



Jayber Crow: A Novel (Port William)

Wendell Berry

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Jayber Crow, born in Goforth, Kentucky, orphaned at age ten, began his search as a "pre-ministerial student" at Pigeonville College. There, freedom met with new burdens and a young man needed more than a mirror to find himself. But the beginning of that finding was a short conversation with "Old Grit," his profound professor of New Testament Greek. "You have been given questions to which you cannot be *given* answers. You will have to live them out—perhaps a little at a time."

"And how long is that going to take?"

"I don't know. As long as you live, perhaps."

"That could be a long time."

"I will tell you a further mystery," he said. "It may take longer."

Eventually, after the flood of 1937, Jayber becomes the barber of the small community of Port William, Kentucky. From behind that barber chair he lives out the questions that drove him from seminary and begins to accept the gifts of community that enclose his answers. The chair gives him a perfect perch from which to listen, to talk, and to see, as life spends itself all around. In this novel full of remarkable characters, he tells his story that becomes the story of his town and its transcendent membership.

Jayber Crow: A Novel (Port William) Details

Date : Published (first published September 5th 2000)

ISBN :

Author : Wendell Berry

Format : Kindle Edition 390 pages

Genre : Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Literature, Novels

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From Reader Review Jayber Crow: A Novel (Port William) for online ebook

``Laurie Henderson says

In the beginning Jayber Crow was a happy child living with his parents in northern Kentucky where life was still pretty primitive. No electricity or indoor plumbing and they grew all their own food. Jayber's parents had died of the flu after WW1 so his childless Aunt and Uncle brought him home to live giving him everything a child could possible need.

The lyrical descriptions of the countryside and Jayber's childhood reminded me of the book *The Yearling* where young Jody ran wild in rural Florida with his pet deer, Flag. Both Jayber and Jody are well loved and happy children but both children soon had a brutal ending to their idyllic and magical childhood.

Spoilers Below Beware!

Jayber Crow's elderly parents would both die while he was still a child and he was taken to an orphanage to live his teenage years.

Young Jody's magical childhood ends when his father is permanently crippled and preteen Jody had to take on all the responsibilities that his father was no longer able to fulfill.

The Yearling thankfully ended at that point with the reader now aware that Jody would be poor and miserable for the rest of his life. Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings would not write another 300 pages going into cruel detail of Jody's difficult new life.

The author of Jayber Crow, Wendell Berry, did decide to write another 300 pages detailing how Jayber's soul was crushed in the orphanage. Jayber returns to his original home town as the town barber where he still had a few childhood friends. But Jayber will live his life on the sidelines, listening to the talk in the barber shop of events in his customer's lives while his life remains unfulfilled.

Maybe I just didn't have the stomach for this tale of unrelenting woe as related by the rather garrulous Jayber Crow. The author did bring the beautiful, rural Kentucky alive for this reader and I wouldn't mind taking a vacation to Kentucky now to see it for myself.

Melki says

I'd had the idea, once, that if I could get the chance before I died I would read all the good books there were. Now I began to see that I wasn't apt to make it. This disappointed me, for I really wanted to read them all.

It says a lot that I started this book on September 23rd, and didn't finish it until November 12th. I meant to read a chapter each day, I really did, but I didn't exactly wake up each morning saying, gee . . . I wonder what madcap adventure ole Jayber's up to today?

'Cause he really didn't get up to much. He stood in place in his little barber shop with no running water, cut other men's hair, and watched the world go by. And, it went by without him.

The big problem is Jayber himself. Crow seems to be a minor character in his own life; an audience member, rather than an actor. Sometimes, this can work, IF a blank slate of a character meets and interacts with lots of quirky characters. But, there is no quirk factor in this book. Jayber's friends and neighbors are as bland and uninteresting as he is.

There is no doubt this is a beautifully written book, but there were many times I felt like quitting. In the end, I'm glad I didn't. Part III was wonderful, though sad, and melancholic, as Jayber witnesses the inevitable decline of his beloved small town.

It had about come to the point where nobody wanted to live in Port William who wasn't already in the habit of living there, or who could afford to live anyplace else.

Most people seem to have liked this one way more than I did, so I'm chalking it up to both wrong book at the wrong time, and a little bit of too many other titles on the stack calling my name.

Berry sure can write some pretty words, though.

I am a man who has hoped, in time, that his life, when poured out at the end, would say, "Good-good-good-good-good!" like a gallon jug of the prime local spirit. I am a man of losses, regrets, and griefs. I am a man full of love. I am a man of faith.

Fionnuala says

Other reviews have commented on the fictional part of this book, i.e. the life story of Jayber Crow so I will not mention it. Instead I will focus on how this book worked for me.

When I had finished it, I wondered about where I would shelve it (not something I often think of, and a tribute to how much I had valued reading it) and I immediately realised it belonged with a group of authors that I have come to love, a group who share a theme, the theme of 'place', with such as MacLeod, McGahern, Laxness.

If I had to formulate what 'place' means to me, I think I would conclude that it is close to being my version of faith, and 'geography' is probably my version of religion (I mention faith and religion because they are woven into Jayber Crow's conception of things). To me, geography has always been first and foremost about the physical landscape, this earth we inhabit, and the lives and histories of the animals and people who shape that landscape.

There is geography in every page of this book, geography that you can see and feel, that you can walk all over in every weather. There are people in this book whose histories you live and breath, in health and in sickness; even in death, these people remain tremendously alive in your memory.

That is the power of Berry's writing, that he has recorded the lives of a community and that his record will survive long after the landscape it inspired has been transformed.

The changing landscape is one of his pet themes and he has been criticised for being a fanatical preserver of the environment to the exclusion of change. I don't feel he is against change, just against change which destroys for no good reason. Like Hardy in his Wessex novels, Berry examines how progress impinges on land use and on the livelihoods of the people.

All of them knew that neither farming nor the place would continue long as they were. The dignity of continuity had been taken away. Both past and future were disappearing from them, the past because nobody would remember it, the future because nobody could imagine it. What they know was passing from the world. Before long it would not be known. They were the last of their kind.

Berry goes further than Hardy, by showing how land use changes the landscape irreversibly. I did not feel that he was preaching a doctrine here as some have claimed. The environment issues, along with the

spirituality issues he touches on, are just part of the history and geography of the place, as impossible to ignore as the flood line of the Kentucky river. I think he works on the principle that it is only by thoroughly examining the physical world for meaning that we can access meaningful abstract thought. I see him as a philosopher of the physical world as much as a storyteller.

You may have no interest in geography or the environment, or in the small details of people's lives in rural Kentucky during the twentieth century, and so you may think that Berry's book holds little for you. Stay a moment while I focus on the writing. The book is written as if the narrator, Jayber Crow is speaking directly to the reader, rather than writing anything down. In fact there is hardly a mention of pen and paper. Instead, there are wonderful intonations and echoes of the local way of speaking in the voice you hear in your head as you read. The language is not elaborate but it is nevertheless truly impressive what complex ideas emerge from Berry's simple but beautiful phrasing:

Every shakeable thing has got to be shaken. In a sense, nothing that was ever lost in Port William ever has been replaced. In another sense, nothing is ever lost, and we are compacted together forever, even by our failures, our regrets, and our longings.

Do read it.

Diane Barnes says

Oh, Jayber! You told me your story and now I am drained, and devastated, and full of the joy of having known you. You, sir, are that rarest of things: A good man. A man who did his job, helped his neighbors, loved and laughed when he could, and, all along tried to do no harm.

Let me tell the rest of you about Jayber. Orphaned twice by the age of 10, sent to an orphanage where he got an education and learned to love books, he was told he needed to "make something of himself", so decided he heard the call and went to a seminary on a scholarship. There he quickly decided there were more questions than answers, so he made his way back to the community of Port William, Kentucky, where his life had begun. There he became a barber, the only one in town.

From 1937, for the next 50 years, Port William became his family. He was an ineligible bachelor who never made enough money to support a family of his own, because he stopped trying to make something of himself in order to be happy. For 50 years, Jayber took care of his community in the small ways that made a difference. He cut their hair, and dug their graves, and cleaned their church. He listened to their stories, and kept their secrets, along with a few secrets of his own.

Now, if this sounds like a book that lacks action and drama, think again. Ordinary lives are the stuff of history, and contain enough sorrow and pain and excitement and disappointment for a hundred Shakespeares to write about. Jayber tells us about his little corner of the world, and makes its history and its people come alive.

This novel is a love story, a tragedy, a cautionary tale, and a history of sorts. It's also one of the most joyful books I've ever read. Life is a wonderful thing, if we can appreciate what we have and take care of it. Be good, to yourself and to others, do no harm, stop trying to make something of yourself, and be happy. It's really not that hard.

Kj says

An easy five star rating for this one- half way through I already knew it had become one of my favorite

books.

Not driven by plot, in fact not "driven" in any sense, this is a story that walks you gently and honestly through many parts of a life. It's hard to put words to a reading experience such as this one that takes you deep into the heart of what it means to live, to be alive. Despite its fiction narrative, "Jayber Crow" feels far closer to a guided meditation on youth and age, Progress vs. nature, community vs. materialism. About every five pages, a passage would knock me over with its distillation of truth and beauty from that which is most obvious and taken for granted. Over and over, I read things that made me say "I have always thought/felt that, and no one has ever put language to it." I've never used "integrity" to describe a book, but that is what this book showed me, and in a way that feels livable and desirable.

Wendell Berry's heart for the things that run deeper than the passing of years, leads me, more than anything I have yet to encounter, towards an understanding of where our American culture sold its soul in exchange for borrowed fantasies of what qualifies as a life. And at the same time, this is one of the most hope-giving narratives I've ever had the blessing to sit with night after night.

Oh read it. Read it. I don't know what else to say.

Sue says

Wonderful book that seemed to increase in wonder as I read. Berry's ability to create characters of such "person-hood" amazed me. His creations, beginning with Jayber Crow, seem real, gifted with actual traits (good and not so) as would be found among living, breathing folk. Their experiences seem to reflect American life of this time and place....but I think even more than this place. For me, Berry has captured some elemental realities of American life. Though I have not ever lived in a small place like Port William, I could relate to some of the changes in Jayber's world from memories of the changes in my suburban life as a child and teen in the 1950s and 1960s.

And he writes of these changes, in people, places, nature, and the world at large, so beautifully. His language simply evokes the emotions, the scenic wonder, Jayber's awe of nature and life.

But I wouldn't want anyone to think this is a story with no humor. This is Jayber's view of his life from his childhood in the 1920s through to the 1980s and he experienced so much along the broad spectrum of emotions.

In one final part of the review, I want to leave with a couple of examples of Berry's descriptive prose. This is what pulled me in to discover the wonders of Jayber himself.

The surface of that quieted river, as I thought in those old days at Squires Landing, as I think now, is like a window looking into another world that is like this one except that it is quiet. Its quietness makes it seem perfect. The ripples are like the slats of a blind or a shutter through which we see imperfectly what is perfect. Though that other world can be seen only momentarily, it looks everlasting. As the ripples become more agitated, the window darkens and the other world is hidden. As I did not know then but know now, the surface of the river is like a living soul, which is easy to disturb, is often disturbed, but, growing calm, shows what it was, is, and will be. (p 20)

And musings of a different sort:

Hate succeeds. The world gives plentiful scope and means to hatred, which always finds its justifications and fulfills itself perfectly in time by destruction of the things of time. That is why war is complete and spares nothing, balks at nothing, justifies itself by all that is sacred, and seeks victory by everything that is profane. Hell itself, the war the war that is always among us, is the creature of time, unending time, unrelieved by any light or hope.

But love, sooner or later, forces us out of time. It does not accept that limit. Of all that we feel and do, all the virtues and all the sins, love alone crowds us at last over the edge of the world. For love...is not explainable or even justifiable. It is itself the justifier. We do not make it. If it did not happen to us, we could not imagine it... It is in the world but not altogether of it. It is of eternity. It takes us there when it most holds us here. (p 249)

And finally, as Jayber sums his life up:

This is not an exactly true account of my life. The necessity of telling it has caused me to divide it into strands... Some of the funniest things have happened on some of the saddest days. Sometimes I have been happy in the midst of sorrow, or sorrowful in the midst of happiness... This is, as I said and believe, a book about Heaven, but I must say too that it has been a close call..... (p 354)

I do highly recommend this book to everyone and, lest you fear that this talk of Heaven and Hell means a book full of "sermonizing", never fear. Wendell Berry is too smart and much too great a writer for that!

Candi says

"As I did not know then but know now, the surface of the river is like a living soul, which is easy to disturb, is often disturbed, but, growing calm, shows what it was, is, and will be."

This book was an absolute joy to read and Jayber Crow one of the most wise and gentle souls I have thus far encountered in a piece of literature. I read this while on a much-needed family vacation, which incidentally also happened to be my twenty year anniversary to one of the most honorable men I have had the pleasure of meeting in the real world! Somehow the opportunity to read this book came at the perfect time for me. Anniversaries, birthdays, and holidays mark times when we often find ourselves reflecting on our own lives, the choices we have made, the different paths we have followed. Jayber helped me along with my own reflection, and I feel a better and more peaceful person for it.

Jayber was born in Goforth, Kentucky where he lived for a short time before being orphaned twice over, if you will. While memories of his loved ones at an early age "grow misty and fade away under the burden of questions", what does remain and seems constant, despite its shifting currents, is the river. "I felt, a long time

before I knew, that the river had shaped the land. The whole country leaned toward the river. All the streams flowed to it. It flowed by, and yet it stayed. It brought things and carried them away. I did not know where it flowed from or to, but I knew that it flowed a great distance through the opening it had made. The current told me that." Jayber will often return to the river, both literally and figuratively, for the remainder of his life.

After receiving a calling to the clerical life, Jayber enrolls as a pre-ministerial student at Pigeonville College where he soon loses not his faith, but rather his direction once he fails to find answers to a multitude of questions. Jayber once again travels an unidentified path until he eventually winds up in Port William, Kentucky, not far from his place of birth. It is here that he establishes himself as the town barber in 1937, a position he holds for the rest of his life. Like Jayber, I found myself settling into this town and befriending its people. We now arrive at the heart of the novel, the pulse of the persons that share their lives with Jayber. I felt as if I too sat up in that barber chair, observing those that entered the shop and even those that passed by. I was charmed to meet many of these wonderful characters. Most of them lived a quiet, unassuming life - working their farms, attending to their small businesses, caring for their families. Jayber continues along his course of contemplation, asking himself introspective and often unanswerable questions. If you are like me, then Jayber will induce you to do the same. The institution of marriage, structured religion, the senselessness of war, the practice of agribusiness, the gift of nature, death, and grief are all food for thought. This is also a story about pure and unrequited love. Mostly it is about the varying branches of our lives and the choices we make. As Jayber traverses his life, much like the river flows through the land, he learns from his mistakes and triumphs. He reaches an awareness that will bring comfort to his spirit. *"But now it looks to me as though I was following a path that was laid out for me, unbroken, and maybe even as straight as possible, from one end to the other, and I have this feeling, which never leaves me anymore, that I have been led."*

This novel is simply beautiful. Wendell Berry writes with a lyrical prose that infuses Jayber's words with honesty and heartfelt wisdom. It is thoughtful and calming, never whimsical, never preachy. It is a balm for your soul. I know I can rest easy with the paths I have followed thus far. A book for the favorites list for sure.

I can't finish without sharing a couple of bookish quotes that I loved:

"I hungered and thirsted to hear somebody talk about books who knew more about them than I did."

"I'd had the idea, once, that if I could get the chance before I died I would read all the good books there were. Now I began to see that I wasn't apt to make it. This disappointed me, for I really wanted to read them all."

Sara says

Before I can tell you how much I loved this book, I must tell you that my father, like Jayber Crow, was a barber in a time when the barber shop was a social place and not a styling salon. I loved this very male place, where I could very rarely slip myself into a corner and listen to old men talk about the weather and the crops and gossip about one another in a friendly and civil way. My father was also a self-taught fiddler and music would often pour from the back room of the shop well into the night. I thought of this place as a crossroads of our community. There was no one that my father did not know and know well.

With this in mind, I was thrilled to meet Jayber Crow, a bachelor barber in Port William, Kentucky, who serves his community with so much more than a haircut and a shave. Wendell Berry opens this man's life and heart to us and through his interactions with the community in Port William, the lives of his neighbors and friends. The story unfolds, with vignettes sprinkled throughout detailing the events that make up the

everyday lives of the entire community. But, most importantly, we meet Jayber, whose boyhood is laced with both tragedy and rescue, and whose bachelorhood is really as peopled with love and attachment as a life can be.

Wendell Berry has a marvelously descriptive and captivating style. It sometimes felt to me as if I were sitting in that barber shop and listening in on the conversation, or on the bank of the river pole in hand, the story unfolded in such a charming and folksy manner. But this book is anything but surface material, there is depth galore and major issues tackled in profound ways.

Prayer is like lying awake at night, afraid, with your head under the cover, hearing only the beating of your own heart. It is like a bird that has blundered down the flue and is caught indoors and flutters at the windowpanes. It is like standing a long time on a cold day, knocking at a shut door. But sometimes a prayer comes that you have not thought to pray, yet suddenly there it is and you pray it. Sometimes you just trustfully and easily pass into the other world of sleep. Sometimes the bird finds that what looks like an opening is an opening, and it flies away. Sometimes the shut door opens and you go through it into the same world you were in before, in which you belong as you did not before.

I could quote dozens of passages that address such issues and do them with a candor and feeling that is seldom encountered. I can see myself re-reading this book someday and finding hidden nuggets of truth and wisdom buried deep beneath the story line that were missed the first time around.

As is often so, I owe a debt of gratitude to *The Southern Literary Trail* group for introducing me to this remarkable author. I know this will not be the last book I read by Mr. Berry. I wish I had discovered him earlier...but, as Jayber would agree, I am sure, it is better to meet a good man late than to never meet him at all.

Laura says

I totally fell in love with Jayber, Wendell Berry and the place. Berry makes it feel so easy. Touches you from the very beginning and never lets up, but in a very soothing way. This is going on my favorites, it's that good.

Margitte says

I must admit, after thoroughly pondering this philosophical novel, that I did not agree with some of the author's idealistic solutions to the world's problems, in particular the naive approach to agriculture and the economy. I will accept that it was not the author's own viewpoint, which I doubt, but that of our dearly beloved Jayber Crow's. However, the novel is a *tour de force* for lyrical prose and the philosophy behind heaven and hell.

Phew, the impact of Jayber Crow's unrequited love for Mattie Chatham ripped my guts out. I felt this deep sadness, almost sorrow, for this kind and gentle man's sincerity and loyalty to a woman he could never afford. And I wanted to cry for the trees lying helplessly uprooted in The Nest.

The full circle journey we took with Jayber Crow through his life as twice-orphaned little boy, then resident of an orphanage, then divinity school, odd jobs and then back to Port William in Kentucky as the town's only barber, left me yearning for more contact with this lonely man who made friends with his neighbors in his

barber shop which became the town's living room, where everyone shared their private thoughts and concerns. But Jayber also became friends with his readers. I did not want this friendship to end.

He was born at the river, then took away, and returned in his old age to the vein of water which determined the outcome of all life on earth. The river brought life, hope, enlightenment, and knowledge without words, but also confirmed the irreversible passage of time, and a sense of loss and oblivion. It flows by its own rules and divide by its own laws. The river was Jayber's soulmate. It kept Jayber moving forward at his own pace and time, and allow him to live by his own rules and decide his own destiny, which he hoped was heaven for all mankind.

What a great novel. I was thinking afterwards that the reader got emotionally so invested in this story, that we wanted to hang onto his trousers like little children, begging him not to go. Jayber did not only understand his town, he also claimed his reader's souls and climbed into our minds, knocking on the doors of our own need for goodness and love. How can we let go of someone who understood us this well? Who knew where we hid our vulnerabilities and lonely thoughts. No wonder we were left hanging when the end came and we wanted to cry for our loss. An honorable man. A decent soul. A caring earth angel to those who did not even know it.

I'm so deeply touched by this book, that words allude me completely.

I had this same overwhelming urge to meet a character in a book with **Ove**, in *A Man Called Ove* by Frederik Backman,

Ebenezer in *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* by G.B.Edwards,

and

Larry Ott in *Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter* by Tom Franklin. Another three loners who had to navigate their journey through their lives by their own sense of remaining true to themselves and what they believe in.

A slow read, but a necessary one.

PS. Jayber Crow's emotional connection with the river reminded me of this quote:

From my village I see as much of the universe as you can see from earth, So my village is as big as any other land For I am the size of what I see, Not the size of my height. —Fernando Pessoa as Alberto Caeiro, *The Keeper of Sheep*

Esteban del Mal says

Pet peeves:

1.) Cars with dealer license plate frames. You bought the car, is it necessary to advertise where you bought it from? For free? This is America, you dumbass. Have some self-respect.

2.) Company vehicles that have an overhead dome light that has some sort of short in it that causes it to light-up whenever I go over railroad tracks, potholes, or spare change in the road at a speed of greater than 3 MPH and consequently makes me feel like the centerpiece in some hackneyed corporate motivational workshop complete with strobe lights.

3.) Novels written in the first-person that supposedly take place in the American South during the Great Depression that present a narrator that never made it past the eighth grade but somehow manages to sound like Truman Capote and John Waters had a baby and left it in the care of Mr. and Mrs. Thurston Howell. As cool as it may sound, it doesn't work.

This novel is unconvincing. As unconvincing as the bucolic America it conjures. It's sentimental pap and I couldn't finish it. Couldn't really even begin it.

Bucolic America is a commodity. It's a shiny bauble that you don't need but which has been foisted upon you by a culture that thinks better of itself than it deserves.

Here's the good news: that culture is scrapping the bottom of the barrel if it's promoting the particular sentimentality this rustic boob is best acquainted with.

Lately, I've been inclined to think of Goodreads as some sort of psychological experiment; that all the personalities I interact with on here are really fronts for one or two graduate students somewhere. Graduate students who alternately fuck with and flatter me in some morbidly-algorithmic-impregnable manner such that I jump through my assigned hoops just so. This is a ridiculous notion, of course. But it is an easy explanation. And people, of which I am one, like easy explanations.

America is an easy explanation.

As you may have deduced, I drive a lot. For work, that easiest of explanations. I drive through and around a part of the country that many would absent-mindedly, if assuredly, consider bucolic. Once, late at night, I was driving down a quiet byway and nearly ran over a young man. He was sitting, cross-legged, square in the middle of the road. He looked placidly anesthetized. I missed hitting him by mere inches. His expression never changed as I, heart racing, palms sweaty, mouth cursing, eyes frozen wide, swerved around him in a mass of metal propelled at a speed that would have obliterated the human body.

I didn't stop.

Cathrine ?? says

5★

Less is more.

If the terms environmental activist, organic farming, or sustainable development have a place in your personal beliefs or you're a fan of Thoreau, Muir, or Gandhi, you will no doubt appreciate or love Wendell Berry and this book. If not, chances are you will really like it anyway. Fair to say he uses this story as a platform to espouse his beliefs, many of which I also embrace, but beyond that it's an exceptionally and beautifully told tale about a man and the life, or more pertinently, the lack of one he chooses to live. If you want a taste of what you'll find in the pages just read through some of the shared quotes on the books GR home page and you will know if you want to share Jayber's life journey and let it come to rest in your heart. <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes...>

Chrissie says

What do I think of this book? I absolutely hated parts and other parts totally blew me over, the words were so

perfect. The author IS an acclaimed poet. I was never indifferent to this book. Either I was furious or astounded by the quality of the writing. Should I give it one star for all the times I felt like dumping it immediately? I cannot give it two or three stars because they are lukewarm ratings. I was never lukewarm to this book. Yes, I liked it a lot, four stars it is. I will explain what I liked and what I absolutely hated.

When Wendell Berry describes nature - a river, a forest, a foggy morning – it is not just beautiful, it is completely accurate. A river is something you hear and see. You feel its presence, and all this is conveyed in his words. Me, I adore walking in the woods or along a beach so I felt very attached to Berry's words.

Humor. There is lots of humor. Tongue in cheek humor and that is my favorite. Great dialogs too.

I look at the story as a whole and I feel the message the author wants to convey is perfectly demonstrated by the events, by what happens, particularly its ending. This is a book about a barber (Jayber Crow) in Port William, Kentucky. He tells us about his life living through the events of the 1900s. He speaks of not only his life but all the people of the town, since being the barber he comes to know everyone. This is not a book of historical fiction; you do not read this to learn about either of the wars or the Vietnam War or the Depression, all of which he lives through. He never went to war since his heart disqualified him. He was orphaned twice, but I will not explain that. Read the book instead. He was first educated to become a priest, but he realized it wasn't his calling. He did have faith. He philosophizes and thinks and questions. All of the things he lived through shape his personality. Berry creates a character that is believable.

The author has a pet peeve and he speaks through Jayber. Agriculture has become big business and this is just not good in the long run! Natural resources are being wasted. Small town life, based on sharing and trade where everyone knows each other is always better than big business. Small scale is always better than large scale production. But it is here that I got so annoyed with the book. I agree with the author's/barber's point of view. I am not opposed to the message, but it is repeated and said over and over and over to the point where I just wanted him to zip his mouth. Enough! I get it. I agree. I am not an idiot. I don't need a lecture. Will you shut up! Do you understand how annoyed I got?!

There. If you can stand a little too much philosophizing and preaching and religious talk, which I could not quite swallow, you will also be given a good story that holds together, where the characters feel real, with lines that will make you smile or laugh or chuckle and most everyone will agree with the message imparted. The author is a poetexcept in those parts when he is proselytizing through Jayber.

P.S. Paul Michael narrated the audiobook I listened to. I liked his southern dialect. I liked the speed, which is rather slow, but I did want him to hurry up when Jayber went on and on and on with his proselytizing soliloquies. The women all sounded the same, and that annoyed me because their personalities were different!

Gloria says

Read through #3.

Perhaps it's just one of those stories which only intensifies and becomes greater with each reading...

All I know is that with every reading, the end of this book makes me feel like I need to take a step back from everything-- and really assess the world around me with clearer eyes.

And work toward mercy.

One year later, after my first read through, I am amending my original 4 star rating to 5-- even though it deserves 6 or 7. Beautiful, haunting, soul-stirring and will not leave me in peace.

I'm embarrassed that it took me so long to get through this book. I could chalk it up to busyness and school and all the other things that wrap up my time, but I've devoured lesser books amid those activities.

And I think therein lies the key. This book was amazing. The prose so beautiful that I couldn't have any distractions around me to diminish it. And, I'm realizing, I pored over this book more slowly because I simply didn't WANT to finish reading it. I wanted to keep hearing more of Jayber Crow's story and life.

I loved how it laid out his life in distinct sections-- from childhood, young adulthood, to being older. While his character evolved in some ways, the core of him was visible all the way through. I also appreciated the moments in it where the humor actually made me laugh aloud. It's one of those stories where you earnestly wished the characters were real ... because you'd will yourself to live where they are ... and I'd probably fall in love with the shy, somewhat reclusive Jayber Crow.

PattyMacDotComma says

4.5★

“Where, I have asked myself, is this reflection? It is not on the top of the water, for if there is a little current the river can slide frictionlessly and freely beneath the reflection and the reflection does not move.”

There's a saying that you never step in the same river twice. So it seems reasonable for Jayber Crow to ask the question. Where IS the reflection?

Most of his life he wonders what purpose he serves by being alive in the world. Every once in a while he has a sudden epiphany or inspiration or urge and changes direction without warning, seeming to feel it was preordained and meant to be that he should take a next step.

His life began by the river at Port William, where he was orphaned and had to move, first to another family and then to school. Thinking he felt a calling for the Church, he studied at college but there was too much he couldn't reconcile.

“But these preachers I'm talking about all thought that the soul could do no wrong, but always had its face washed and its pants on and was in agony over having to associate with the flesh and the world. And yet these same people believed in the resurrection of the body.”

He wondered what kind of a preacher he'd make, feeling as he did about the Bible.

“... when I preached, I thought, I would just not mention the parts that gave me trouble—“

That didn't seem feasible, so he took off rather suddenly from college and wandered away to find himself. He'd learned a bit of hair cutting at school and luckily happened upon a barber looking for an off-sider, so he settled – for a bit. But once again, he got itchy feet and took off, feeling the pull of Port William and the

river.

He arrived at the height of a flood and luckily again happened upon a fellow with a boat, who ferried him across the river and told him they needed a barber in town and he knew the perfect building.

For years his barbershop was a pivotal stop on the male social calendar, some men calling by daily to read the paper and yarn, while some had a shave and a haircut. He heard all the gossip, but it was almost as if it didn't matter what they said in front of him.

He felt he was living on the edge of things, never quite included, like a bystander in his own life, but it never seemed to occur to him that possibly everyone feels like this at one time or another. He's a bit like the kid who thinks everyone knows how to do everything except me. Why am I so dumb? Why am I left out?

But he had fun, too, buying a car, flirting at dances in the bigger town nearby, worrying more about the flesh and less about the soul.

“I was well acquainted with the unforbidden, but now that I was accumulating a little money I invested some in the forbidden. Wherever I could locate the forbidden—and with our clientele, it wasn't hard—I went and tried it. Wherever the sirens sang, I went ashore. Wherever I heard the suck of whirlpools and the waters gnashing on the rocks, I rowed hard to get there. It's a little bit of a wonder that I didn't get cast up from the depths in several pieces, or at least contract a foul disease.”

He reckons what saved him was his love of books and miserly nature.

“I was a cut-rate prodigal.”

That's only the barest of bones of what is a rich, deliciously philosophical treatise on life and the nature of man. He despairs of the loss of the small, self-sufficient family farm with a team of mules and a hardworking family.

“We went steadily from one thing to another, from can see to can't see, and then on by lamplight . . .”

He is no fan of the would-be corporate farmer who clears all the trees, fills sheds full of machinery and grows single crops, all on borrowed money. The soil grows hard and sour and the almighty dollar rules. It's a familiar theme of *The Good Old Days*. He even has the retired folk moving to smaller holdings where they can still house the mules and raise chickens and vegetables, but he doesn't really clarify where the food and goods come from for those without land.

It's a romance, but for one who has lived on the land, I know that everybody can't farm their own few acres with mules and expect to feed the world. Even in Jayber's early years, more was needed – there were already a lot of hungry people. I got tired of the preachiness, I must admit.

He opened his barbershop in the late 30s, before WW2, the calamity that sent so many young men and women to their doom. **“Nothing could reduce the strangeness and dreadfulness of that phrase, ‘gone across the waters.’”**

By this time he'd taken on a second job as church janitor and gravedigger. No longer a religious man, he still enjoyed the company of churchgoers on a Sunday morning and the company of the quiet departed in the graveyard.

“I saw that, for me, this country would always be populated with presences and absences, presences of

absences, the living and the dead.”

This book is such a collection of quotable quotes, aphorisms, epigrams, anecdotes, and memorable phrases, that it needs leisurely reading to let you mull it over and soak up the atmosphere.

I didn't like the political tone here and there, but I enjoyed the narrative and the wonderful descriptions:

“His chin stuck out, when he wanted it to, as though he used it for pushing open doors.”

A building: **“The whole thing was slung a little askew like an old dog half-minded to lie down, and it was badly in need of paint.”**

Ultimately, it's a life that begins and ends with the river.

“I stop and look at it. I think of its parallel, never-meeting banks, which yet never part. I think of it lying there in its long hollow, at the foot of all the landscape, a single opening from its springs in the mountains all the way to its mouth. It is a beautiful thought, one of the most beautiful of all thoughts. I think it not in my brain only but in my heart and in all the lengths of my bones.”

It's on my Old Folks shelf along with other favourites like A Man Called Ove and Britt-Marie Was Here. I enjoy seeing how people have lived their lives and what they've learned or taught others.

Connie says

It was such a pleasure to read Wendell Berry's lyrical prose about a quiet, observant man living through the 20th Century. Jayber Crow was orphaned twice as a young boy, first when his parents died and then when his adoptive aunt and uncle passed away. He was sent to an orphanage, spent time at a divinity school until he questioned his faith, and worked some small jobs. But the river that flowed near his rural childhood home called to him, and he made his way back to Port William, Kentucky.

Jayber became the barber in Port William, and later added a few part-time jobs as a grave digger and church janitor. The barbershop was a wonderful atmosphere to introduce the residents of Port William to Jayber. "It's a fact that knowledge comes to barbers, just as stray cats come to milking barns. If you are a barber and you stay in one place long enough, eventually you will know the outlines of a lot of stories, and you will see how the bits and pieces of knowledge fit in." (94)

He became part of the small Kentucky town, and had a vision of a gathered community. "What I saw now was the community imperfect and irresolute but held together by the frayed and always fraying, incomplete and yet ever-holding bonds of the various sorts of affection. There had maybe never been anybody who had not been loved by somebody, who had been loved by somebody else, and so on and on." (205)

As the 20th Century marched on, Jayber chronicled wars, births and deaths, strong friendships, and a secret unrequited love for a married woman. He saw traditional farming methods being replaced by larger agribusinesses that took on substantial loans. Jayber saw Port William change as the interstate cut through farms. "It divided neighbor from neighbor. It made distant what had been close, and close what had been distant." (281)

As an older man, Jayber moved to a small home by the river. Wendell Berry, who is also a poet, shows us Jayber's wisdom, his reverence for nature, the change of seasons, and his desire for self-sufficiency. I hated

to turn the last page and see this beautiful book come to an end.

Dolors says

Jayber Crow is an octogenarian barber who sits under the poplars that hedge in his cabin and stares at the reflections on the river water that is always running somewhere, with time floating in swirls of memories of a life fully lived and now suddenly gone, its light extinguished from within. And yet, this very same river erodes the hills and pastures that have crowned Jayber's home since the beginning of times as if to remind him that everything changes so that the essential remains the same.

I know what you are thinking.

What can the chronicle of community life in rural Kentucky, the unfulfilled desires of a loner trying to make sense of his declining faith or the musings of a conservationist have to do with you, a modern reader? How can they add anything new? I am sure you have had your share of going over old times and that you are familiar with many authors that have addressed similar subjects.

I won't lie to you, this book is about all that, but it is also much more.

In fact, this book is a lot of things. Not because Berry is ambitious in his vast scope, but because he remains faithful to his vision of the world.

This book is the beginning and the end, a moral voice and a confession, a ferocious criticism to technical progress or materialism that devaluates the human.

It is the definite love story that will make you weep as you've never done before, a hymn to friendship, a tribute to the land that breathes out the wisdom of past generations.

It is a spiritual journey towards the culmination of a life, insignificant for its achievements, but all-abiding for its ability to detect and spread beauty even after its fleeting time has ticked out.

It turns out that *Jayber*, our old barber, is a philosopher after all, and that his self-effacing first-person narration becomes an intimate meditation on the mysteries of existence and the retelling of his lifelong quest to overcome fear and anger and replace them with enduring love. He becomes a monk married to his ideals that takes the vote of chastity to balance out the unfairness that befalls on the wife he won't ever have and transforms his barber shop into an unconventional church where the Coulters, the Penns, the Feltners, the Keiths and the Chantams congregate to have a haircut and to be listened to like nowhere else in town. Barbers are known to be good listeners and Jayber was born to be both.

Wendell Berry's prose is a clear-sighted reflection of the reality his characters struggle against, sailing the turbulent waters of the quotidian. The reader gets to see them appear and recede in the dark hole of WWI and WWII, defeated by illness or consumed by their own delusions, but in spite of this constant flow of lives parading through the years, there is a strong sense of timelessness that is closely related to the physical space they inhabit.

It's precisely in the perpetuity of the natural world, in the idea of a place that anchors aimless spirits where Jayber's heartache finds a comforting quietude, a solace that quenches his chronic loneliness.

Heaven is right here.

Beneath the shade of double-trunked white oaks and the song of twittering birds. In silent conversation among good friends. In the dark soil that yields crops and swaying wheat. In that so much awaited smile that *covers us with light*. In the boat that goes with the tide to cross this river, where you will see Jayber wishing, waiting for you, sitting patiently on the other side.

Camie says

Jayber Crow is an orphan twice over who ends up in an orphanage at age ten. Though later he finds the means to get back to his hometown Port William and become the local barber (whose shop is a social hub), he ultimately chooses a more solitary peaceful life living in a borrowed cabin by the river. A fine story of small community life, the beauty of nature, unrequited love, and a life well lived. The best acclaim for one book is wanting to continue reading the author's work. Luckily there are eight other books in the Port William series.

Read for OTSouthern Literary Trail -August -5 Stars

Cecily says

Still waters run deep

That line is old wisdom, recorded in English from 1400, and Latin before that.

A river runs through the town, and Jayber's life, "a barrier and yet a connection" to other worlds, its many creeks and branches reflected in the digressive storytelling. Jayber is a quiet observer of his small community. He is a contributor and participant as well, but it's his gentle and generous philosophical musings that form the eddies and undercurrents of this understated novel. The flotsam and jetsam taken and discarded by a river in flood have unexpected beauty and utility.

It's a fictional autobiography spanning most of the 20th century (Jayber was born in 1915 and lives into the 1980s), in and near Port William, Kentucky: two world wars, wars in Korea and Vietnam, the coming of cars, interstate, and of agribusiness. He is an educated man, content to be town barber, gravedigger, and church janitor. He, and the town itself, are the central characters.

There is not much plot, or perhaps there are many plots: there is an overall current from Jayber's birth to death, but you never know where the ripples, tides, waves, dams will take you in any chapter: the cast is large and tangled. Like a rich casserole or stew, it's the subtle interactions of a multitude of ingredients that tickle the tastebuds, please the eye, give depth of flavour, and provide sustenance for the future.

Fate

Circumstances during my reading made the theme of Fate, big and small, stand out. There is great political uncertainty around the world (impossible to ignore with 24-hour, multi-media global news), and personal uncertainty for some of my close family, and thus for me, as well.

Two key quotes from the book were enhanced by my receiving two related but contrasting ideas from different sources at the same time:

- "The world as it is would always be a reminder of the world that was, and the world that is to come." Jayber Crow.
- "The mercy of the world is you don't know what's going to happen." Jayber's friend, Mat Feltner.
- "The disadvantage [of not knowing] is that sometimes we fear more than we need." A dear, wise friend of mine.

- “Do not be afraid; our fate Cannot be taken from us; it is a gift.” Dante Alighieri (GR QotD).

The Wisdom of Jayber

“I have books to read, and much to sit and watch. I try not to let good things go by unnoticed.”
“She treasured up the knowledge that, though she was not happy, happiness existed.”

This is a non-religious book of wisdom, related by a solitary pillar of the community. Jayber’s pragmatic morality and accessible philosophy are gradually imparted, alongside straightforward tales of ordinary folk. Except that he demonstrates there is no such thing as an ordinary person. He certainly isn’t.

I like Jayber as a person, along with his philosophical diversions, and I really admire his attitude to life and people, but two-thirds through, some of the peripheral stories were not holding my interest quite as firmly as I hoped. His somewhat directionless doggedness also irked a little.

But the final few chapters were stunning, as his decades-long secret sacrifice for love throws all his admirable traits into the spotlight: his quiet acceptance of and triumph over tragedies; his refusal to feel sorry for himself; his compassion for others - especially those he doesn't like; the way his Christian heritage seeps through his more secular outlook; how he remembers and reveres the dead; his communing with nature (especially trees and the river); his love of books and the simple life; his loyalty and determination to repay debts of all kinds, and most of all, his hopeful and forgiving attitude.

He has no real faults, and the wrongs he does are minor, rare, and rectified (perhaps his initials are no coincidence), yet he is utterly believable.

The world needs more Jayber Crows.

Why Write, and for Whom?

One nagging question was who Jayber was telling his story to, and why. It's not just him talking to himself, because there is (at least) one occasion when he addresses the reader (or listener?) directly, "I can't tell **you** exactly how Athey managed his farm" (page 178).

Subtext?

I may be in breach of this, from the front of the book, but what better company could I have than “other explainers”?

NOTICE

Persons attempting to find a "text" in this book will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a "subtext" in this book will be banished; persons attempting to explain, interpret, explicate, analyze, deconstruct, or otherwise "understand" it will be exiled to a desert island in the company only of other explainers.

BY ORDER OF THE AUTHOR

Quotes

- “Telling a story is like reaching into a granary full of wheat and drawing out a handful. There is always more to tell than can be told.”
- “Its history was its living memory of itself which passed over the years like a moving beam of light.”

- “The river itself leaves marks but bears none.”
- “The surface of the quieted river... is like a window looking into another world that is like this one except that it is quiet... The ripples are like the slats of a blind or shutter through which we see imperfectly what is perfect. Though that other world can be seen only momentarily, it looks everlasting... The surface of the river is like a living soul, which is easy to disturb... but, growing calm, shows what it was, is, and will be.”
- “Not quite nameless, but also not quite named.” Orphans, known by initial and surname.
- “We lived within a net of rules tightly strung between ourselves and the supposed disorder and wickedness of the world. But the meshes were always a little too wide... There was leakage in both directions.”
- “I belonged... to what I remembered and not to the place where I was.”
- “My life just filled out into all the freedom it was allowed, like water seeking its level.”
- “You have been given questions to which you cannot be *given* answers, You will have to live them out.” How long? “As long as you live, perhaps... It may take longer.”
- The progression of a drunken evening is illustrated by the changing impression of the moon:
“The moon hanging all alone in the sky, its light pouring down over everything.”
“The moon had become abashed and uncertain of its position out there in the fathomless sky.”
“The embarrassment of the unsteadied moon.”
And eventually, he sees two moons.
- “I remained a sort of bystander a lot longer than I remained a stranger.” Small town stuff.
- “You seem not longer to be standing together in the center of time. Now you are on time’s edge, looking off into eternity.” Talking to aging customers.
- “He was not by nature a man who was very much in evidence.” A passive and unhappily married man.
- “In winter... the church seemed to admit the light strictly on its own terms, as if uneasy about the frank sunshine of this benighted world.”
- “History overflows time. Love overflows the allowance of the world.”
- “Love is slow and accumulating, and no matter how large or high it grows, it falls short. Love comprehends the world, though we don’t comprehend it.”
- “Love... forces us out of time... If it did not happen to us, we could not imagine it... It is in the world but is not altogether of it. It is of eternity.”
- “People sometimes confided in me deliberately; sometimes almost forgetfully, they handed me puzzle pieces... How could I help but notice that some pieces fitted together?”
- “Prayer is like lying awake at night, afraid... It is like a bird that has blundered down the flue... It is like standing a long time on a cold day, knocking at a shut door... But sometimes... the shut door opens.”
- “I lived as I thought she did: hoping for the good, reconciled to the bad, welcoming the little unexpected happinesses that came along.”

- “Both the past and the future were disappearing... the past because nobody would remember it, and the future because nobody could imagine it.”
- “Those who wish to see Him [Jesus] must see Him in the poor, the hungry, the hurt, the wordless creatures, the groaning and travailing beautiful world.”
- “For any sin, we all suffer. That is why our suffering is endless.”
- “The mercy of the world is time. Time does not stop for love, but it does not stop for death and grief, either.”
- “For me, this country would always be populated by presences and absences, presences of absences, the living and the dead.”
- “Tight of pocket... but free of heart... the Branches seemed uninterested in... making something of themselves. What they liked was making something of nearly nothing.”
- “I feel more religious... here beside this corrupt and holy stream” than in church.
- “I have lived on the edge even of my own life. I have made plans enough, but I see now that I have never lived by plan... *All* the important things have happened by surprise.” Although he does make a few, highly significant decisions.
- “The new slavery has improved upon the old by giving the new slaves the illusion that they are free. The Economy does not take people’s freedom by force... it *buys* their freedom, pays for it, and then persuades its money back again with shoddy goods and the promise of freedom. ‘Buy a car’ ...”
- “This is a book about Heaven. I know it now. It floats among us like a cloud and is the realist thing we know and the least to be captured.”
- “Faith puts you out on a wide river in a little boat, in the fog, in the dark.”

Related Reading

Jayber Crow had been on my TBR for a while, but after reading and loving **The Book of Ebenezer Le Page** (which I reviewed [HERE](#)), several friends pointed out similarities with this. Ebenezer also has a long life, in a small community, and is solitary, but involved, though Jayber Crow is more philosophical, with more of an overt message. Both men stay loyal to (view spoiler), which is a similarity with Leo Gursky in **The History of Love** (which I reviewed [HERE](#)).

Another stoical, solitary, bookish, thoughtful man, embedded in his environment, is **Stoner** (which I reviewed [HERE](#)). That is one of my top three books; Jayber Crow is worthy to stand in Stoner’s shadow.

Michael says

A moving and uplifting portrait of heaven. That’s how Jayber Crow sees it as he reflects on his life as an ordinary man living his life as a barber in close connection to his community in rural Kentucky, Port William. Or maybe I should say an extraordinary man in an ordinary community. What makes Crow special is that he believes in love, even to the point of trying his best to love his enemies. On my part, I found it easy

to love him and hated for my time harvesting his wisdom and sensibilities to end. To me he is an unforgettable character and the book a timeless vision of a rural way of life I cherish from my own upbringing.

Like Berry himself, Crow had some early time with a farming community in north central Kentucky that set a baseline of Eden in his heart, which drew his return after some wanderings in the world. Crow is orphaned at a young age and is raised until the age of 11 by an aunt and uncle. But they die, and he ends up in a distant orphanage. From there he has a stint on scholarship at a divinity school. But he eventually realizes he really doesn't believe in prayer: "if Jesus' prayer in the garden wasn't granted, what is there for us to pray, except 'thy will be done', which there is no use in praying because it will be done anyhow?" After an aimless period of menial jobs, he finds himself at one point magnetically pulled back to his true home, Port Royal, a young man in his early twenties in 1937.

He feels the sense of home immediately in the acceptance he receives and in the help given him to set up a barber shop. Most of the men pass through his establishment, where all their hopes and concerns and all the news and rumors are shared. He sees his barber shop as effectively the living room of the town. It's a fact that knowledge comes to barbers, just as stray cats come to milking barns. He experiences the company of women when they bring their children in, as well as through his extra work as a janitor at a Protestant church. He experiences the gravity of life's travails through his other work as a gravedigger. Otherwise not much happens. He partakes of friendships from all walks of life, thrives on the seasons of gardening, fishing, and hiking the woods or along the river, and experiences the pervasive impacts on the community of the Depression, World War 2, and the boom times afterward. I appreciated the rhythm of his days when he retires to live in a cabin on the Kentucky River. An unrequited love for a married woman, Mattie, dwells sad and wonderful in his mind throughout much of the book.

It is in his reflections on the life he observes that makes his relatively uneventful journey a compelling quest of the spirit and lesson of hope for sustaining values threatened by the inevitable changes wrought by modernism. I have to forgive him for trying to tell his conclusions rather than showing them through the narrative. Having just read some of his essays on the destructiveness of modern agribusiness and forestry on sustainable local economies, I see how many of the characters in this book serve as means to illustrate his ideas. It does bring the issues to life in personal terms, but the spelling out of Berry's philosophy through Crow breaks some of my engagement in the story.

Here are some illustrations of Crow's attractive blend of pragmatic and spiritual outlook on life.

On one's possession by love:

So it is that the life force may take possession of a man—so that in the end he may be possessed by something greater, no longer at all belonging to himself.

On grief and its tapping of eternity:

The grief had something in it of generosity, some nearness to joy. In a strange way it added to me what I had lost. I saw that, for me, the country would always be populated with presences and absences, presences of absences, the living and the dead. The world as it is would always be a reminder of the world that was, and of the world as it is to come.

His critique of agribusiness in a nutshell:

The new way of farming was a way of dependence, not on land and creatures and nature but on machines and fuel and chemicals of all sorts, bought things, and on the sellers of bought things—which finally made it a dependence on credit.

A distillation of his view of community as imperfect, transitory, but somehow timeless:

It was a community always disappointed in itself, disappointing its members, always trying to contain its

divisions and gentle its meanness, always failing and yet always preserving a sort of will toward goodwill. I knew that, in the midst of all the ignorance and error, this was a membership; it was the membership of Port William and no other place on earth. My vision gathered the community as it never has been and never will be gathered in this world of time, for the community must always be marred by members who are indifferent to it or against it. And yet I saw them all as somehow perfected, beyond time, by one another's love, compassion, and forgiveness, as it is said we may be perfected by grace.

And so there we all were on a little wave of time lifting up to eternity, and none of us ever in time would know what to make of it. How could we? It is a mystery, for we are eternal beings living in time. Did I ever think that anybody would understand it? Yes. Once. I thought once that I would finally understand it.

I am grateful for being turned to the book by Steve's wonderful review: [Review of Jayber Crow](#). It's great I can look forward to other books by Berry about this fictional but real community of Port Royal.
