

# Review: Tiger Rag by Nicholas Christopher | CultureMob

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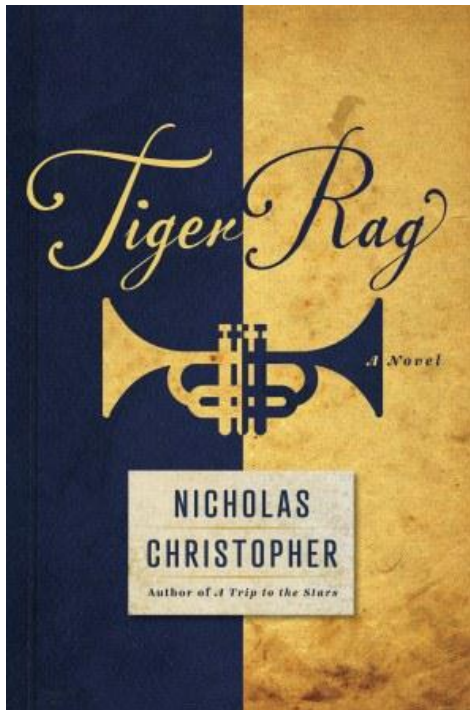
## Review: Tiger Rag by Nicholas Christopher

by Gemma Alexander | 01/08/13 |

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Nicholas Christopher's sixth novel spans a century with a classic jazz story line – the Holy Grail of a lost recording. Tucked quietly into the corners behind flamboyant characters and their mental breakdowns is an exploration of other irreplaceable things that we lose – our loved ones, ourselves – and the hopeful message that sometimes what has been lost can be found.

Skillfully alternating points of view and time periods, *Tiger Rag* tells the story of legendary proto-jazz cornetist Buddy Bolden, whose largely undocumented burst of localized fame at the dawn of the twentieth century influenced a generation of jazz greats before mental illness ended his career. Christopher follows the artifacts of Bolden's only recording session as they pass through different hands over the decades, drawing closer to the second story in the book.

In the present day, Dr. Ruby Cardillo is having a mental breakdown of her own. Triggered by the convergence of a divorce, her mother's death, and her daughter's drug conviction, Cardillo's breakdown provides a contrast with Bolden's. While he was silenced by his mental illness, her disintegration provides an opportunity to regain her voice.

The voice in *Tiger Rag* ignores the rules of written English. Instead, *Tiger Rag* is expressed in the fragment sentences and rhythms of speech. Adjusting to the cadence may take a couple of chapters. Eventually the style becomes almost completely transparent, and *Tiger Rag* develops the same pleasing immediacy as the early jazz music that inspired it.

Christopher relates the prosaic and the implausible with equanimity that helps suspension of disbelief. The magical realism that hinges the plot on spells and intuition is subtly handled. The rest of the story, especially the treatment of events in Bolden's life, is so credible you may find yourself searching for footnotes.

Whether the tension between historical and magical realism in *Tiger Rag* is a strength or weakness may come down to personal taste. But the uncertain line between historical fact and

fiction is irrefutably successful. It may be impossible to read *Tiger Rag* without developing the urge to learn more about Buddy Bolden and the earliest days of New Orleans jazz.

Find *Tiger Rag* now at your local, independent bookstore or [online](#).