

# Identity at extremes: the many faces of jesus' son



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Jesus' Son by Denis Johnson and Identity and Intercultural Communication by Judith Martin and Thomas Nakayama are both concerned with identity and the effect it can have on the way someone's life turns out. While Jesus' Son is a book of short stories about a character, Identity and Intercultural Communication is an essay about how identity is created and how it defines us. Using these texts together reveals a deeper meaning in Jesus' Son and shows how either being accepted by society or thrown to the curb can have a large impact on how we identify and how others identify us.

Both authors of Jesus' Son and Identity and Intercultural Communication would agree that identity can cause people to slip through the cracks. The narrator of Jesus' Son is an outlaw. He commits crimes, doesn't have much of a moral ground, and uses a lot of drugs. One reason for this is his feeling of not belonging anywhere within society. Near the end of the novel he is working in a care center for disabled people and he reflects that he "had never even imagined for a heartbeat, that there might be a place for people like us" (Johnson 133). Since this comes at the end of the book it shows that the rest of the novel he hadn't felt like he had a "place" to call his own. Both works address how identity develops due to society the way someone is perceived. Identity plays a large role in people feeling as though they have a place to call their own. Identity and Intercultural Communication gives insight into the huge world of identities. In many cases people can be pigeonholed into identities and categorized based on "our background and by society [which] influences how and what we see, and most important, what it means" (Martin and Nakayama 319); the speaker in Jesus' Son was partially trapped in an outlaw 'pigeonhole' categorized by those around him.

Identity and Intercultural Communications gives insight and a way to talk about the narrator in terms of identity. The places we grow up and the people we associate with can have a large impact on how we identify and how others identify us. The use of both texts gives a deeper meaning to the identity of the narrator of Jesus' Son.

Jesus' Son tells many stories of a man who doesn't fit in. In a lot of the stories it seems he doesn't care about himself or the people around him. He doesn't make strong connections and his friends seem to come and go throughout the text. The narrator spends a lot of time near the end of the novel looking into the window of an Amish family's home. At first he watches in order to see the wife in the shower, but he begins to be fascinated with their lifestyle and watches more and more. This image of a man on the outside looking in at a "normal" life is a powerful one. He is interested and fascinated by their life because it is so unlike his and he doesn't relate to it. The way the narrator identifies himself is completely different than the couple. Identity and Intercultural Communication explains how identities are formed and seen. Identity is an important aspect of communication, "identity plays a key role in intercultural communication, serving as a bridge between culture and communication. It is through communication with our family, friends, and others (sometimes people from other cultures) that we come to understand ourselves and our identity" (Martin and Nakayama 316). It can be hard for the narrator of Jesus' Son to communicate with others because he doesn't know his own identity, and for him to understand himself since he has a hard time communicating.

A single person can have a plethora of identities. Identities can be different from each other based on who someone is talking to or change based on experiences in someone's life and "it makes more sense to talk about our identities than our identity. Because we belong to various groups, we develop multiple identities that come into play at different times, depending on the context" (Martin and Nakayama 318). The narrator of Jesus' Son employs many different identities. The lifestyle he is surrounded with creates cause for secrecy as well as a disconnection for his true self. This separate crime committing part of his identity makes the character lonely and unsure of who he is. In one instance in "Dirty Wedding", he is fighting with his girlfriend but he sticks it out because "it felt like [he] had to have her. As long as there was one other person at these motels who knew my real name" (Johnson 80). While some identities are created unintentionally, this separate identity is created on purpose by the narrator in order to hide his other identities. His "real name" identity only "comes into play" when surrounded by those he trusts, like his girlfriend.

In the story "Beverly Home" the narrator has gone through a large change. He is improving his life and kicking his addiction. This causes a new, healthier identity to develop. Identities are not static, they change as a person changes. According to Identity and Intercultural Communication, "Identities are not created in a smooth, orderly process but in spurts. Certain events provide insight into who we are" (Martin and Nakayama 318). One event that provides the narrator of Jesus' Son with "insight into who he is" is getting sober. The narrator "was in a little better physical shape every day... and [his] spirits were rising, and this was all in all a happy time" (Johnson

133) for him as he became a better person by working full time and maintaining relationships. By making a change in his life the narrator finally feels like he fits in and is able to communicate better with other people. His identity of himself and the identity of how others see him finally match up which allows him to have a more stable life.

The narrator of Jesus' Son's life is greatly affected by his personal identities and the way others identify him. Looking at the work while using ideas from Identity and Intercultural Communication provides insights as to how the narrator identifies and the ways these identities change the story. The narrator's inability to fit in or allow others to get close to him causes him to be an outlaw and not have strong moral character. This is because his identity is not clear to him and societies view of him differs from his own. Identity can cause someone to be ignored or outcast if the identity doesn't match societies cookie cutter image. Jesus' Son proves this as well as the opposite - that when society likes someone's identity they can be successful.