


# Instruction Manual for Swallowing

*Adam Marek*

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## **Instruction Manual for Swallowing** Adam Marek

A new North American edition of an acclaimed short story collection, *Instruction Manual for Swallowing* explores what happens when ordinary people collide with bizarre, fantastical situations. A man discovers he has testicular cancer on the day that a Godzilla-like monster attacks the city he lives in; a kitchen-hand is put under terrible peer pressure in a restaurant for zombies; a husband and wife discover they are pregnant with 37 babies; and a man travels into the engine room of his own body to discover Busta Rhymes at the controls. The 14 stories are grotesque, hilarious, unnerving, and moving. No matter how outrageous the subject matter of the stories, they have at their heart genuine human experiences that are common to us all. Bonus BackLit materials will include two new stories and an interview with the author.

## **Instruction Manual for Swallowing Details**

Date : Published April 1st 2012 by ECW Press (first published June 1st 2007)

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Author : Adam Marek

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# From Reader Review Instruction Manual for Swallowing for online ebook

**Amanda says**

**Really, 3.5 stars**

A mixed collection, containing both 2 star and 5 star stories, although most stick right around the 3 star mark. The stories veer between scifi and fantasy, although both have some bizarro element in them.

Where Marek excels is when he takes a little talked-about male experience and utilizes the unique qualities of genre fiction to explore it. The only 5 star story in the collection, “Boiling the Toad” explores a male victim of domestic violence. It does this in a powerful way without demonizing all women. The story starts as “my life is so bizarre” but eventually becomes all too real. It’s interesting to note that this is also the opposite of many stories in the collection. Many start ordinary and turn bizarre. Starting bizarre and turning ordinary worked much better. Similarly, “Testicular Cancer vs. The Behemoth” explores male feelings about a cancer that is only possible to get if you have testicles. Marek fairly eloquently presents the main character as attempting to defend his perceived manhood by trying to protect his girlfriend from a Godzilla-like monster attacking the city. These stories are interesting, and I enjoyed exploring them.

Where the collection fails and flounders, though, is when the main character is self-centered and perceives of women as objects or only existing for his pleasure. It’s incredibly difficult to feel any empathy for a character who wants to cheat on his wife but ends up failing because of a mysterious puking illness he gets at the sushi restaurant (Sushi Plate Epiphany) or to care about a man who calls his pregnant wife a monster and tries to cheat on her while she’s still carrying his children (Belly Full of Rain). A lot of these stories incited an eye-roll and “boohoo it’s so horrible to be a man” sarcastic response from me, which I seriously doubt was what the author was going for.

Then there are the stories that simply don’t seem to have any point or make any sense. They seem to just be getting going when Marek stops them abruptly. Or they do seem to be at their end but there is just no point. Both “the Forty-Litre Monkey” and “Jumping Jennifer” have a great set-up of a mystery but that mystery is never addressed. They stop too soon. “Instruction Manual for Swallowing” and “The Thorn” are highly fantastical yet the conflict isn’t set up enough so as to be interesting.

Overall then this is a widely varied collection of bizarro short fiction. Some of the stories offer wonderful insight into male issues while others wallow annoyingly in the minds of terrible men who only think they have a problem, while still others set up a fantastic world but are ultimately boring due to lack of conflict. If you are intrigued by any of the stories mentioned, I would advise getting a copy from the library since they will be quickly read, and you can return it when done. Definitely feel free to skip around in this collection.

Check out my full review, featuring quotes!

Note: I received a free copy of this book in exchange for my honest review.

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## Erica says

I can see why the publishers at ECW thought to give me this collection when I told them that I'm a huge fan of Etgar Keret; Adam Marek cites Keret as one of his inspirations in the BackLit interview included in this edition. Marek's stories gravitate much more to the grotesque than Keret's, however they maintain a similar balance of the mundane and the fantastic. *Instruction Manual for Swallowing* lacks some of the emotional resonance of Keret's works, however it is an enjoyable and disturbing foray into the absurd. An impressive debut.

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## Betty Dickie says

These stories were beautifully written and very strange. There was one about a woman pregnant with 37babies and with the help of a wacky doctor brings them to term. One dealt with mechanical wasps created by exterminators, that only exterminators, or a gifted computer geek, can destroy. The strangest was the restaurant that served zombies--you don't want to know where they get their meat. Mind messing but fantastic writing.

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## Stuart Douglas says

*Instruction Manual for Swallowing* is Adam Marek's first collection according to his website, but I can only assume that he had written pretty widely before creating this compilation of his work. There's little flab on show here, and absolutely no sign that Comma simply collected up every short story he'd ever written, threw a front cover on it and released the new book into the world.

Instead, what we have is a series of highlights, a set of stories where each successive tale trumps the one before it in some respect and where the very best stuck in my mind and popped back up as I lay in bed in the dark.

Like Paul Magrs' Salt Publishing collection, 'Twelve Stories', this is a book about a universe gone slightly and unexpectedly askew. Futuristic tales about metal wasps with red LEDs in their heads and Godzilla rising from the waves and destroying an un-named western city jostle for space with grotesque tales about a woman giving birth to thirty-seven foetuses and suicidal cheerleaders.

These are surreal stories in the proper sense of the word: placing the bizarre into the mundane world, juxtaposing the impossible with the probable, scattering hints of the banal in a universe gone mad. Zombies roam middle England, a man dresses in tea towels and gardening gloves to fight deadly robotic insects and nine foot tall Gilbert and George step out of stained glass into the Tate Modern, wielding giant willies.

It's actually this contrast and the presence of a prosaic background which prevents the book becoming a little too one for comfort. There's a fine line between 'askew' and 'wacky', but luckily Marek stays on the right side of that line and if the occasional story dips a little, it tends to be when - as with the slight tale, 'Sushi Plate Epiphany' - he forgoes this surreal strand and attempts straight-forward story-telling in a straight-forward setting.

At times, I was reminded of John Irving ('Thanks to the monster, he'd stopped dying for a second' ponders the titular hero of 'Testicular Cancer vs the Behemoth'), at others of a more restrained Philip K Dick ('Robot Wasps' and 'A Gilbert and George Talibanimation' in particular) or even David Cronenberg (the slice of gross out horror, best exemplified by 'Belly Full of Rain'), and at others still, of nobody in particular, which was best of all.

Marek is apparently working on a second collection and a novel - can't wait.

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### **Cait Poytress says**

<http://saltyink.com/2012/04/11/new-on...>

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### **Kirsty says**

Strange but interesting stories about masculinity and the male experience. Some of the stories felt a little unfinished to me, but the ones that land (Boiling the Toad, Cuckoo, Belly Full of Rain) are brutal and memorable.

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### **Steven Ackerley says**

Brilliant. The stories are weird, fantastic and touchingly human.

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### **Stacie Cregg says**

I received this book through Goodreads's First Reads program.

In this book are fourteen (sixteen, if you count the bonus stories in the back) of the most inventive, disturbing, and entertaining short stories I've ever read. Many of the stories are simply bizarre: a man, shopping for a new pet, finds himself in a shop where the owner sorts the animals by volume. A group of men hunt the flesh of humans to feed to the patrons of their zombie restaurant. A little boy finds a splinter in his toe; upon extraction, it turns out to be an entire fork. Other stories add the uncertainties and comedies of everyday human life into the mix: a new father struggles to find meaning and direction in parenthood after his wife gives birth to 37 babies. Another man, after learning that he has testicular cancer, brawls with a giant lizard monster rampaging through the city. Yet another man is annoyed to find there's a wasp nest in his backyard, only this is a world where the insects are all robotic.

The stories are all very fun to read and very imaginative without being so weird that the reader gains nothing from reading them. Each story balances the fantastic, grotesque, and strangely hilarious with the dullness and drama of everyday life, creating a rich and unique experience for every reader.

I loved it. Thanks for the book!

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## **Boomz says**

A bunch of spooky tales combined ordinary life with fantastical element, most of which begin promisingly but ends weakly. I do find "Belly Full of Rain", "Cuckoo" and "Meaty's Boys" both entertaining and thought-provoking.

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## **Tami says**

I haven't received my copy yet, just received notice I had won. 03/15/12

Received my copy last night and hope to start soon. I have 15 in front plus my current read. 3/29/12

Started yesterday, 5/28/12

Finished 5/31/12

This book is a collection of short stories that are bizarre. There really is not other word for it. The people that are in the stories find themselves in strange situations, where all sorts of odd things happen to them. One woman pregnant with 37 babies? A man obsessed with the weight of his pet monkey? And yes, there is even a zombie story.

Okay, once again, I thought I would give short stories a shot. This book was better than others I have read. The stories were quick reads, and sort of interesting in a completely illogical way. The story that bothered me the most was the man with the obsession of the weight of his pets. I have no idea why this one bothered me most, but it did. The rest were a bit odd, but didn't disturb me like that one did. Since they were so different, I am not sure I could pick a favorite. I was waiting for a zombie story, so that one didn't shock me (interesting ideas/plot though)

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## **Jafar says**

I picked up this book to try a new genre. I thought it was a collection of science fiction/fantasy short stories. While there's an element of oddity in all of the stories, not all of them seemed obviously to me to be science fiction/fantasy. I think I'm just a novice in this genre. Marek has a pretty good and wacky imagination. Some of the stories were quite intelligent. Three stars because I'm comparing it with the only other collection of fantasy/science fiction short stories that I've read: Italo Calvino's unquestionably-five-star *Cosmicomics*.

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## **Wendle says**

None of these stories are about what you expect. My favourite was Cuckoo, i think, because its elusiveness works so well; it has a well-rounded story that doesn't give all of its pieces up at once. Robot Wasps and Meaty's Boys are two that also sit strong in my mind. Meaty's Boys is one of the longest stories in the book, but seemed to fly by in no time at all. It is also the story with the most well-built world. Though the world we glimpse in Robot Wars was fascinating and left me wanting to know more about it.

These weird little glimpses into strange quirky worlds are what i love about the best short stories. They don't all make sense, they don't all have an underlying message or meaning, and they don't follow any kind of pattern. They're mostly just light-hearted gems to while away a few minutes while you're waiting for the bus. And if a few of them have any kind of depth to them, well, that's a bonus for those who want to search for it.

A longer review can be read at my book blog: [Marvel at Words](#).

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### **Mark J Easton says**

A mixture of quirky tales that are as fun as they are disturbing, each giving the reader the thrill of never quite knowing what the next page will bring. A gem for fans of short stories, a pin to burst boredom, and a surefire way of reading yourself into a smile.

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### **Craig Wallwork says**

I found this book because I've been interested in submitting something to the publishers, Comma Press, for some time. And I also thought it was one of the coolest titles of a book I've seen for a while. The *Instructional Manual For Swallowing* by Adam Marek is not your average book. It doesn't quite fit anywhere, which is why you need to read it.

As I'm always searching for strange and wonderful short stories that match, and surpass, the likes of Etgar Keret, I was really excited at the prospect of *Robotic insects*, a restaurant for zombies, and a woman pregnant with 37 babies. In truth, I was damn near peeing my pants. And Marek didn't disappoint, well, not too much. The first story really blew me away. *40 Litre Monkey* tells the tale of a pet shop owner who measures all his animals by their volume. It was funny, sad and very surreal. My expectations were raised, and although the second story in the collection, the one about the pregnant woman with 37 babies, didn't quite hit me squarely on the chin as the first, I could tell Marek had a gift for pulling you from the page.

The subsequent stories that followed had a little more weight to them, which is probably why they dragged me to real world very quickly. It's not that these stories are bad, it's just that based on the first two stories, I was convinced Marek would be my guide to the dark places in his mind. Instead, he decided it would be best all round to "coast" for a while before throwing back the curtain. Ramping it up with stories about a man fighting both testicular cancer and a monster tearing up the city, a boy who can extract cutlery from his body, and the title story which illustrates how the body might function if it was controlled from within by a person, makes Marek an author to keep your eye on.

Sure, with any short story collection, there are going to be lulls. Fortunately, there are not many here. From one story to the next, you're caught between laughing, reeling back in surprise, and dropping to your knees with wonder. As the blurb perfectly illustrates, as you turn the first page you enter the "surreal, misshapen universe of Adam Marek's first collection, where the body is fluid, the spirit mechanised and beasts often tell us more about our humanity than anything we can teach ourselves."

The price tag is worth it for the stories, *40 Litre Monkey*, and *The Instructional Manual For Swallowing*.

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## Lazarus P Badpenny Esq says

As the title implies, Marek's stories are about the ways in which, particularly through language, aspects of the everyday are made unfamiliar to us. In these uncanny tales there is something almost Lacanian about the way words lead not to understanding but instead reveal the world as ultimately unknowable.

They are also suggestively 'post-secular'. With their mini-epiphanies and their odd moments of lyricism they hint at something like intelligent design. However, as one critic has noted, the stories in this collection repeatedly fall 'just short of revelation', suggesting that to seek metaphysical explanations for the events in our lives is mistaken. In this way the stories act as a denial of their own premise, using what is invented and artificial in the written world to imply that our lives beyond the page are, in fact, contingent and untidy, that what we might recognise as underlying purpose or plan is merely coincidence.

Marek's stories are written in a voice that is personable but, like much modern popular or genre fiction, relies not upon literary technique to achieve their effects but too often upon a kind of cinematic shorthand. Images - Godzilla attacks, zombie-killing rampages - read like film treatments. Moments that aspire to an emotional resonance feel more like they've been lifted from a movie. (These are aside from errors that should have been picked up in the editing - I'm not sure, for example, exactly how it's possible to be both simultaneously clenching one's teeth and chewing the inside of one's mouth?).

Marek, therefore, makes for a potentially interesting story-teller but a less than satisfactory writer.

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