



Ellington Boulevard: A Novel in A-Flat

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Clarinetist Ike Morphy, his dog Herbie Mann, and a pair of pigeons who roost on his air conditioner are about to be evicted from their apartment on West 106th Street, also known as Duke Ellington Boulevard. Ike has never had a lease, just a handshake agreement with the recently deceased landlord; and now that landlord's son stands to make a killing on apartment 2B.

Centering on the fate of one apartment before, during, and after the height of New York's real estate boom, *Ellington Boulevard's* characters include the Tenant and His Dog; the Landlord, a recovered alcoholic and womanizer who has newly found Judaism and a wife half his age; the Broker, an out-of-work actor whose new profession finally allows him to afford theater tickets he has no time to use; the Broker's New Boyfriend, a second-rate actor who composes a musical about the sale of 2B ("*Is there no one I can lien on if this boom goes bust?*"). There's also the Buyer, a trusting young editor at a dying cultural magazine, who falls in love with the Tenant; the Buyer's Husband, a disaffected graduate student taken to writing bawdy faux-academic papers; and the Buyer's Husband's Girlfriend, a children's book writer with a tragic past. With the humor and poignancy that made Langer's first novel, *Crossing California*, a favorite book of the year among critics across the country, *Ellington Boulevard* is an ode to New York. It's the story of why people come to a city they can't afford, take jobs they despise, sacrifice love, find love, and eventually become the people they never thought they'd be—for better and for worse.

Ellington Boulevard: A Novel in A-Flat Details

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Corielle Hayley says

There were parts of Adam Langer's Ellington Boulevard that I really liked, and other parts that I really didn't, so I figure that evens out to about 3 stars, right? This is one of those books with a handful of characters who all end up connected in one way or another. A lot of the novel rests on the characters — their actions towards each other propel everything. Basically, anything involving the tenant, the buyer, the buyer's husband, the buyer's husband's girlfriend and the tenant's dog were all golden (this is how these characters are introduced in the novel). Bad stuff: the obnoxious owner and his girlfriend, the realtor and most of the tertiary characters. Still, the relationship between those first four (and the dog) made the whole novel worthwhile.

The other main character in Ellington Boulevard is the apartment, rented by the tenant, owned by owner, shown around by the realtor, and so on. Music plays a pretty big role, along with theater and New York City itself. The novel tends to meander — it's definitely not what you would call "action-packed" — but following these various characters around and seeing how their lives interconnect is pretty interesting, if not wildly compelling. The character of Jane Earhart — aka the buyer's husband's girlfriend — could have had a novel to herself, where we could have learned more about her past and what drives her decisions in her present.

I'm not making it sound particularly exciting, but Ellington Boulevard was a good read and it's easy enough to skim past the dull bits....

Rachael says

So, here I am, writing a review about a book about writing reviews- sort of. The novel is a play within novel, and reads like Langer's gem of a story, Crossing California. Every character we are introduced to is somehow found in the story arc of each other characters' lives.

We are first introduced to Ike Morphy upon his returning home to his apartment in New York City after a brief return to his home in Chicago, only to learn that his apartment is up for sale. Ike's departure means a new buyer's arrival. Ike's departure means that he will have to find a new place to call home in Manhattan, a borough home to upwards of 1.6 million people, and that the place he once called home will be someone else's to call whatever he or she desires. The changing of the tenants ensues, and what takes place in between is a story about stories, both the ones we read and the ones we live on (is there a difference??). We meet composers, an author of fantasy novel, an author of a dissertation deemed by the Ivy League to be not worthy of the Ivy League, journal editors, a playwright, book reviewers and more than a few real estate agents.

This book absolutely consumed me. Workout schedule disappeared, parks and cafes were frequented so that I could savor this one. I did not expect to love it like I did. Honestly, this deserves at least 4.5 stars. But hey, what makes a book good? Is it the writing or the experience of reading it? Is it both? And, how do we define our standards, anyways? Don't look towards Rebecca Sugarman for an answer as she reads "only books that she likes and no longer has the stomach to criticize the books she reads." Liz Fogelson "had built her career on demonstrating how authors didn't measure up to their forebears, imagining some idyllic, literary Eden that contemporary authors betrayed." And scene.

Kelly says

My first apartment in New York City was on 107th between Columbus and Manhattan, a block away from the apartment around which the plot of *Ellington Boulevard* turns. And let me tell you, what Langer has written is not so much a novel as a field guide to that neighborhood, from the local dive bar to the nearby entrance to Central Park, and everything in between. It's also something of a Cliff's Notes to the last 10-odd years of real estate in up-and-coming neighborhoods in the city. And it's funny (though not as funny as Langer's earlier novel, set in Chicago, [*Crossing California*:]).

I do have a couple of complaints. First, that the characters, especially at first, seem too typecast - but the book has some surprises in store for us there. Second, including parts from the musical that one of the characters is writing is a gimmick that seems somewhat unnecessary. I think it might work if it were more centrally important to the story, or it could go altogether.

If only there were half-stars.... I think this one, while I thoroughly enjoyed it, probably should get only 3.5 upon reflection. Still, if you haven't read any Langer, you're missing out.

Amy says

Another winding tale of people and their city from Adam Langer. The loose-limbed narrative about gentrification and love is engaging, funny, and frequently insightful, but the book just didn't hang together for me as well as *Crossing California*. Langer packs in a few too many characters and a few too many coincidences, although I laughed out loud at the unexpected Rovner! callback. Also, the Broadway musical motif just didn't resonate for me. But there's a great dog named Herbie Mann!

Langer has this thing in all three of his books that drives me nuts: The man either can't or won't write dialogue. Instead, we get whole paragraphs of the narrator describing what the characters are saying to each other. It's distracting. Perhaps he should start hanging out with Richard Russo and learn how to write a conversation.

Diana says

i started this book based in nyc. i am trying to read some books based here so i can go visit some of the places mentioned.
i need to restart it.

Don says

Langer's first two novels take place in his native Chicago. Following his move to New York, this novel takes place there (although one of the principal characters comes from Chicago).

I found "Ellington Boulevard" to be less successful than the prior novels. Langer attempts a comic novel but confusingly periodically reverts to a more romantic/emotional tone, particularly at the end. Comic novels work best not with real, fleshed-out characters, but with characters built on stereotypes. The author that comes to my mind as the model for this type of fiction is John Mortimer, who wrote a number of comic novels (not including the Rumpole series of stories and novels).

What Mortimer makes work doesn't seem to be present here. In part, that may be because Langer's book just isn't sufficiently comic. I never felt like laughing. Somewhat amusing, yes, but not comic.

teresa says

I am about 150 pages in and I am loving this book. If you have ever dreamed of moving to New York you should read this.

AFTER FINISHING:

I really enjoyed the basic plot set-up of the book--real estate in New York and all the players.

I liked all the characters and I think Langer fleshed them all out wonderfully.

As the novel continued I felt like the novel was a hostage to what Langer already had in mind. (The way all the characters interconnect and drive the plot--it all seemed a little.....TIDY.)

Kasa Cotugno says

What a glorious read. This book, mostly full of humor but with its share of pathos, concerns Manhattan's continuous uptown gentrification. The neighborhood is upper upper west side (according to real estate broker's description), and the flat in question is on West 106th now called Ellington Boulevard. Towards the end of the book there is a biography of the flat, the ups and downs of the building, the various inhabitants and how long they'd lived there. The characters here are its current tenant, his beloved dog, and the various participants in the sale of the flat. Even the pigeons roosting on the air conditioner's ledge are profiled. At times, Langer has a Dickensian flair for names (e.g., Miles Dimmelow -- says all you need to know about him). But the central character is New York, her charismatic qualities that entice her lovers to pay anything, put up with anything, just to live there.

Bookreaderljh says

It took me much longer than usual to read this book as I really didn't like it very much. It started well with One, the musician, and his dog returning to New York after the death of his mother to discover that the apartment he has been living in is being sold. The rest of the story revolves around all the different players in this scenario (buyers, sellers, brokers and all their various spouses, coworkers, etc) telling their part of the story. The structure of the chapters is set up to resemble a piece of music or acts in a play which could be interesting but my main problem was I really disliked most of the characters. If this is what people are like in New York, I wouldn't want to live there. Way too many coincidences and intersecting stories to be realistic so the plot soon became as annoying as the people. Writing style was Ok but I kept waiting for it to get

better. Never happened.

Jill Meyer says

When I heard Adam Langer was writing a third novel, I hoped it would be a continuation of the wonderful characters we met in *Crossing California* and *Washington Story*. Those books ended in the 1980's and I have wondered how they would "age".

Well, Langer moved his fiction from Chicago to New York, and introduced us to a new crew of characters, who interact around an apartment on the Upper-Upper West Side. And, "interact" they do. One of the joys of a Langer novel is the intersection - often in odd ways - of various characters.

The first reader review of the novel gives a better description of the book than I can here.

Though ALL the writing is fine, I'd like to praise Langer's portrayal of "Herbie Mann", Ike's dog. The last chapter - *The Life of Mann* - almost had me in tears with it's brilliance.

Thanks, Adam, for another glorious read.

Larry H says

Adam Langer hit another home run with this book, his third. What I like best about his books is his ability to create funny, memorable and even touching situations out of seemingly mundane events (man finds himself priced out of his own apartment, couple struggles with finding themselves and pursuing parenthood, aspiring actor struggles to make it and finds himself distracted along the way), as well as his ability to create truly vivid characters. Even if I didn't like all of the characters (and in some cases wished for them a less happy ending than they ultimately got), they still have lived in my mind since I finished the book.

This is the story of several individuals in New York City whose lives intersect in sometimes predictable and sometimes surprising ways. We get into the worlds of real estate, theater, journalism, academia and finance, and I found myself caring a great deal about what happened to these people. This book at times gets a little complicated because there are so many characters, but it is definitely worth a read. And Langer's other books are also well worth a read.

Sarah says

A real estate fairy tale set in New York. If I'd ever lived in New York, or Manhattan Valley in particular, I would probably have enjoyed this more, but it's still a good read.

Very similar to his previous novels *Crossing California* and *The Washington Story*. Almost too similar... in the early chapters, Ike and Rebecca appear to be adult versions of Muley and Jill. Eventually, I stopped noticing the similarities and just enjoyed the story. A favorite passage, from Ike:

"He loves the sounds of baseball games in Morningside, mah-jongg tiles on 107th Street, playing cards outside the Frederick Douglass Apartments, the subway underfoot, the flutter and clang of the flags atop the Blockhouse -- every bit of it is music."

Fans of his previous novels will appreciate the references to Rovner! and that band's song, "(I Wanna) Soar."

Nancy says

. . . a New York story;

. . . a real estate career primer;

. . . a (man/dog) love story; and

. . . a warm and satisfying, mildly quirky modern novel.

One reviewer called this book predictable---but that didn't diminish its fun for me. It is well written and entertaining. I thoroughly enjoyed it.

UPDATE: "the morning after." I woke up thinking about this book---a rare occurrence for me, particularly since it was a casual read. One of the reasons this book resonated for me is that it says a lot about the nature of love and friendship, the nature of work and art. It is all on the surface; you don't need to dig for any of this, but the more I reflected on the book the more it gave me. Quite a treat.

Ric says

Wow, I feel that I just hovered over NYC and spied on a cosmopolitan group of some of its proud citizens. While doing so I could smell the strong scent of the city's ethnic foods, hear the loud noise of its traffic and feel the emotions as its neighborhoods continue to change. Adam Langer creates a wonderful tale that takes us over the Upper West Side of Manhattan. He becomes multiple characters including a dog (loveable Herbie Mann, one of the best supporting characters in a novel in my opinion) and a couple of pigeons just trying to survive the sometimes harsh city. In fact, that is what all of Langer's characters are doing, and in the meantime Langer creates a composition and orchestration that makes us want to take the 1st available plane to NYC and discover what's remaining of its pure soul. A cynical but sentimental novel that will make you smile and feel someone depressed that we are losing our cities to Starbucks and Pottery Barn.

Jim Leckband says

You know, giving four stars to a book because it reinforces your prejudices isn't a good character trait. But any book that relentlessly skewers a Tupac-quoting white guy who continuously uses "frickin'" is the bomb in my book. (I said "bomb" ironically, please don't assume that I'm a guy who un-ironically says words like "bomb", "frickin'", "dope", "chillin'" or other asinine words.) And that little parenthetical plea I just used illuminates one of the themes of the novels - that stereotypes are real if we adopt our behaviors around them. If we fake it, then so it makes us.

We can tell who the good guys are in this book because they are not adopting a false front to deceive. The plot revolves around a flat that is being sold beneath a tenant without a lease. The tenant, Ike; the buyer, Rebecca; the dog, Herbie Mann; and the theater impresario are all hiding their true/former selves not as a disguise, but because it seems life and circumstances have let their true selves go. The characters that explicitly act who they are not, Darrell, the buyer's husband and frickin' grad student; Josh/Joshua the realtor/actor; Mark the seller/asshole; Chloe the editor/fraudster, are seen to be the bad guys as they truly cause destruction to people, and if you think gentrification is bad, destruction to neighborhoods.

Everything is in flux in this novel, people are wanting to become other people, the 106th St. neighborhood is becoming gentrified, the integrity of the literary scene is being destroyed, but Langer doesn't seem this is all bad, because New York has always been about change. But it seems kinda sad that the bad guys mostly get to stay in New York while the good guys leave. That frickin' sucks ass as Darrell might say.
