitions bloomed and clamored to be harvested."*

See reviews first on my blog

In this story we follow Ben from 1925 to 1928. We see his marriage take shape, and what made them get married in the first place. We see him try to figure out how to deal with "this thing" as he calls it, and how it affects every part of his life, and how he tries to do the right thing but ends up not doing so well at. We also get to see him explore different relationships and trying new things. We get to learn about his childhood which was rather depressing because of how his parents ended up treating him due to how much they had lost before and they were afraid to show love to him because of it.

This story really started to get interesting to me as his relationship with the trumpeter started to really become a relationship and not just flirting, and how Baby Back showed him the world that he was a part of and that he didn't have to hide what he really was. But I'm not going to lie, I never fully trusted Baby Back, I didn't figure out why till much later in the book when his true colors started showing. And boy did he become unlikable at that point. But he wasn't the only one at fault in the relationship, Ben made many mistakes as well. They weren't good together, but that relationship helped, Ben embrace who he truly was and to accept it.

*"While a romantic may have embraced the expedience, he distrusted such effortlessness. It was too easy. He had parachuted into every relationship he'd had, without looking, without seeing, without bother to. Like shooting yourself from a cannon without considering what thorns you might land in. He distrusted love; its*

*sugar promises; the way it commenced with a swelter, but then dissipated, far too quickly, to a lukewarm muddle."*

The only part of this whole book that I didn't like was when Ben went and started sleeping with anyone willing it seemed. It just made me feel so bad for him, because he was worth more than that, and the fact that he felt like that was the way to go broke my heart a little.

The cast of characters in this book were perfect as well, it made it feel more real and my favorite one was Glo who was a singer in Paris and told Ben exactly how it was and how he was worth more than how he was being treated. I also like Sebastian and how he helped Ben get back a little bit of who he was before Baby Back. I liked how they worked as a team and were happy together.

*"Falling in love. As if love was some awful pit and the inevitable direction was down. Why not rise in love instead of fall? And even that was inaccurate because love didn't do either. It unfolded, like a story. It had plot lines and plot points and points of view; was populated with supporting roles like Glo and colorful auxiliary characters like Cafe Valentin's patrons and band. Their story unfolded with drama.."*

I also enjoyed the poetry and some of the songs that were in each chapter.

I went into this book, not knowing much at all, besides the fact that it was about Jazz and set in the 1920's which I have been wanting to read more of recently. I'm glad I didn't know much about this book, because I might not have picked it up and read it.

This book took me on a journey of seeing things from a different point of view, and seeing love in a different way as well. I couldn't wait to find out what happened to Ben next and if he would be happy.

Overall I would highly recommend this book if you want to see how a man struggling to figure out who he is and see his journey through that exploration.

I received this book via netgalley and Kensington Books in exchange for my honest review. Thank you.

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### **Linda says**

Browsing Pinterest I was immediately drawn to this cover! 1920's, Jazz, Harlem, Paris, what's not to love? After reading a couple of reviews I thought..."not my typical read." I got a sample thinking there would be no way I would like it but I was hooked! Mr. Okonkwo gave me a sense of place whether it be Dogwood, GA, Harlem or Paris, France he took me there. I enjoyed the songs and poems that were within the novel. Reading is a journey we take and this novel has the ability to make you more open minded and see things from a different point of view. I love to challenge myself in my reading choices and this novel fulfilled that purpose. I look forward to more from this author.

Update: 04/18/17

I want to add there were a few parts of the book that made me very uncomfortable, sexual in nature. I feel the story and insight gained were much bigger.

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### **Pamela Laskin says**

I just finished reading JAZZ MOON by Joe Okonkwo, a student who was in my graduate Children's Writing and Literature class last year, and I was totally blown away—far over the moon. This captivating first novel explores the artistic, sexual and cultural awakening of a young poet, Ben Charles, who moves to the rhythm of jazz, first in Harlem, and finally in Paris, France. In the liberated Parisian society, Ben, alienated and alone, discovers who he is amidst the city's underground scene, where jazz and blues sing their terrifically evocative and sometimes sad song. From the trendy cafes to the seedy opium dens—and all the liquor and smoke in between, Ben has to learn the difference between forbidden lust and love. The diction is versatile, romantic, loving and passionate, and will inspire any lover of the music of language. A must read!

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### **Nat K says**

*"Love could fill, but not make whole; it could cushion loneliness, not cure it. What it did was broaden your circumference of concern beyond yourself to encompass another person. Even if – when – that person caused you grief."*

Ben Charles is a young, gay black man, who doesn't quite fit in with what society expects of him.

This was quite an evocative, often painfully sad story of his journey to find his place in the world, and more importantly to find love.

The book is wonderfully lyrical in capturing the tone of the jazz clubs in both Harlem & Paris in the 1920s. I could easily imagine being there, as the writing transported me to that time and place.

Filled with dreams, regrets, longing, jealousy, what ifs, hopes for the future...

I'm very interested to read what Mr. Okonkwo's future works have to offer.

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### **Julie Reynolds says**

I read this as the subject matter was part of the good reads summer reading challenge.

It was a love story and an LGBTQ book.

It was well written.

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### **Tonstant Weader says**

"It was raining cats and jazz." From its first sentence, readers will know that Jazz Moon was written by a lover of words and music—someone who hears the music in the vowels, consonants and syllables of language and can weave them into poetry. Ben, the protagonist of Joe Okonkwo's Jazz Moon has one constant love and that is poetry. It saves him again and again.

Ben Marcus Charles writes poetry in the mornings before heading off to his work as a waiter at a downtown

hotel. His wife, Angeline, fixes hair. They love each other, perhaps not with the passion she might hope for, but enough to be happy enough, except for this thing that haunts Ben. And what is this thing? Ben is attracted to men. His first love was a man and one night, while he and Angeline are out enjoying the night life in Jazz Age Harlem they meet a man who brings up all those long-buried desires and dreams.

This is Ben's story, of his search for love and for happiness though Ben thought that "happiness was more aspiration than destination." He follows his love, the jazz trumpeter Baby Back Johnson, to Paris where "they love us over there," as Baby Back assures him. And they do, with a fetishizing paternalism that is exemplified by the welcoming ship's captain on their way to Paris who says, "The European must embrace the primitive sensuality that comes naturally to the African. That is essential to reinvigorating a white race that is becoming, quite frankly, boring." Of course, fetishization is another facet of racism, but compared to lynchings and Jim Crow, it feels like love.

Ben's life in Paris and his search for love are complicated by ambition, jealousy, success and failure. He finds friends, lovers, and a home in Paris, but can he find what he needs?

Paris is a powerful presence in *Jazz Moon* and Okonkwo describes it in dizzying detail as "a painter's palette streaked with colors: brilliant, moody, audacious, tantalizing, inviting, alienating. Reds and blacks and pinks and that milky gray that belonged both to the Paris sky and the pearls entwining a rich socialite's neck." It makes the cover art so perfect for this book. There's a chapter where Ben is feeling the colors of Paris that is luminous. I read it twice, just for its beautiful prose.

*Jazz Moon* can break your heart. There is a poem that Ben writes that can tear you apart with its pain. I very much enjoyed this novel though people who take offense at explicit sexuality, particularly explicit gay sexuality will be unhappy. For the rest of us, it's a lovely novel of love and self-discovery. There are a few times when it verge toward melodrama, when we are just far in Ben's head when he's wallowing and he does wallow. He is the kind of character that you just want to wake up, but that's the point of the story, isn't it, the slow awakening of Ben Marcus Charles.

*Jazz Moon* will be released May 31st by Kensington Books.

I was provided an e-galley by the publisher via NetGalley  
<http://tonstantweaderreviews.wordpress...>

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### **Gerhard says**

There are books you read at certain points of your life that talk to your heart; this is one of those.

I like to read the Lambda Literary finalists to keep up with what is happening on the gay-fiction scene, which is seriously under-represented in both public libraries and in bookshops (I have seldom ever seen any Lambda titles in Exclusive Books in South Africa, for example.)

Occasionally the Lambda finalists are *meh*, like the oh-so-politically-and-culturally correct *God in Pink* by Nasim Hamir, to this year's best novel, the enigmatic-but-cold *After the Blue Hour* by John Rechy.

Then you get Okonkwo's jazz-soaked triumph, which blazes a trail of stardust and love across the reader's heart. At first I thought this was a simple love story, between Ben and Angeline in Harlem. Then jazz enters

the picture, and Babyback. And then Paris, in all her multi-hued and seedy, spangled glamour.

So, this then is a multivalent story that takes in as much horror as it does love, from the gruesome lynching of Babyback's uncle, the stench of his burning body that seems to seep through these pages, to the terrible wrongs that the lovers inflict on each other, stemming from the deepest recesses of their own buried psychoses.

And then there is the music, the polyphonic jazz that reflects the intertwined nature of this tale in as joyous and sinuous a form as the musical notes themselves fill the smoke- and reefer-filled air. Against it all, of course, is the Grande Dame herself, Paris, from the haughty grandeur of Sacré-Cœur to the seediness of her opium dens and speakeasies.

Magnificent. And then there is that transcendent ending, which transforms the jazz theme of love spiralling through the novel's rarefied atmosphere into a trumpet solo that suspends belief in the earthbound gravitas and folly of human nature.

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### **African Americans on the Move Book Club says**

Jazz Moon by Joe Okonkwo will make readers question everything they read and feel. Nothing like a novel about jazz that brings out the poetic side to everyone especially the characters. A debut novel that brings, to life, the action, drama, and passion of 1925. Times where everything beckoned and called to those who hearts wanted more. Inside this title, readers will get a glimpse into a poet's lifestyle. He has a devoted wife but is angry with her...he soon find himself attracted to another who brings out the heat of raw animalistic desire deep within his blood. A stirring unlike any other. Paris is a place where art, passion, and desire come in abundance and that's where both Ben and his new lover find themselves. Joe Okonkwo brings readers the best world of fiction readers will find. Race, jazz, and travel are deep topics easily explored within this exciting well-written plot. Overall, I highly recommend this new novel, Jazz Moon, to readers everywhere.

Danielle Urban  
AAMBC Reviewer

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### **Shomeret says**

Lyrical written tale of a gay African American poet in the 1920's who must deal with both homophobia and racism in the American South and Harlem. He also encounters racist and homophobic individuals in Paris which was not as free of prejudice as it pretended to be. The protagonist evolves as a poet and as a human being. He begins by writing doggerel, but eventually becomes a published poet who gives readings. There are a few really excellent samples of his poetry included in the novel. I also enjoyed the jazz element which ran through the novel.

Yet the road to love and happiness for this gay man did not run smooth, and there were many mistakes in judgment along the way.

My only criticism of this first novel is a minor one. I think the author doesn't understand art as well as poetry and music. There was an artist character whose work was supposed to be a combination of impressionism

and cubism, yet there were no cubist elements in the description of his work. It seems likely that Okonkwo may not know the definition of cubism.

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### **Sofia says**

This is Mr Okonkwo's debut as an author - so I can't say anything but bravo..... His writing sent me immediately to Baldwin's Harlem and Baldwin's Paris and Baldwin's people. His spirit seems to permeate this book but in the meantime this book also has it's own spirit.

Okonkwo wrote a book about choices and consequences. Choices re what notes to play, what words to write, what to choose when life presents you with crossroads. Always what to choose and how to live with those choices. He presents difficult choices and he does not give answers but then it would be presumptuous to say without hindsight that one is absolutely sure of the way forward.

The strength of this book lies not in giving an ending but in presenting us with imperfect Ben, seeing him discovering who he is, trying to find a way forward for himself, making mistakes and living with the consequences. The writing has a great sense of time, place and situation, be it violent rural Georgia or loving in Harlem or jazzy Paris. Capably catching the nuances of the differences in being a black American in say Georgia or in New York or in Paris.

Special mention to Angeline. (view spoiler)

I am not a great one for poetry and sometimes when there are bits of poetry in a book I tend to skim. But not this time, I read each poem as it came along and I even highlighted.

*Shatter the hourglass.  
The sand tumbles out,  
The grains minute, sharp-edged,  
As many-pointed as a snowflake.*

*What now?*

*Sweep up the sand?  
Try, but some will remain,  
Elusive and uncatchable.  
Glue the shards of glass,  
But they will cut you.*

*Fairy tales lie:  
Magic words cannot undo destruction.  
Regret is no elixir.*

Steps of Montmartre Paris

Fits into slot 5 of my reading challenge - a book by a person of colour

**Matt Root says**

This is a book full of truth and beauty.

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**Shin Kuroi says**

Beautiful writing and story, the poems were a really nice plus. I loved it.

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**Russell Ricard says**

**JAZZ MOON**

I read to be a better writer. I read to be a better person. I read to better understand the human condition, and to understand history. I read to better open my mind, expand my imagination, and to go on a journey past my own life's experience.

And all of the above reasons why I read are fulfilled in Joe Okonkwo's stunning debut novel, *Jazz Moon*. I shed tears, laughed, was even enraged at times, and was deeply heartened by Okonkwo's emotionally satisfying prose; it's as if my head, heart, and soul was being conducted by a confident bandleader as I moved through the pages.

Set in the late-1920s, *Jazz Moon* follows the life of a poet named Ben, from his late-teens to his early twenties, and with flashbacks to his childhood. It is a historical novel, love story, coming-of-age narrative that explores black life, and gay life along with Ben's struggles during the Harlem Renaissance, and Paris. Ultimately, it explores how art is love, and love is art.

Okonkwo's prose is both poetic and succinct; he wastes no words, which gives the narrative the musicality of a jazz composition. As well, Okonkwo composes a highly easy to visualize world--from protagonist Ben's time in Harlem, his journey to Paris, and even in the seamless flashbacks to his childhood in the South.

While reading *Jazz Moon* I was reminded of some other dynamic writers: Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Gustav Flaubert, Alice Walker, Langston Hughes, and even Gertrude Stein. Also, just like my past experiences with reading the works of those mentioned above, the further I was drawn into *Jazz Moon*'s world, I found myself casting every single character with famous actors. The reader and writer inside is so impressed with how vivid, true-to-life, and dimensional Okonkwo's characters are, and how expertly crafted their story arcs are fulfilled by novel's end.

In short, read *Jazz Moon*. I'm convinced that over the years, I'll read it again and again, because I'm also certain that it will become a classic work of literature. Also, it serves as an important study of the struggles of Black life, Gay life, and the intersections of both during the late-1920s Harlem Renaissance.

Below, I've posted a link to a feature that appeared on Lambda Literary's website, and includes a sample read of *Jazz Moon*. When you read the sample pages, Joe Okonkwo's remarkable prose speaks for itself.  
<http://www.lambdaliterary.org/feature...>

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