



A Devil to Play: One Man's Year-Long Quest to Master the Orchestra's Most Difficult Instrument

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In the days before his fortieth birthday, London-based journalist Jasper Rees trades his pen for a French horn that has been gathering dust in the attic for more than twenty-two years, and, on a lark, plays it at the annual festival of the British Horn Society.

Despite an embarrassingly poor performance, the experience inspires Rees to embark on a daunting, bizarre, and ultimately winning journey: to return to the festival in one year's time and play a Mozart concerto—solo—to a large paying audience.

A Devil to Play is the true story of an unlikely midlife crisis spent conquering sixteen feet of wrapped brass tubing widely regarded as the most difficult instrument to master, as well as the most treacherous to play in public. It is the history of man's first musical instrument, a compelling journey that moves from the walls of Jericho to *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, from the hunting fields of France to the heart of Hollywood. And it is the account of one man's mounting musical obsession, told with pitch-perfect wit and an undeniable charm—an endearing, inspiring tale of perseverance and achievement, relayed masterfully, one side-splittingly off-key note at a time.

A Devil to Play: One Man's Year-Long Quest to Master the Orchestra's Most Difficult Instrument Details

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Author : Jasper Rees

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From Reader Review A Devil to Play: One Man's Year-Long Quest to Master the Orchestra's Most Difficult Instrument for online ebook

Julianna Lopez says

When journalist Jasper Rees decides to pick up the French horn after twenty-two years to play at the festival of the British Horn Society, he fails. That day he decides that the next year he would return to the festival to play a solo, embarking on a year-long journey to master the French Horn. Although, essentially a story of a man's midlife crisis it is, at its core, one of perseverance and achievement.

Reese is hilarious. He makes jokes that only French Horn players would get but that anyone who has ever failed at something could appreciate. "There must be something about the Horn. You have to develop a sense of humor. Otherwise you will go and kill yourself." He provides a lot of the history of the French Horn, the first writings of it, the first users of it, where it originated and how it has evolved. He goes into detail about the kinds of Horns, the most distinguished Horn pieces, and the most renowned Horn players. By doing this he manifests a respect in the reader, for the instrument, they might not have had before. Being that this a true story about perseverance, something that everyone has faced, it is very relatable making it all the more engaging. He writes of all he endured on his quest to master the Horn, about embarrassing circumstances where he failed, awkward situations where he didn't know what to do, and humbling times where he had to ask for help.

This book might not be for you if you aren't a musician but if you play the French Horn you need to read this, no question about it.

Laura says

From BBC Radio 4 Extra:

The author and journalist embarks on 'One Man's Struggle with the Orchestra's Most Difficult Instrument.'
Read by Nicholas Boulton.

Nikki says

Am still reading this book at this time, but am having issues getting very far as I am not very enthused by the subject matter. It is well written, but if it were not a book-group selection, I would never have even considered reading a book about a guy who decided to play the french horn at the age of 39 after he had given it up at the age of 17.

So I didn't finish the book, but put it on the read list so that it didn't sit on my to-read list (since I have no desire to ever finish reading this book).

The author, Mr. Rees, tried very hard to make it an interesting read with metaphors and combining his own personal story with the history of what he refers to as "the horn." His anecdotes are somewhat entertaining, but not enough to hold my attention, or make me want to finish reading the book. I only gave it two stars

because it is a well-written book, it is only the subject matter that I do not care for.

Nathan says

What a super-fun and informative read! I have always loved the horn, but the author is obsessed. Jasper Rees learned French Horn when he was in early high school but gave it up for 22 years. He then pulled his dusty horn out to play at the British Horn Society concert. He really sucked. But he decided at the concert that he was going to take up the horn and play Mozart's 3rd horn concerto a year later at the same concert.

The book is funny, lighthearted, and it takes unexpected turns into the history of the horn. Questions about the horn are answered that I didn't even know were questions! Things like: how did the stigma of the horn come to be? Why is it called a "French" horn? What makes it such a difficult instrument? Who is the best horn player in the world? Who plays all those lamenting and heroic horn solos in Hollywood movies? Who played horn on all the Beatles records?

"A Devil to Play" will appeal to ANYONE - mostly because it's about someone who tried playing an instrument when they were young, put it down for 22 years, and made a commitment to pick it up again. Read it. It's really fun.

Jonathan says

As with Richard Cohen's "By the Sword" this weaves the history of the instrument around a personal story, to the benefit of "I found my horn" since it has considerably more story and less history; the combination is enjoyable and gives the author a great chance to show off his obsession and his hard work. Jasper's zeal is infectious, despite his background he manages diffidence and humility. The ending is all about him, but I think after his travails that he has earned it, he does have a book to pitch to publishers after all and he needs his big finish. He has also produced this as a play, which I would like to see if it is still on.

Something about the whole madcap scheme brings Francis Veber's film "Le diner de cons" to mind. Francois Pignon, the spectacularly moronic 'hero' of the film is revealed to have started his obsessive matchstick modelling of buildings because his wife has left him. Here too, the talented Jasper's dive back to pre-wife days and his habit of calling his girlfriend New Woman and later New Person (so that I thought for a while he had a second girlfriend) might be taken for insensitive, but I don't read it that way. And he does dedicate the book to her twice, using a real name, so I'm glad he found his horn.

Roisin Radford says

As a horn player myself, this book obviously held a lot of appeal for me to begin with. But I didn't expect anything like the amount of fascinating history that is packed into it! Jasper Rees' style is perfect; he is personable and funny, and presents a large amount of information in a totally engaging and interesting way. Sections of history are interspersed with the story of his 'struggle' with the horn, in a skilfully seamless way which would appeal just as much, in my opinion, to someone with only a passing or amateur interest in the subject as to a professional.

I was lent this book by my horn teacher; I went out and bought it as soon as I had to give it back, and have re-read it since then. For anyone with an interest in music history, who would like a better approach than a dry history book, this is an excellent choice!

Stephen says

A suspense story: journalist and old Harrovian who played the horn in school then dropped it is seized by the desire at age 40 to resume it and master it so that he can play a solo with orchestra at a public concert to which people pay admission in one year from then. He settles on the Mozart K. 447

This is akin to taking up rock climbing at age 30 and planning to do a maor North Face in teh Alps inside a year.

The author comes across as good-humored, self-deprecating, humble but also pushy in seeking advice and moral support. He could not have done this without pushing. I had not known just how hard this instrument is to play; for example, much of the player reads has to be transposed at sight.

Weaknesses: I thought there was a bit too much of hunting horn history and too much about plumbing and drainage of the horn. 10% more on horn technique than I wanted. Un-necessary, mild ritual put-downs of all musicians who don't play the horn as slackers.

Strengths:Piercing insight into the sad fact that it's so darn much harder to make music with others than alone. Enjoyable musical history about Mozart. Good, suitably awed portrait of Dennis Brain, whose iconic recording of the four Mozart concertos was one of the first classical records I listened to over and over. I was hoping for a little story on the first (and I think only) Hoffnung Interplanetary Music Festival, which featured Brain playing a garden hose. Didn't get that one.

Nice vignettes of the many people who helped on the quest.

Anyone reconnecting to an instrument in adulthood or taking one up de novo then will enjoy this tale. I will shelve it under humor and also adventure non-fiction, though it's not adventure in the usual sense.

Eric_W says

This represents the dream of most of our Walter Mitty selves. I was in my mid-thirties when my son took up the trombone in school and, wanting to help him out, started French Horn lessons at the college where I worked. 20 years later he had long given up the trombone and I, after 15 years, gave up the French Horn, tiring (lazy, I guess) of the requirement to play every single day for 45 minutes to an hour just to maintain some flexibility in the lips. Skipping a couple days would set you back a week. I guess I also tired of being mediocre. I was what most would consider competent, good enough to play with local orchestras, but to get really good you have to practice hours daily. I did have the advantage of having played piano and organ for years so at least I didn't have to learn to read music. The worst part was transposing on the fly. I look forward to reading how Rees did. Got to admire his courage.

Darby says

Pretty overly wordy at times, but enjoyable non the less. I play the trombone, and while I haven't done any solos on it, I can certainly relate to all of Jaspers feelings of panic during his performances.

Sarah says

Come to find out, I'm a sucker for books where people shake up their normal lives to dedicate a year to a crazy mission; this author actually verbalized why: he's in "those years when routine traditionally sets in like a stubborn winter fog, when you set yourself the monthly task of amassing enough money to pay for things you need rather than things you want, when horizons close in and clouds lower dully overhead, when pipe dreams of a second home in Tuscany - or, failing that, Wales - shrivel and wilt in the face of remorseless blasts from the blowtorch of life", and so am I, and it's inspiring to see someone fight against that. In this case, the author decides to pick up the French horn for a year and, at the end, perform in front of an audience of horn professionals and enthusiasts. I'm a former high-school musician myself, and former French horn players have a special place in my heart (my boyfriend being one of them), so I'm a pretty ideal audience for this book. And I loved it. It's both witty and touching.

Stephanie says

Loved this book! Jasper Rees decides to start playing the horn again at age 40 - 20+ years since he last touched it. He spends a year preparing for a solo performance at the British Horn Society. Along the way, he shares the history of the instrument and meets with current leading horn luminaries from around the world.

The result is a hilarious first-person account of someone facing their mid-life demons, interspersed with well-written and entertaining vignettes of the horn's history - including lots of Haydn, Mozart - and even the Beatles. I'm biased, of course, but think that even non-Horn players would find this an entertaining read. For Horn players? It's a must-read!

Bettie? says

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00zm2ny>

Description: *In the days before his fortieth birthday, London-based journalist Jasper Rees trades his pen for a French horn that has been gathering dust in the attic for more than twenty-two years, and, on a lark, plays it at the annual festival of the British Horn Society.*

Despite an embarrassingly poor performance, the experience inspires Rees to embark on a daunting, bizarre, and ultimately winning journey: to return to the festival in one year's time and play a Mozart concerto—solo—to a large paying audience.

1/5: The author and journalist embarks on 'One Man's Struggle with the Orchestra's Most Difficult Instrument.' Read by Nicholas Boulton.

2/5: The scale of the ambition dawns on him

3/5: to America.

4/5: school days and a disasterous performance

5/5: the big performance

lessons.

2.5* Bred of Heaven: One man's quest to reclaim his Welsh roots

2.5* A Devil to Play

Elise says

Very informative and well-written with just enough humor, so as to make it fun to read. As a horn player, I learned a lot about horn history and some of the great players.

Gerald says

I was disappointed but perhaps I suffer from a case misplaced expectations. When I learned that A Devil to Play is a story about an obsessive young man, I assumed that Jasper (the character's name and the author's), would be a kindred soul to Rollo Hemphill, perpetually obsessed boychik of my comic novels. Yes, Jasper is obsessed with relearning how to play the French horn in his middle years. The description is detailed and, I presume, accurate. But it's not all that funny. Or even entertaining. And it seems to go on forever, an episodic series of stumblings and bumblings toward his admittedly difficult goal of producing something like melody.

My principal complaint about this first-person narrative is that Jasper doesn't seem to have any personal relationships whatever. He mentions a significant other a few times, but never goes deeper than that. He talks about his family, his parents and siblings, but in the most oblique terms, and usually only in relation to his lifelong relationship with various kinds of horns (seriously).

I thought this was intended as a humorous novel. Is it a serious autobiography and I'm just missing the point?

Carmen says

I thought this book was very boring. It is about a man who plays French horn in school, then gives it up. 22 years later, inexplicably, he takes it up again. There is no apparent reason for this. For the rest of the book, he alternates between rambling on and on about very dull history of the French horn, and subjecting his poor, poor family and friends to numerous 'concerts' at which he butchers Mozart. There are a few charming things. One - he has a very good vocabulary. Two - he calls his girlfriend (he is divorced with two children) the New Person in My Life. Sometimes he just calls her New Person. I found it endearing. Three - he has a very good sense of humor. Some of his jokes were very funny. But those things cannot save the book. Unless you are VERY into the French horn, I doubt you would find this book the slightest bit appealing. It definitely does NOT appeal to mass audiences. His story of 'overcoming the odds' and 'turning an old foe into an old friend' CANNOT be applied to my life...in fact, I would venture to say it probably wouldn't apply to the majority of people's. Pages and pages of French horn history, French horn trivia, things about Mozart that relate to horns, and things about the Beatles pertaining to horns, and tons of information about famous horn players. Very dull. I would NOT recommend this book. I'm sure he enjoyed writing it, but I did not enjoy reading it.
