



American Spirit

Dan Kennedy

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When Matthew, a fortysomething media executive, finds his Manhattan job, health, and Connecticut marriage crumbling, he goes native: Drinks in his car. Gives drug dealing a shot. Looks for direction in easy-listening rock lyrics, takes a free crafting class at the community center, and gets in a fistfight with a meditation instructor. He also tries jogging.

Soon he's on a stumbling, sideways vision quest that takes him from strip malls to national parks to a Bali medical clinic, from an unlikely romance with a Hollywood agent specializing in hot young vampire roles to extreme RVing with a disgraced Wall Street trader.

American Spirit Details

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Author : Dan Kennedy

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From Reader Review American Spirit for online ebook

Anna says

I didn't mean to read this book. I was trying to read several books I felt I should read. But I heard the author on NPR and he was funny so I downloaded it and kept telling myself I would let myself read it once I finished reading all that I should read. Well, all that I should have read never got read as I devoured this completely hilarious, bizarre and original book. Sad it ended. Read this, people. It'd be silly not to.

Allison6876 says

DNF - read about 100 pages, didn't like the writing style.

Jody Curtis says

An amusing guy-version of an Eat, Pray, Love odyssey. It starts out with the main character tooling around, drinking morning coffee and then noontime beers, in his leased BMW ("the Bavarian land-barge situation"), trying to kill time and hide that he's been fired from his "mid-six" Manhattan publishing job. This leads to clunky attempts at jogging, meditation, ceramics, drug dealing, buffalo spirit seeking, and then a medical holiday in Bali. Funniest if you can appreciate the snark-mocks referencing Elizabeth Gilbert's book about running away to discover herself.

Jordan McBride says

I read the first two chapters and quit. I just couldn't get into the book. I tried and tried but I hated the writing style and I just felt like I couldn't focus. The writing style is kind of all over the place like the author is so ADHD that he doesn't know how to string along one thought at a time. It was very confusing. I will not go back and try to finish this one later....it's the second book I've ever had to put down because I couldn't read it.

Jay Wexler says

The only problem with this brilliant darkly comic novel is that if you're trying to write your own darkly comic novel, American Spirit might make you start weeping in despair at the inadequacy of your own talent. Otherwise, highly recommended.

NinjaK says

An odd, easy read. Not especially good, but there are some gems in here that keep you reading, hoping to

find another one. My personal favorite was an anecdote about the protagonist's friend camping in Yellowstone, who saw a bear outside his RV, snorted a few lines of coke, and then attacked the bear with a formica table top. The ending is absolutely awful, though. Maybe consider stopping the book once the main character gets to Bali.

CluckingBell says

I received a copy for free through GoodReads' First Reads.

As someone who is often put off by an overabundance of "style," I began doubting my ability to finish this book on p. 2 with the description of a gas station restroom that begins, "If you were tracking left to right in here, things would look like this as you drifted along making sense of it: empty paper towel dispenser with just a tiny torn tag of why-bother hanging from the stoic slit of its chipped metal grin; then the scratched-up, dented, bereft vending machine..." Something about the bloated verbiage of that paper towel dispenser really made me want to stop right there, in the second paragraph.

My advice for anyone with a similar reaction? Get through the first chapter. The style does stay fairly consistent throughout, but it also develops a natural rhythm (and stops being about gas station restrooms). It's kind of the stream-of-consciousness narrative of a man in crisis—or rather crises, most at least partly of his own creation. While Matthew has difficulty forming coherent sentences and behaves much of the time like a full-bodied myoclonic jerk, you gradually come to appreciate that this was once a functional human being (though I wouldn't have minded a little more evidence of that) who's just *really* overwhelmed by life right now.

And if you accept that this is ultimately a fable of survival rather than a documentary of a futile downward spiral, it may be easier to enjoy the humor, which I think Alan Tudyk should bring to life if they make a movie out of the book.

Kevin says

I don't want to overhype this but Dan Kennedy is like the new master of American loser fiction. He's so good at the dry delivery and suckerpunch to your heart (sometimes at the same time). I think it's interesting to see some of the crappy ratings and reviews for this book. I think some of these people just want to read something more docile and toothless like Dave Barry. Oh, well. If you like the dark bite of Lipsyte, the perversion of Jonathan Ames, and maybe even a touch of Bret Easton Ellis, seek out this man.

David Pennington says

A common writing admonition warns against using the passive voice. Dan Kennedy laughs in the face of such an advice-giver, brazenly scattering such passive sentences as "the mugs are each inspected" (instead of "Matthew inspects each of the mugs") and "one walks in through the door" (instead of "he walks in through the door") throughout the book. There is a reason most authors avoid this type of passivity, and there is a reason Kennedy does not. For this particular story--and this particular protagonist, whose detached outlook practically stands up as its own character--the disconnected approach to attributing action reflects the lack of

engagement Matthew has with those he encounters.

What Matthew is thinking or doing is often described in terms of what his body parts are doing: the heart thinks this, or the mind thinks that. Again, in this context, the disconnect works: Matthew is not a whole person but, at any given time, he's the sum of a few of his parts. He tries (rather, "the brain" tries) to guess what others are thinking, but his conclusions are so far off, and the results are both funny and bittersweet. Nobody tells Matthew that his guesswork is faulty, nor does the author tell the reader; we become aware of it through the actions of other characters as interpreted by Matthew's warped sense of what makes sense. Warped to us, that is, but perfectly coherent in his mind.

It takes a certain finesse for a writer to lead his readers through this subtle path of comical absurdity. When Matthew waves a gun around--not to intimidate anyone, but simply to underline the points he's making--his young listeners scatter away, leaving Matthew to speculate that it's their youth making them act in strange ways. It doesn't even occur to him that their fleeing was a reaction of fright.

Some might argue that *American Spirit* has no plot. Indeed, I found myself referring to the back cover copy more than once, to remind myself what I was reading about and where it might be going. But Kennedy isn't one to follow rules, and despite what is often referred to as a given, not every book needs a plot. Or, what constitutes a plot is debatable. There certainly are things that happen throughout the story, and some of those events have consequences relating to later events, so it could also be argued that there is a plot after all. Perhaps the plot of *American Spirit* is a reflection of its title: we are Americans, and we may not always know where we're headed or what will happen next, but whatever it is, damn it, we will approach it with spirit.

Or spirits--as in drinking. There's plenty of alcohol and drugs fueling Matthew's deviant perspective, but one gets the feeling that those recreational medications only enhance the distorted outlook that was already brewing in him.

I see some of the "couldn't get into it" reviews and I understand. For some, a voice as unique as this will be an acquired taste. I don't know Dan--though it happens we attended the same high school at the same time--but my imagined version of him glances at those reviews and shrugs, not caring if some didn't get it. I aspire to be like that imaginary Dan and I'm jealous of his ability to react that way. I'm a bit like *American Spirit*'s Matthew in that way--taking an imaginary conversation or behavior and running with it, reacting to it, making my own sense of it which may or may not reflect the real world--and that may be part of why I was drawn to the story.

I highly recommend Dan Kennedy's previous books, *Loser Goes First* and *Rock On*, both memoirs that read like fiction, and I look forward to seeing what he comes up with next.

Colleen Estep says

Dan Kennedy has written a book that makes you understand why you should appreciate the life you have. After Matthew, a media executive in Manhattan gets the news no one wants to hear from his Doctor his life spirals out of control.

Suddenly the required home in the suburb's, the German car that leases for \$1750 a month, and his marriage to Kristin (former model) who is sleeping with everyone but him, loses it's appeal.

His Boss, who brings his dog to work, and the dog who pee's wherever it chooses makes Matthew decide to

"mark" his own territory. Probably not the best idea, since his boss walks into his office to find Matthew with his pants down whizzing away.

Fired on the spot, Matthew is lost with what to do. He tells no one, certainly not his trophy wife and continues to leave his burb home every morning. And so begins Matthews life after leaving it all behind... I totally enjoyed this book and the trials and tribulations that Matthew goes through to find the meaning of it all. Being a baby boomer it all made sense to me. Thank you to Dan Kennedy for writing *American Spirit* and Goodreads for making it possibly for me to read it.

Jenny Boyce says

There have been four books that I haven't been able to finish reading in my lifetime... Now there are five. :(

I just couldn't get into this book at all. The description on the inside cover flap sounded so intriguing and I was really excited to read the book, yet the writing style wasn't something that I enjoyed. The book was written from an interesting perspective, the narrator refers to the main character as "Matthew" when talking about him yet the book still seems to be from Matthew's perspective... Hmmmm... The writing was also a little too wordy and jumbled for my liking. An example of these wordy and jumbled musings can be found on page 12:

"This is only because the fear has long been that Matthew might wind up one of the marginalized beautiful losers in these songs' lyrics and so the head studies the songs and band since age nine or ten, like a cautionary tale of how Matthew could wind up if things get bad, like a schematic of what might go wrong eventually or suddenly, at any minute."

Overall, I couldn't enjoy this book because the writing style just wasn't my cup of tea. Maybe in a few months when I'm completely out of new books to read I'll try to read this one again... We'll see.

Justin says

I came to this novel from hearing its author, Dan Kennedy, interviewed on a podcast I love called "Bullseye." On-air, Kennedy was engaging and witty. He also has a great Twitter feed and happens to be the host of "The Moth" podcast, which endeavors to do nothing more than relate great stories told by interesting people from all walks of life.

But while all those elements most certainly add up to a fantastic individual in the literary community, they unfortunately do not necessarily add up to a fantastic novelist. I'm sad to report that *American Spirit* is kind of a letdown.

Kennedy has the literary trappings down pat: disaffected prose with a trace of irony; a protagonist mired in the quagmire of a modern world that he just doesn't feel connected to; darkly humorous satire on that same world and its abundance of materialism, shallowness, greed and on and on. Kennedy knows what good writing is and he knows how to produce good writing. Ironically, given his devotion to the sharing of other folks' tales in a public forum, it's the storytelling where he comes up short.

American Spirit, for all its skill and hip self-deprecation, just isn't a very compelling read, and there's a strain

of unintentional elitism throughout that culminates in a ludicrously upbeat finale that completely undermines all the social commentary that precedes it. The problem starts with Kennedy's protagonist, Matthew, a former music industry executive who has been recently fired for urinating on the floor of his office and now spends his days living out of his car, drinking and smoking copiously. Rather than detailing the chain of events that might have led up to this irrational behavior, Kennedy assumes that being a six-figures-earning music executive with a fancy car and big house is in itself a big enough piece of soul-sucking drudgery to justify it. As a result, Matthew doesn't feel like a character so much as a scenario, a lever for Kennedy to wander aimlessly between digressions on the modern American workforce and an assortment of wacky characters. Matthew is bland and unlikeable, and so adamantly passive he almost seems to have some kind of learning disability, or a brain trauma that keeps him from fully processing anything. I think Kennedy wants to imply that Matthew's aforementioned soul-sucking job and miserable marriage have caused him to crack so profoundly from normal existence he is no longer capable of functioning in the way humans are expected to function. But the stakes just aren't high enough for us to care about this dreary individual, and his bland personality doesn't translate into the accidentally prophetic wisdom all the characters he encounters interpret him as having. This annoying trait of the novel is at its most irritating with a recurring plot thread involving mugs Matthew starts making in a community center crafting class. The sayings Matthew writes on the mugs are cloyingly wry and cool-clever (which he seems oblivious to, of course) and everyone reacts to them as though they are the most brilliant things they've ever seen, including a beautiful Hollywood talent agent whom Matthew meets, and hooks up with, while running drugs to make a little extra...

God, just writing these plot points is annoying me. *American Spirit* is too contrived and self-aware to be poignant, and too heavy-handed to be smart. Matthew is ultimately a privileged person who takes a departure from his privileged world only to come back to it more privileged than ever. For all its attempted commentary on American life and business, the ultimate message I took away from this book is "The rich get richer." Maybe that was Kennedy's intention but somehow, I don't think so. I think we were supposed to root for this schlub.

Nat says

Kennedy proves himself a master at rendering the slow-bleeding protagonist who must suffer through the diminishment of his facade in order to find redemption. Who among us does not wear a mask that eventually must be removed to face the music? Easy to sketch, difficult to turn into post-modern poetry. Kennedy succeeds beautifully at the task.

Jennie says

Man, this started out so strong. It was hilarious and full of pathos; at times I thought it felt a little Fight Clubby, too. I'm not sure if the schtick got old or what, but I just don't feel like it finished as strong as it started. I would still recommend it, though.

Tim Roast says

There are some vile bits in this book. If you don't like vile bits don't read this book or the rest of this review.

The book follows 45-year-old Matthew Harris who is “long, lanky, slightly underweight, now hung-over, semi-moneyed, tall, and medium slim, with no evident interest in shaving.”

He is going through a nervous breakdown thanks to his marriage to “unfaithful, unwieldy, retired fashion model wife” falling apart, and also because he was fired from the job he held for eleven years. The book follows him through this time where he “is in the midst of an endless and rudderless journey on rising seas of anxiety and receding tides of currency.”

(Vile bit) The beginning sees him basically living out of his car, spitting all over it, him going over the incident that made him lose his job where “suddenly taking a leak all over your office is a crime” plus he has a kidney stone which makes blood come out instead of the normal.

The book is written through Matthew’s over-thinking, active and self-destructive mind. This makes him not a nice person. For example, in addition to the above vile things, he goes to a meditation class and thinks, “The instructor has been brought here today to teach me how to relax and not let fear govern my life. I have been brought here today to teach the instructor how to be tense and afraid again.” And his depression makes him “ponder the very real and very urgent shadow of death that seems to come to mind when there’s too much silence.”

He refuses help. “This is what Matthew’s head does every time help comes along... it looks for holes in the argument.” But eventually he comes to realise that he can’t run away from the pain forever and it is time to get his life in order, deal with his kidney stone etc. “Let’s get rid of some of the crutches; let’s ask for help when it is needed; learn to have a little faith that there’s still time, no matter how much was wasted.”

So overall not a book for me, as a happy-go-lucky person, but maybe for others.
