



Deus Ex Machina

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On a distant island, reality show contestants battle for bragging rights and a slot on next week's episode. They've perfected their dramatic roles and are prepared to do whatever it takes to win. There's the take-no-prisoners Marine sergeant, the gay hairdresser, the ruthless lawyer, the brainy poet. But one player refuses to compete—Gloria Hamm, a sullen dental hygienist, voted least likely to win by the show's crew.

The higher-ups are desperate for ratings and sensational twists to trump the plots of seasons past. But the producer—haunted by personal tragedies all too real—is losing control of the show and its crew. While he obsesses about Gloria, the crew plots mutiny, a contestant dances with insanity, and disease threatens to halt the show completely. When real catastrophes strike, the producer finds it harder and harder to navigate his surreal landscape, where boundaries of the real, imagined, and orchestrated have blurred beyond recognition.

Deus Ex Machina deconstructs our notions of narrative, revealing how tricky it is for any auteur to disappear from his creation. In an age when people will seemingly do anything to be on television, it asks what is the true nature of "reality," and what is its cost?

Deus Ex Machina Details

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Author : Andrew Foster Altschul

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From Reader Review Deus Ex Machina for online ebook

Dave says

This book was awful. The satire falls flat and all you're left with is the awful cliches. I wouldn't have finished it, but it was a quick read. Even so, I had to grit it out.

It's too bad, because the author is a decent writer, but the idea was just a bomb. Making fun of the idiocy of reality TV is easy but to devote a novel to it is overkill. Hard to like a novel where every single character is loathsome.

tiph says

The book *could* have been pretty neat. A reality show run by a man known only as "the producer," as he tries to open humanity to the world. His goal is to see what's truly in the human heart, but all he seems to get are the same cliches.

But the writing is messy. At first, I thought the author was ending chapters awkwardly because he was going to get back to things. Maybe he was trying to up the mystery a bit, and I was patient. I got more than halfway through the book and it's only continuing to go downhill. The characters are cardboard cutouts, everyone the producer interacts with or watches through his screens are false and empty. And that seems to be the point, initially. But then nothing happens. For a long time. Still nothing happens. 150 pages is plenty of time for something to happen. So I'm left with half-finished thoughts (that are *almost* good! Altschul was *so close!*) and a 150 pages worth of cliches.

Do not want.

Tom Riordan says

Edmund Kean or Gwenn, both actors, are credited with saying, "Dying is easy. Comedy is hard." I add, "satire can kill." And not in a good way, as a comic saying "I killed " recounting a good night of standup. No, I mean kill as in make dead. Great satire (e.g., *Bonfire of the Vanities* or *A Modest Proposal*) is brilliant. Done not so great, even just good, it flops. Unfortunately, I felt this satiric novel flopped. It was good on several levels -- had a strong premise, was written in a punchy style, and had many strong set pieces that hit the mark. But overall it felt like it was trying too hard to be edgy. The central metaphor is a Faustian bargain-- a nameless reality T.V. show producer, the god in the machine of the title, loses his mind having sacrificed his own real live to become a reality T.V. god -- is very clever, a solid premise. But all the over the top savagery turns the corner of satire and travels into absurdist territory. I believe that satire works best when it stays real, and here the story often got lost in surreal loops that had me scratching my head. Also, the introduction of Palin pulled me out of the story as well. Here the satire tripped over polemic and the pratfall was not funny. While I appreciated Mr. Altschul's effort in writing an intelligent book about the false gods of perceived reality, I was left unsatisfied, wanting both to have laughed more along the way and moved to rage at the machine at the end.

Keely says

I really wanted this book to live up to it's potential. It could have been a great piece about how this genre of tv has molded and possibly even warped our societies perception of self and reality.

It derailed quite quickly and I found myself reading each page hoping it was going to suddenly veer back on track and end fantastically. It didn't even come close.

The sole part that I felt tiptoed close to this pieces potential was the very very end. Better luck next time!

Connie Kuntz says

NPR Books recommended this book about the hard ironies of Reality Television. I was sort of surprised that NPR recommended it. After all, doesn't everyone already know that Reality TV is bunk? I read it anyway and am glad I did.

While the prose itself did little to soothe my soul and I was annoyed at the "ads" placed throughout the book (Starbucks, Coldplay, etc.), some of the plot twists and turns caught me unawares and reminded me about how lucky I am to have love and children in my life. (I know: duh. But I haven't always been so lucky and the characters in this book reminded me of that lonely time in my life.)

Deus Ex Machina humorously explores exploitation, a concept I spend a lot of time considering. Every time one of the contestants "left" the island, I laughed out loud at how the network logo was featured, even though the natures of the departures were so violent. I especially enjoyed the conclusion and was surprised to find myself wiping away tears.

Deus Ex Machina does well to make the point that Reality Television (and I don't know why I am capitalizing Reality Television) is what happens when children are denied their childhood.

Gina says

Good Lord. He got paid to write this?

As a person who has (sometimes unwillingly) watched the program the author is satirizing, "Survivor", I can see he missed the point entirely.

Some of the plot twists he suggests (such as putting instructions in the night sky) are laughable. And the lethality he injects into the contests would soon get the show shut down.

Not to mention Sarah Palin (sigh). Way to date a book.

And the scene near the end with the woman and the baby? Who he refuses to identify? "But you know who she is? Don't you???"

Don't be coy. Who the hell is she? This ain't literature, so stop trying to be all cool and symbolic-like. I did find one thing I liked about the book. I thought it was interesting that things had gone wrong on a previous season, and there was a huge cover-up. Now you could really get a fun book off just that idea.

Eric Meyers says

This is a clever book, and a great read. In short, its about an intense version of survivor controlled as if it was the truman show. It invites questions about who controls your life. Is there a difference between the producer and god? Sometimes it wears this questions a little too much on it's sleeve, but it's clever nonetheless.

It makes the decision that most creative writing professors will decry to date itself by including a number of real people and celebrities in cameo appearances (including one memorable one in the middle though, while funny, Altschul comes a bit short of capturing the celebrity's voice). It is the right choice for this book, which wants to place itself firmly in our world in order to make the firmest social statement possible.

It's a short and fun read, and it brings up more interesting and challenging questions than you would think. I read it for Stephen Elliot's Rumpus Book Club (highly recommended if you're not a member), so I'm looking forward to the club's conversation with the author. I'm also planning on reading his other novel, Lady Lazarus, so I'd say this book is recommended.

All the best,

-Eric

Corby says

I really liked the idea of this book, but had a really hard time finishing it. I grew tired of the hammering negativity on current pop-sell-out culture (the nadir of which it seems, according to the author, is the survivor-like reality TV genre), the frenetic switching between secondary characters that were half-drawn (or was that on purpose, to try to straddle the mystery and cynical pop-culture-bashing genres?), and a generally convoluted writing style. Under all these things, there's a great almost-message about introspection and love, but the problem is that this message is buried so deep underneath the sparsely-drawn characters and the snide comments about network executives that it is not drawn out or presented in any sort of meaningful way. The happenings during the arrival at "Paradise" was the point where clarity was needed, but ended up being more confusingly written than the rest of the "Deserted" scenes. The backstory on the Producer and some of the other crew was too-little, too-late to help really clarify the motivations of the characters' actions throughout the book.

Neal says

I wish goodreads had half-stars, because I would give this book 3-1/2 stars if possible. There is a lot worthwhile here, and Altschul mines more from the subject matter, reality television, than I would have

initially thought possible. Ultimately, though, I think Altschul is too smart for his subject matter - reading this book's jabs at "celebreality" and "televolution," is like watching an expert marksman shoot fish in a barrel. We can admire his considerable skills (and considerable they are), while simultaneously wishing he would have put them to use on something more challenging.

The scene with the High Priestess almost merited an additional star, but that, too, was perhaps too easy, though supremely satisfying, a target.

David says

I think there is something just a little extra funny in the idea of fiction about reality television. This book would almost be dystopian, if it wasn't so scarily close to where we actually are. Dark, cerebral, funny, intriguing, and more. This book is a delicious, captivating read.

Ash Connell says

Only read twelve pages, but I am already done with it. The producer masturbates on like the third page, the Latinx character is from the Bronx because apparently that's the only place in the US that has Latinx, the black character is a "gang outreach counselor" named "Shaneequo Jones," and the lesbian is butch because obviously that's the only kind that exist.

Oh, and the damn narration is in a distractingly obvious form of present tense. Bleh!

If you like the concept, just go watch Unreal instead.

Vanesa Martin says

This novel was action-packed from the start, but not to a fault—the characters, in all their crude actions and annoying companionship on the set of the book's reality TV show premise, are very believable, and the action is not overly-dramatized. There is a clever use of language throughout that reminds readers just how micromanaged and stylized reality on TV is, just when one character's true fears, desires, and pains are beginning to be revealed. It makes everything and everyone seem untrustworthy and fake, no matter how much we want to believe them. Essentially, the readers are going through the same thing the seasoned producer of the novel's show is experiencing in his search for some true, tangible human reality. There were some scenes that left me a bit bewildered, and I will have to sit with them a bit longer in order to grasp their full meaning.

Towards the end, the tone of the story changes—I felt like the sad explanations of why the soldiers in Benin had attacked the set became too dogmatic (although I totally agree with the fact that the Niger Delta is being completely exploited by MNC's for ludicrous profits). In other words, it felt like the consistency of the narration strayed in order to make room to include these critiques into the story. I don't think I disagree with that necessarily, as I think those topics need to be discussed, but it felt a bit forced to me. Overall, a good thought-provoking story that also packs in some interesting action—I would recommend.

Celine Lescalie says

I pretty much haven't had a TV for the last 8 years. Will I make any sense of the whole book ?

Ok it did not make much sense to me.

I actually cannot decide if this is genius or complete failure when it comes to the style and the whole narrative strategy.

All characters are stupid stereotypes. The landscape is rather non descript, come to think of it, used solely as a tool for the TV crew.

Plot cliff hangers ? Nope, not even one.

Now, if this is all on purpose to mirror the appalling vacuity and lack of meaning of reality TV, this is genius.

I doubt it though, as the very last part - that could have been a liberation from said stereotypes as the adventure is over and everyone no longer has to act as requested by TV producers - is just reinforcing all cliches developed earlier. The guy who was always scared of flying dies in a plane crash ? Oh Please !

This is going straight to the never-read-again pile.

If you really want to know what happens when a group of people need to survive on a desert island after

karen says

this book could have gone either way: brilliant satire about our fallacy in equating reality television with reality or steaming pile of finger-pointing hipster poo.

it's somewhere in the middle, but because i was never really jazzed about picking it back up again every time i put it down, and was easily distracted from reading it by other things, it gets a sad two stars from me.

others might like it more.

i actually don't watch any reality t.v. i have never seen *survivor*. or *real housewives* of anywhere. or even *american idol*, which is not technically a reality show, but i understand that it is a popular show that people like to watch that features non-actors and is televised. i am, however, a victim of both *top chef* and *project runway*, but those are shows in which something physical is produced, and i hate it when any of them talk, so the "reality" elements of it are painful to me. i would run the show in a much less social manner. *project sweatshop*. *top shut the fuck up and make me a sandwich*. you don't even want to know how i would revamp that teen mom show.

so i might be missing a lot of subtleties in this book that other people more reality-show-savvy would appreciate. i do understand, however, that reality television is still a really big deal because it is so cheap to produce and audiences just want to see "real" people do unfortunate things. i get schadenfreude. i work retail, after all...

here, in the world of this book, reality shows have progressed somewhat further down the taste-spiral than

they are currently, and become nearly self-parodic, yet still wildly successful.

"but why? why can't we make a show people would believe?"

the AP meets his gaze and holds it. "because it would be boring."

"so people would rather be lied to than bored? they'd rather have their intelligence insulted?"

"wouldn't you?"

and this is the audience. people only in this for the razzmatazz. no one cares about being lied to, or being supplied with no-brainer humor, flashy lights, being cast as dummies and offered only the least common denominator-grade of entertainment. it is all gimmicks and easy laffs.

and i'm not making any judgments here, just observations. there still seems to be this manic rush towards the next big thing, but the next big thing frequently seems shallower than what came before and it lowers the bar more and more until what's left is all flair and no substance. but i don't mean to sound like i am patting myself on my elitist back - people will like what they will like. just because i personally do not understand why larry the cable guy is meant to be funny doesn't mean he is not, to some. to many. i just lack the frame of reference.

this book is ultimately less of a satire and more of a sustained existential crisis caused by reality television. the producer oversees the contestants who become less and less real to him every day. rather than developing some kind of god complex as he observes and manipulates them, he begins to doubt his own authenticity, and the authenticity of the people around him; their reactions and "personalities" a by-product of exposure to reality television, which has become indistinguishable from scripted television. who are these people? where are their counterparts in real life?

exposure to reality television, with its heightened personas, makes any subsequent contestant on reality television develop these "as seen on tv" personalities and pigeonholes them into a role they are only imitating, making the term "reality" laughable at best. is complicated.

so i'm not sure if i am underappreciating this book. the writing is fine, there are some clever moments and jabs at the standards of populist appeal, but ultimately it just never grabbed me. like *survivor* has never grabbed me.

someone else could be totally grabbed by this. give it a shot. be grabbed.

Joseph Michael Owens says

I always like to get my overall impressions of a book out of the way at the beginning in case someone is too impatient to read my entire review. With that said, I really liked Andrew Foster Altschul's *Deus Ex Machina*. You should probably go pick yourself up a copy.

On the surface, the novel is about reality television, specifically, a show that is ostensibly a cross between *The Truman Show* and *Survivor* (with aspects of nearly every other reality show ever created sprinkled in). But to say that the novel is about "a reality show on a distant island" would be to miss the multiple

wonderfully-textured layers Altschul has weaved in so skillfully within the books tightly-packed 203 pages.

It is possible that I read far more into the novel than what is actually there, but once you dig underneath the ten original contestants, the desert island, the extreme focus on ratings and the shady powers-that-be who run the show, you see that the book is really a metaphor for humanity in its own postmodern and metafictional way. The opening perfectly captures the feel and pacing of the novel to come:

On the island they talk about everything, but they don't talk about love. Conversation is constant, even after the day's tasks are done, goals achieved, challenges met. Once they've banked the fire, posted a sentry, checked the stars one last time for messages, they collapse into a makeshift yurt... huddle together for warmth—that's when the whispers arise: Did you hear something? Do you think they've forgotten us? I'm cold. How did this happen? Don't come near me. What in god's name is that smell?

The contestants are called the Deserted, people who are left to fend for themselves on an island essentially miles from anywhere. There is no production intervention allowed. The cameras roll and whatever happens will happen. Free will is stressed, essential. It allows for the contestants to "reveal their true selves up close" unimpeded by a higher power—I'm sorry, I mean the show's producers.

I personally read the island as a metaphor for Earth. A hunk of rock displaced in the middle of nowhere, lacking any possibility for outside help or intervention. The network executives are a *laissez faire* God and the Deserted are us, human beings. It's the evolution of reality TV—tevolution.

But forget the question, "what is reality TV?" Altschul forces us to ask ourselves, "what is reality?" Sections in the book depict the show's production staff putting on acts between themselves and afterwards, asking each other how they did in the event that production footage gets spliced in with footage of the Deserted. Everything is filmed, everything is fair game. But does any of it matter?

Altschul wants to show us ourselves through the lens of the Deserted. He also wants to show us that we are always acting, performing for an audience we can't exactly name. To be accepted, to gain adoration on the island is priority number one. Well, perhaps it's priority number two — making sure we win (at whatever) is priority number one. To be disliked, to be not accepted is death. To be voted off the island, to be exiled, is even worse. So then who are we? According to Altschul, we are the person who's "playing ourselves," not unlike a video game player controlling an avatar, a virtual likeness of themselves—or rather, who they'd like to be—in *The Sims*. At some point, I also realized I haven't been talking only about the book in this review. It seems Altschul has struck his intended chord.

What had once been about free will, about the unpredictable ways of the heart, all of it had been overridden by the show with its one, paramount directive: Crush everything in your path... Theories have been breaking down recently, and the producer can no longer afford to let events be shaped by other hands.

Oddly, the producer is the character who experiences the most cognitive dissonance about intervening at all. Even when characters are itching themselves mad or suffering the effects of worms burrowing deep into their nervous system, the producer resists pushing a button to ease the contestants suffering. Because then it wouldn't be organic. Because then it wouldn't be real. Only then you find yourself in a circular conundrum asking yourself what real even means. In this way, the character of the producer is very much like our *Sims* player, or maybe that is precisely what he's trying not to be.

So that's it in a very complex and not at all tidy nutshell (seeing as how I despise spoilers, there of course will be none). The book does a number of things well, but particularly, it makes the reader question his or her

priorities. It makes the reader question themselves, who they are? and what, exactly, is real? if anything is at all. When all is said and done, who are you performing for?
