

The Psalms of Israel Jones

Ed Davis

Vandalia Press, imprint of WVU Press (September 2014)

Softcover \$16.99 (296pp)

978-1-940425-13-9

Moving scenes depicting a difficult father-son relationship are framed by a gritty look at a musician's life.

Reading Ed Davis's elegant prose is a little like listening to a Bob Dylan album: it's nearly impossible to choose a favorite line. Are the evocative poetic phrases the most meaningful, or does the strength lie in the pointed observations about society? Or maybe it's the superb storytelling itself that makes the pages fly by. Davis, like Dylan, masterfully weaves all of this together in the reverent and raucous story of rock-n-roll redemption that is *The Psalms of Israel Jones*.

It's not like we haven't seen the bones of this story played out before, but in Davis's hands, it's specific as well as iconic. Israel Jones is an aging rocker on the road in a world that has mostly passed him by. He's estranged from his son, and pretty much everyone else. So far, nothing new. But what about those charismatic snake handlers? Or the young groupies with a penchant for cutting? And what do we make of Israel's latest performance piece: a primal howl that seems to come from the bottom of his soul?

Davis continually surprises with moments like these, all framed by a gritty, behind-the-scenes look at life on the road. Israel is a complicated man, and Davis draws him out through his son's alternately awed and angry observations. One minute, Thomas describes his father's presence poetically: "His breath ghosts before him." Then in the next, he bitterly notes that his father "doesn't answer questions; he takes hostages." Davis keeps the tension in the story through Thomas's conflicted relationship with his father, which never stoops to stereotype but instead explores the real way human beings try, fail, and try again.

Much of the story is dark, but Davis manages the mood with expertly timed humor—Israel's first heart attack is known as "The Big One," for instance, only to be topped by his second, "The Bigger One"—and a cast of eccentric characters that form a dysfunctional family.

Between the tears and the laughs is a moving story of two men seeking to understand the world and to be understood themselves. That's the heart of songwriting, and storytelling.

With *The Psalms of Israel Jones*, Davis contributes to this greater understanding of ourselves and our world with a masterpiece that hits all the right notes.

SHEILA M. TRASK (Fall 2014)

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