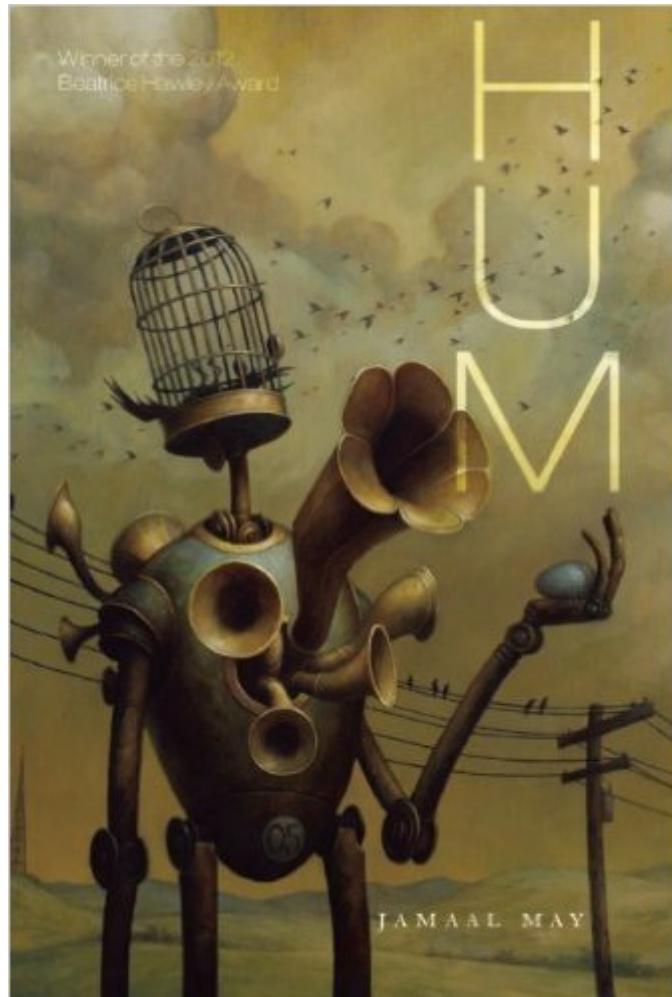


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# Hum (ALA Notable Books For Adults)



## Synopsis

In May's debut collection, poems buzz and purr like a well-oiled chassis. Grit, trial, and song thrum through tight syntax and deft prosody. From the resilient pulse of an abandoned machine to the sinuous lament of origami animals, here is the ever-changing hum that vibrates through us all, connecting one mind to the next. "The elegant and laconic intelligence in these poems, their skepticism and bent humor and deliberately anti-Romantic stance toward experience are completely refreshing. After so much contemporary writing that seems all flash, no mind and no heart, these poems show how close observation of the world and a gift for plain-spoken, but eloquent speech, can give to poetry both dignity and largeness of purpose, and do it in an idiom that is pitch perfect to emotional nuance and fine intellectual distinctions. Hard-headed and tough-minded, *Hum* is the epitome of what Frost meant by 'a fresh look and a fresh listen.'" --Tom Sleigh "Jamaal May's debut collection, *Hum*, is concerned with what's beneath the surfaces of things--the unseen that eats away at us or does the work of sustaining us. Reading these poems, I was reminded of Ellison's 'lower frequencies,' a voice speaking for us all. May has a fine ear, acutely attuned to the sonic textures of everyday experience. And *Hum*--a meditation on the machinery of living, an extended ode to sound and silence--is a compelling debut." --Natasha Trethewey "In his percussive debut collection *Hum*, Jamaal May offers a salve for our phobias and restores the sublime to the urban landscape.

Whether you need a friend to confide in, a healer to go to, or a tour guide to take you there, look no further. That low hum you hear are these poems, emanating both wisdom and swagger." --A. Van Jordan From "Mechanophobia: Fear of Machines": There is no work left for the husks. Automated welders like us, your line replacements, can't expect sympathy after our bright arms of cable rust over. So come collect us for scrap, grind us up in the mouth of one of us. Let your hand pry at the access panel with the edge of a knife, silencing the motor and thrum. Jamaal May is a poet and editor from Detroit, MI where he taught poetry in public schools and worked as a freelance audio engineer and touring performer. His first full-length collection is *Hum* (Alice James Books, 2013). Individual poems have been awarded the 2013 Indiana Review Prize and appear in journals such as *The New Republic*, *Poetry*, *Ploughshares*, and *the Believer*. Jamaal has earned an MFA from Warren Wilson and fellowships from Cave Canem and Bucknell University. He is founding editor of the Organic Weapon Arts Chapbook Press and a visiting faculty member in the Vermont College of Fine Arts MFA program. Â

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

May is an exciting new voice from Detroit and I don't say that lightly. Natasha Trethewey wrote on the back cover: "Hum is a meditation on the machinery of living, an extended role to sound and silence". I admit I was drawn to the cover of Brian Despain and bought it off an AWP table simply for that purpose and later had him sign it since I knew this was a keeper from the get-go! I love the way he thread the book with these phobia poems. Several poems jump out from the title alone like "How To Get Your Gun Safely Out Of Your Mouth" and "Thinking Like A Split Melon" and "If They Hand Your Remains To Your Sister In A Chines Takeout Box". I also love the way he makes war and death and decay and debris all sound beautiful as in "Coming Back To You". Here is the opening of the poem:"Tonight the tide will stretch out. Syringes and splinters of glass will be collected. Shells and stones that aren't needed until morning will be left cleaving beach. You'll forget that sound in a month then remember it on a runway waiting for your ears to pop. In Pittsburgh a vat overflows and scalds a foundryman while a young chef somewhere smothers a fire because she lost control of it.

This collection of poetry is near perfect. It's accessible, unique, masterfully written, and brilliantly executed. These are poems by a man obsessed with sound (as evidenced by his experiences as a performer and an audio engineer). This voice takes you on an incredible journey through a life in a city rife with urban decay and its inhabitants' struggles with addiction, death, joy, laughter, and more. Mr. May is a an amazing poetic voice (who is rarely in better form than the -phobia poems which are interspersed throughout the book). It would be a great injustice to not mention the book design as well. The cover art is incredible and the pages periodically invert to be black pages with

white writing, and the various gray stages in between, evoking a day/night cycle in the text as well as a level of inversion. A must for fans of contemporary American poetry!

I admit to being drawn to this collection because of the gorgeous cover and its steampunk robot with a birdcage head, which immediately sparked my imagination. The physical book itself is also beautiful, with a lovely typeset. A smattering of dark pages, each for a "phobia" poem (such as "Athazagoraphobia: Fear of Being Ignored"), appear throughout the book, starting out black at first then lightening toward softer grays. It's an interesting way to highlight a set of associated poems and there's a subtle effect to reading words with white text on a dark page that suits the "phobia" poems. For example, reading "Athazagoraphobia: Fear of Being Ignored" on one of the rare black pages in the books creates an interesting contrast between text and the physical page. Hum is dedicated to "to the inner lives of Detroiters." When I think of Detroit these days, I picture photo essays that show the city in seemingly apocalyptic states of decay. May's poems reflect this state of everyday apocalypse. "Still Life" presents a "Boy with roof shingles / duct taped to shins and forearms / threading barbed wire through pant loops" as well as other trash can armor in the face of what seems to be a wasteland. While in "The Girl Who Builds Rockets from Bricks," a girl wanders in "the caverns of deserted houses," performing "her excavation for spare parts: // shards of whiskey bottle, matches, / anthills erupting from concrete // seams, the discarded husk / of a beetle." These poems thrum with rhythm, and sound plays a vital role, natural sounds mix with manufactured sounds mix with inner soul sounds. They are full of texture, bringing Detroit imagined and real into vibrant life. "A humming bird draws nectar in my thoughts, wings beating 80-something times per second but there aren't many flowers here; it's been many summers since I stopped even listening for bees." "A" from "A Detroit Hum Ending with Bones" "Neat" is a disorderly pantoum, in which the repeated lines are almost but not quite repeated. There is enough variation that the new lines slip by almost unnoticed as repetitions. It describes a bar scene and a man sitting alone, drinking. "No one is above being invisible / not even me, with my shirt tidily pressed, // another man who's seen the bottom of a tumbler." The feeling is despondent and mundane. The pantoum form works perfectly here, the almost-repetition of lines reflecting the slipshod redundancy of everyday life and looping thoughts and questions that never seem to lead anywhere. "You are a quarter ghost on your mother's side. Your heart is a flayed peach in a bone box." "A" from "How to Disappear Completely" In "Macrophobia: Fear of Waiting," he writes, "I was fascinated / that every time I tried to type love, / I missed the o and hit the i instead. / I live you is a mistake I make so often. / I wonder if it's not / what I've really been meaning to say." I make the same mistake quite often, and I have

found myself thinking the same thing (I am only a little jealous that he put it into a poem first). There are so many passages, phrases, poems I love in this book that I find it hard to know which ones to focus on. "Is the sun a flash grenade? This heat is so heavy the fruit stands buckle and ripplelike mirages, but your brother shivers" from "Chionophobia: Fear of Snow" This book is amazing (another I need to own) and is one of the best collections of poetry collections I've read this year.

It's pretty audacious to dedicate a book to an entire city, especially a dying one. But in Jamaal May's collection, *Hum*, readers are drawn into the bodyshops, bedrooms, and back alleys of Detroit. This book of poems is as much memoir as it is poetry (as it is philosophy). And as an African American coming from one of the poorest cities in the country, May opens the readers eyes to a world that is foreign and heartbreaking to many readers of American poetry. If there is a torch burning somewhere for Etheridge Knight, I vote Jamaal May be the next to bear it.

The poems are very intense, very powerful. They resonate within you and make you wonder how anyone could have missed the connections but also how anybody could have thought to immortalize their thoughts on paper with this sort of phrasing. Recommended for all poetry enthusiasts as well as aspiring poets who are looking for new sources of inspiration and new voices to hear. Book arrived within the week and in great condition.

Fell in love with May's work after hearing "Hum for the Bolt." His poetry is beautiful and powerful and I highly recommend this book to any poetry lover (or anyone just beginning to love poetry). We all need more poetry in our lives.

Reading May's words was like deciphering a new language, beautifully vivid but like a thousand piece puzzle with the image face down. He gives his readers just enough to peek their curiosity into the unknown or even uncomfortable. One of the best collections of poetry that I have read in a long time!

i saw this book on a writer friend's table. i opened at random, read a couple of poems and ordered my own copy when i got home. a strong voice. a strong voice saying something quietly.

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