



Rookery Blues

Jon Hassler

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The New York Times Book Review praised the characters in Jon Hassler's last novel, *Dear James*, as "so exquisitely rendered that even a first-time visitor to Staggerford will come to love them as old friends." Now, in *Rookery Blues*, Hassler once again brings to life an oddball group of Midwesterners, as they brace themselves and each other for the turmoil of the late 1960s on a small college campus.

Rookery, Minnesota, is about as far north as you can go and still be in the United States, and Rookery State College is an academic backwater if ever there was one. The campus is populated by students seeking draft deferments during the height of the Vietnam War and misfit teachers who can't get a job anywhere else. Even so, some of the faculty at Rookery State long for a meeting of the minds, the companionship of soulmates.

And then, one frigid afternoon, the Icejam Quintet is born in the improbable basement apartment of Neil Novotny, an unkempt English instructor and obsessed novelist. With Leland Edwards on piano, Neil on clarinet, Victor Dash on drums, and Connor on bass, the group comes together with the help of its muse, the lovely Peggy Benoit, who plays saxophone and sings. The most gifted and spirited of the bunch, Peggy instills the harmony that allows the Icejammers to produce the kind of jazz they've all dreamed of playing, bringing them satisfaction they never thought they'd experience.

But even isolated Rookery State will be touched by the great discontent sweeping the country. News of a salary freeze electrifies the rabble-rousing Victor, and the first labor union in history comes noisily to campus. As a teachers' strike takes shape, threatening both the draft-dodging students and the complacent administration, the five musicians must struggle with their loyalties--to the school, the town, their families, and each other....

As he does in all his novels, Jon Hassler infuses the story of this unlikely collection of eccentrics with wry wit, deep feeling, and ultimately, his faith in human beings to endure despite their own sadly comic foibles. Like his beloved *Staggerford* novels, *Rookery Blues* is about the sheer need for community that everyone harbors--even in the unlikeliest places.

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