

Jagged Blind Hop Zozzle

M.S. Simpson

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Even ninety years later, the 1920s still roar in the collective imagination of writers, readers, painters, and dreamers everywhere. It was a wild time when flappers and philanderers challenged taboos. The guns of the Great War were finally silent, and a new kind of music, jazz, had invaded the clubs. The arts were booming, and great minds were converging on Paris to share, create, think, act, and live.

M. S. Simpson's newest book, *Jagged Blind Hop Zozzle*, opens in Paris at the height of the Jazz Age. The angelically beautiful Cuthbert Westbrook-Madison has taken a sabbatical from his position at Amherst College and invites himself to his aunt's house with the intention of "meeting artistic people."

Fortunately for the book's author, name-dropping is not a crime. The Fitzgeralds, Gertude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, James and Nora Joyce, Josephine Baker, and King Vidor flit through the story like highway signs seen from a speeding car. They show off Simpson's careful research, but with the exception of Baker, most of the historical persons never become fully developed characters. Instead, they function only as time references in the narrative, letting the reader know where he or she stands in history.

Along with the great names of the Lost Generation, Cuthbert meets the beautiful twins Irène and Théophile. The ensuing triangle and the persistent interference of Théophile's former flames challenge Cuthbert's beliefs about the time he lives in and the people around him. And despite being "a good guy in a bad place," as Simpson allows Cuthbert to recognize of himself, betrayal is inevitable, and the light of a bright young thing is snuffed out one day at the lake.

Simpson's story, broken up into three acts and sixteen chapters, is told through a series of flash-fiction-length scenes, the majority of which last a couple of pages, at most, before breaking. The effect is disconcerting at first: the reader is kept from forming any intimate connection with the story. Scene after scene opens and closes with no segue from the one that came before it or to the one that follows. Everything feels slightly choppy, like the dancing figures on a lazily spinning zoetrope. But as Simpson makes his world spin faster, the early dissonance sets the tone for a Parisian Jazz Age story that is as earnest and curious as it is dilettantish and superficial. Or, as Josephine Baker says when she introduces the reader to Paris (and the story) early on, "I *do* love a night out in Paris. Snappy and witty, caviar, champagne and that jagged blind hop zozzle from time to time."

While Simpson's style will appeal to modern readers, his characters will inevitably invite comparisons to other contemporary portrayals of the Jazz Age, from Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* to D. J. Taylor's *Bright Young People*. The flatness of Simpson's historical characters may cause a few readers to lose interest. But if they persist, they will appreciate the novel's brilliantly conceived conclusion.

This is Simpson's third novel. It comes on the heels of *Shirtless in Iceland*, winner of the 2011 Pinnacle Book Achievement Award.

JOSEPH THOMPSON (March 15, 2012)

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