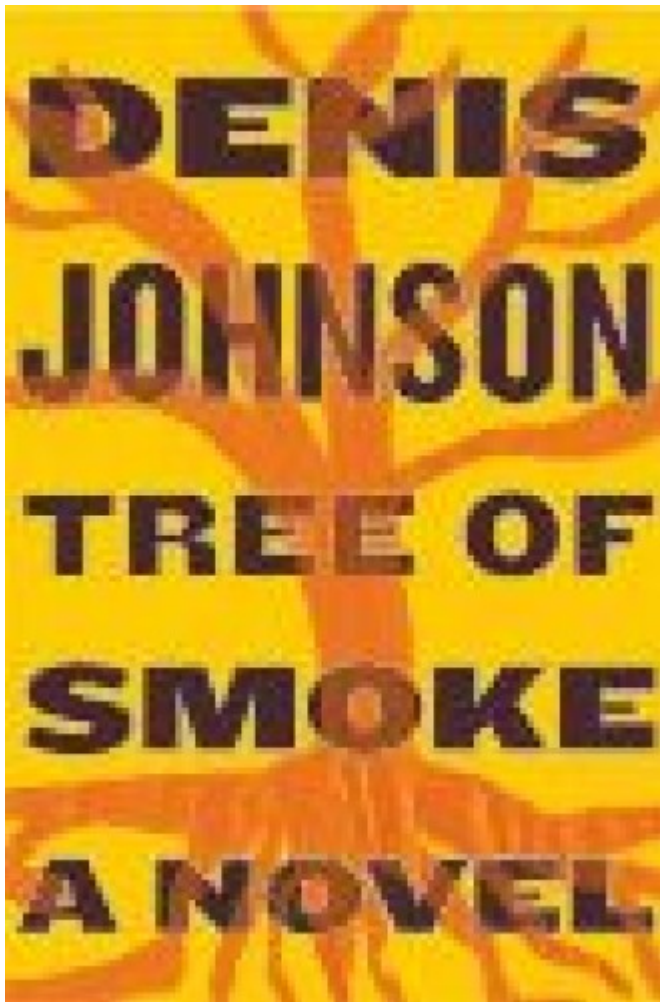


Tree of Smoke: A Novel

reviewed by [Todd Shy](#) in the [May 6, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Tree of Smoke: A Novel

Denis Johnson

Farrar, Straus & Giroux

Late in Denis Johnson's novel, one of his many defeated, aimless characters, Bill Houston, surveys what Johnson elsewhere calls "the cancelled life":

He'd lived almost twenty-five years, his hardships colored in his own mind as youthful adventures, someday to be followed by a period of intense self-betterment, then accomplishment and ease. But this morning in particular he felt like a man overboard far from any harbor, keeping afloat only for the sake of it, waiting for his strength to give out. When would he strike out for shore? When would he receive the gift of desperation?

Tree of Smoke, which won the National Book Award for fiction, is a searing vision of a world without shores.

Set largely in the 1960s, this loose, sprawling novel tracks numerous characters into the mythical heart of American darkness: the Vietnam War. At the center of the book's action is the oversized Colonel Sands, who with 19,000 index cards of notes is organizing CIA operations in Southeast Asia, first in the Philippines, later in Vietnam. A charismatic rogue, the colonel sees in the maelstrom of war not chaos but incipient myth: "To hell with reason, categories, synthesis, common sense. All was ideology and imagery and conjuring. Fires to light the minds and heart, the acts of men. And cow their consciences. Fireworks, all of it."

The dislocation, this absence of normal order, is precisely the appeal of war for the colonel's nephew, Skip Sands, who is the closest thing to an organizing consciousness in this diffuse story. Fatherless, impressionable, a reader of Marcus Aurelius, he is a seeker who isn't yet sure what he is seeking, and he looks to war for definition. Similarly, James Houston, Bill's younger brother, joins the service at the age of 17, then re-ups without hesitation. "Don't you want to see home?" someone asks him in Vietnam. "This war is my home," he replies.

A broken and abusive home at that. In one of the many tour de force episodes in the book, James, drunk and AWOL, accompanies a suicidal amputee into the South China Sea on a thatch boat. In dangerous currents, the amputee rises "storklike on his single leg" and tips himself into the water, refusing to be rescued but still fighting his way back to shore. Like other such episodes, this one comes and goes in the space of ten stark pages. How many more of these, we realize, Johnson might have portrayed.

While James drifts through the abyss of war and Skip searches for clarity, the colonel determines to shape it all by "penetrating the myth of the land." He does this by customizing the biblical image that gives the book its title. The "cloudy pillar"

marking the presence of the Lord in Exodus 33, the colonel notes, is literally a “tree of smoke.” Likewise, the portents described in Joel 2 should read, “earth, blood and fire and palm trees of smoke,” and the Song of Solomon asks, “Who is this that cometh out of the wilderness like a tree of smoke?” The similarity of the image to a mushroom cloud is not lost on the colonel. The elusiveness, the impenetrability of that smoke justifies to the colonel his creed about the war zone: “It’s not a different place. It’s a different world under a different God.”

The moral confusion of the story is personalized by another major character, Kathy Jones, a Seventh-day Adventist missionary whose husband has been kidnapped and probably killed. Kathy takes to reading Calvin and discovers nothing but grimness there. Grieving and desperate, she finds herself in a bar filled with American soldiers, where she ponders wartime contradictions: “They threw hand grenades through doorways and blew off the arms and legs of ignorant farmers, they rescued puppies from starvation and smuggled them home to Mississippi in their shirts, they burned down whole villages and raped young girls, they stole medicines by the jeepload to save the lives of orphans.” Exactly what light can the colonel’s mythmaking cast on these haywire contests of angels and demons?

In such a shoreless ethical world, religion is just one more drifting vessel. A portrait of a Catholic priest accused of gunrunning is particularly amusing and poignant. For 33 years Father Carignan has served in the remote Philippine countryside. Forgetful, prayerless, more obsessed with Judas than Jesus, he is charming and winning but utterly adrift. Here he is presiding haplessly over mass:

What were today’s readings? He’d lost the book again, the schedule of liturgy. He hadn’t actually consulted it for years, just read what he wanted, whatever verses the Book opened to. “Here’s something.” He read in English: *“If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies . . .”* He tried to explain in the local dialect what he thought might be meant by “bowels and mercies” and ended by saying, “I’m not sure what it means. Maybe how we feel toward our families.”

Even this passing comedy evokes lostness. “Here’s something” is a lovely interruption, but it is recognition without content. The eye blinks but doesn’t behold. Religious power is as inscrutable as the tree of smoke that is ever in the colonel’s bloodshot mind.

Johnson knows the territory of desolation intimately. His acclaimed short story collection *Jesus' Son* (1993) was a startling, brilliant evocation of marginal, dead-end lives. But the bleakness there was personal, whereas in *Tree of Smoke* the whole world is an abyss. The power of this magisterial novel is that through portraits of relentless drift, Johnson achieves something like literary transfigurations: the prose moves from rich, concrete description through metaphor to brief suggestions of higher, vaguely revelatory things.

One passage straining toward this kind of illumination involves Skip. He has learned that his mother has died, and he has just read both her last letter and the last letter from Kathy, with whom he'd had a brief affair. "Goodbye to the women in his life," Johnson writes. "And so much else." Then, in a paragraph that quivers with emotion but not redemption, Skip recalls a college road trip:

Driving with fellow undergraduates from Louisville to Bloomington after a weekend holiday, his hands on the wheel, three in the morning, headlights opening up fifty yards of amber silence in the darkness. The heater blowing, the boozy odor of young men in a closed car. His friends had slept and he'd driven the car while music came over the radio, and the star-spangled American night, absolutely infinite, surrounded the world.

How far the prose reaches here: the nearly false note of "star-spangled American night," the padding of the infinite as "absolute," that same infinity not just surrounding Skip or his memory but encompassing the whole world—these could register as overeager embellishments, except that in this bleak novel they soar as the flares of a castaway sent up from an abyss. Johnson loves to hoist the prose to these big, even charged, connections.

Such flares lead the novel onward, but there is no metaphysical destination, no rescuing shore. It is desolation as far as the eye can see, across the canopy of a Vietnam disturbed with local explosions—those trees of smoke—and across the landscape of America, where Johnson's veterans end up in prison and on the run. When, toward the book's end, a character aptly named Storm visits a shaman in Kuala Lumpur, the shaman asks Storm what he would say if he spoke to God. In the spirit of the times, Storm quotes a rock-and-roll band: "Break on Through," he replies. He might have asked for lifeboats.