

An ear trained by Seuss, Eliot, Hendrix

Posted on **October 22, 2012** by **Marla Akin**



Denis Johnson, the legendary author of “Jesus’ Son, Tree of Smoke,” and “Train Dreams” and a frequent visitor to UT’s **Michener Center for Writers**, returns to campus on **Thursday, Oct. 25, 2012** to give a free public reading at **7:30 p.m.** in the **Blanton Museum Auditorium**.

Johnson has been a literary phenomenon since publication of his first poetry collection, “The Man Among the Seals,” at age 19. He grew up abroad and in suburban Washington, D.C., the son of a State Department official, and earned an MFA at the Iowa Writers Workshop, where he worked with the famously gifted and famously alcoholic Raymond Carver, his mentor for better and worse. Addiction threatened and fueled Johnson’s own bright start, as over the next dozen years he published two more poetry books—“Inner Weather” and “Incognito Lounge,” which was selected by Mark Strand for the National Poetry Series in 1982. Carver himself described Johnson’s verse as “nothing less than a close examination of the darker side of human conduct.”

In recovery, Johnson took up writing fiction, and his output grew prolific. His prose was populated with a cast of delusional to visionary anti-heroes recognizable from his poetry, perhaps most memorably in 1983’s “Angels” and his 1992 story collection, “Jesus’ Son,” both of which won him critical recognition and a near-cult following. But the stories of Johnson’s lost souls were always infused with hallucinatory brilliance and a Calvinistic sense of salvation. **One reviewer** put it succinctly, saying his language read “as if Camus had become a dope fiend and later found God.”

Later novels run the gamut from the self-described “California Gothic” of “Already Dead” (1998), to a slender and aching beautiful portrait of grief, “The Name of the World” (2000) and a noir

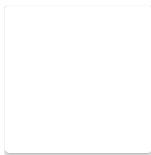
detective send-up serialized in *Playboy* magazine, “Nobody Move” (2009). His haunting Vietnam magnum opus (600+ pages), “Tree of Smoke,” which won the 2007 National Book Award, gives backstory on more than half a dozen characters found in his earlier novels. “Train Dreams,” brought out in 2011 as a novella (but first published in *Paris Review* in 2002), packs no less of a punch in its 125 pages. Set in Prohibition-era Idaho, the novella captures the western landscape where Johnson has lived seasonally for years. It was a finalist for the un-awarded 2012 Pulitzer Prize in fiction. His collected poems are in “The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly,” and his journalistic pieces are gathered in “Seek: Reports from the Edges of America and Beyond.”

With the turn of the millennium, Johnson turned his genius to playwriting and was playwright in residence at Camp Santo/Intersection for the Arts in San Francisco, where his “Hellhound on My Trail” and “Shoppers Carried by Escalators into the Flames” were initially produced. His latest published plays, “Son of a Whore and Purvis,” are written in iambic pentameter, what might be an absurdly forced and archaic form in lesser hands, but proves yet another literary coup for Johnson, who once said that his ear “was trained by—in chronological order—Dr. Seuss, Dylan Thomas, Walt Whitman, the guitar solos of Eric Clapton and Jimi Hendrix, and T. S. Eliot.”

Johnson and his wife have lived in Austin part-time over the last decade and a half, as he returned four times to teach at the Michener Center and held the 2006 Mitte Chair in Creative Writing at Texas State University in San Marcos. His ties to Austin and the university were further forged when in 2010 the [Harry Ransom Center](#) acquired his papers.

The reading is free to the public, but seating is limited. The [Blanton Museum Auditorium](#) is in the Edgar A. Smith Building on the west side of the museum complex, just north of the intersection of East MLK and Congress Avenue. [Parking](#) is available in the nearby Brazos garage.

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About Marla Akin

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1 THOUGHT ON “AN EAR TRAINED BY SEUSS, ELIOT, HENDRIX”



Kim Freeman

on [October 25, 2012 at 5:27 pm](#) said:

Marla: Will you be attending the event this evening and able to ask Mr. Johnson if he has a cat? We are polling famous authors for a collection to benefit Austin Pets Alive on feline vs canine companions.

Thank you,
Kim

Comments are closed.