



Us

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A husband wakes up to find that his wife has had a seizure during the night. The husband calls an ambulance and his wife is rushed to a hospital where she lies in a coma. By day, the husband sits beside his wife and tries to think of ways to wake her up. At night, the husband sleeps in the chair next to his wife's bedside dreaming that she will wake up. He wants to be able to take her back home. Years later, the story of this long and loving marriage is retold by their grandson. He wants to understand his grandmother's life and death, what it meant to his grandfather, and what it means to him. He wants to understand – in his own words – "how love can accumulate between two people."

Us Details

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From Reader Review Us for online ebook

Mel Bosworth says

Recently, while driving to work, I ran over two animals. The first was a red squirrel and the second was a gray squirrel. The red squirrel was just a little critter. Every red squirrel I've ever seen is just a little critter, not much bigger than a big mouse, but they're fierce and aggressive around the larger but still relatively small gray squirrels.

I don't enjoy killing animals. When I do kill an animal, it's accidental, mostly. I still swat mosquitoes pretty quickly and I still smash black ants when I catch them on my desk. I used to kill insects all the time when I was a kid, with no real understanding of the difference between life and death—alive one moment and a smudge on the cement the next.

Now that I'm somewhat older (I'm getting deeper into my 30's) I find that I'm much more aware of that invisible line between life and death, breathing and not breathing, feeling and numbness or nothing at all. The awareness of that line hurts sometimes. And that hurt is a bottomless black thing. It's sadness. It's the end of something being something. It's a furry little red squirrel running across the street, clear of my car and then suddenly cutting back in a fit of indecision, oh I forgot my snack, and then it's the end of that furry red squirrel with a wet popping sound beneath my tire. And then it's me pounding my steering wheel, wondering why, why did that stupid mothergrabbing red squirrel have to cut back under my tire?

The gray squirrel was just as bad, leading another gray squirrel out from the edge of a green lawn. The following squirrel stopped at the curb when he saw my car coming, and the leading squirrel, who looked like he was fit to move past my churning wheels just in time, simply stopped, and then looked at me just before I popped him under my tire, too.

And maybe this death was worse than the first, but it's hard to say. The death of the red squirrel was a blur of confusion, and the death of the gray squirrel was more like a suicide. And his friend at the edge of the lawn watched him die. Brutal. Wrenching. Man oh man.

I wanted to turn around and go home. It wasn't going to be a good day, not with two deaths on my hands before most people have their breakfast. I needed to stop driving so I could hit some kind of re-set button but I also needed to get to work. I tried to convince myself that I'd done all I could do—with the exception of coming to a complete, screeching stop—to avoid killing them. I certainly didn't want to kill them, and when I saw them coming into the street I thought for sure they had me beat.

And they did.

But it was their time to go, to pluck the invisible string between this world and the next, to offer me the assist in the string plucking. I'm not sure I had a choice but I suppose it doesn't really matter.

That morning I was nearly finished with Michal Kimball's Us. I planned on finishing it when I got home at the end of the day. I made it home without killing anything else, at least as far as I know. I could've killed some flies or something, some ants. All in all, though, it turned out to be an okay day. Nothing else terrible happened. I made it home, I finished the book.

And it killed me. I played the role of the red squirrel cutting back underneath the tire. I played the role of the

gray squirrel stopping in the road to meet my death with chin held high. I became road kill, doomed to be flattened and spread along the blacktop until the ants and the bugs and the birds carried and pecked me away.

In truth, though, *Us* didn't really kill me. Instead, it played the song that's played on that line separating breath and not breath, which, I suspect, is more potent than death because it's death experienced while living, it's shoving your face into death and then jerking back out, gasping, cheeks dripping.

Kimball's *Us* played the single note, actually, that that string can play. And damn what a note it is. And damn I can't think of many writers (or any off the top of my head) who have even dared to play that note. I mean, how could they? Why would they want to? What living person can convey something that only those on the very edge of that line can know/feel, when being on that edge means sacrificing so much, especially something so indulgent as writing? And should a writer attempt to convey such a thing, how could they even dream of conveying it with any semblance of honesty? How could they pull it off?

Michael Kimball is a rare, rare writer, a writer whose empathy knows no limits. He holds the note of loss and his voice never cracks, not even for a moment. Kimball's personal narration is interspersed in self-contained blocks throughout the book, co-mingling or co-existing, rather, with the voice and story of his nameless narrator. Kimball's pull-backs are refreshing as they act to offer a slight reprieve from the hard sadness of the narrator's expression, but they also act as manifestations of another hard sadness, a similar hard sadness, the one that inspired the book. In this way, the text, as a whole, is a muse to itself, which is where the hope lies. It's that universe within a universe, or the hint of a universe within a universe, that keeps bubbling up in the books I've been reading lately. To me, that feeling, that sense of the circular, is what all writers strive to give their readers and themselves but it's something few writers convincingly achieve.

Kimball has achieved that here with seeming ease. The words rise off the page like smoke, and the story blazes like a firework in the darkness, a firework bound to leave lasting tracers once the powder has burned clean.

The story of *Us* begins at the end of a wife's seizure in the bed she shares with her husband, a seizure that cripples her consciousness. From there we move to the hospital for her awakening and her recovery, and from there we move back home, nervously, where there are no doctors or nurses should things go wrong, should another seizure (or something worse) grip her during the night.

Kimball's narrator uses short, declarative sentences to tell us his story in a simple voice that conveys very difficult things easily, like how he tried to drive himself home from the hospital, how they slowed their time down, how they practiced for her death, how love can accumulate between two people.

Anyone who's ever dealt with or experienced, even peripherally, the anxiety that comes along with serious illness or impending death (although after reading this book I'm reminded that we're all going to die, each and every one of us) knows how consuming it can be. In order to move forward or to, at worst, maintain, everything in one's life is reduced and compartmentalized, and the language of *Us* reflects this concept perfectly. Take, for example the chapter *How I Rubbed Her Wrinkles Out* in its entirety:

"I would rub her back and her arms and her legs and her feet. My hands could rub the wrinkles out of her skin and make her feel younger, so that she could stay alive longer. We were trying to stretch the rest of our lives out."

In *Us*, Kimball announces, reminds, sings, paints, carves, and whispers that all things are temporary, impermanent, fleeting. I like to believe he's also telling us to make hay while the sun shines, and to love,

give, comfort, go, and, hopefully, as he's already done early in his career, leave something resonant behind.

Michael Beeman says

Us is a gutsy little book. Kimball's 184 page novel begins as a step by step account of a husband's life as it is remade by his spouse's seizure. A quarter of the way through, Kimball presents a chapter in new voice, a plea from the comatose wife. Soon another voice is added, that of the couple's grandson who is meticulously imagining his grandparents' last days in order to understand the strength of their love. Although these storylines might have been hard to sustain alone, together they even each other out. Kimball performs an incredible balancing act by switching between these concurrent narratives, a difficult feat to pull off in any novel and especially impressive in one so short.

Alli Crawford says

T__T

Jeff Bursey says

This novella, despite its competence, and the universal cheering of critics on the front pages, is a book of no great importance. It handles its theme with respect, and Kimball does a good job detailing the mental anguish of a husband as his wife is taken to hospital goes into a coma, awakes to return home, and then slowly declines. What works against that picture is the portrait of the husband, a large hole in the text we know about thanks to the narration of a grandchild, and the lack of distinction between those two male voices. What Kimball has come up with isn't ambitious enough.

For a longer review, go here:

<http://quarterlyconversation.com/us-b...>

heather says

This book ripped out my guts and broke my heart. In a good way.

Michael Kimball says

I think that I love this book more than any of my other books. I had more fun writing Dear Everybody, but writing Us changed me in fundamental way. The novel was first published in the UK, South Africa, and Australia in 2005. The Spanish translation came out last fall and there is an Italian translation in the works. I couldn't be happier that it is now getting its American release with Tyrant Books.

Shawn says

I see very well why some may have struggled with or even given up on this book. In fact, I saved it from the recycle bin myself. (Well, actually, it was just my husband deciding to turn it in at the Used Book Counter for store credit, but that is recycling.) He had read another book by this author and found it frustrating and "flat", as some criticized this book for being. The author does write in a rather stilted manner - "I looked at the book. I picked the book up. I read the book's pages. I closed the book. I put the book down.", etc. An entire novel of that could be irritating, I imagine. What worked about that style for this particular novel is that the methodical, regimented, robotic prose lent the feeling of foggy, disoriented, world-shifting-off-its-axis confusion that comes with sudden loss and consuming grief.

The emotions felt authentic, visceral. A very interesting choice of storytelling to weave the story of a long, loving marriage brought to an end by the death of a spouse, with that of a younger man thinking back upon, trying to make sense of, and confronting the fear of loss in his own life.

Poignant. Absolutely worth pushing past any initial apprehension or discomfort. The payoff is worth the effort.

Jamie Gaughran-Perez says

It kept breaking my heart till the end. So many brilliant little turns -- I love how the even-numbered parts (the autobiographical things) completely change how you think about the book... Disarm you in some way... And oddly make the book more about the husband and wife by telling you about people outside their story -- people from Kimball's life and Kimball himself. Just read it, you'll see.

Robertha says

We talk about death in my household a lot, especially since the early passing of my future spouse is a very likely calamity at which we occasionally plan.

Yet I couldn't and didn't think of that as I was gripped by this beautifully sparse novel, detailing the pathetic and painfully familiar and immediately understandable gestures and minute actions by which the narrator attempts to, in turns, capture, then extend, then conjure from nothingness, the life of the ghostly and then expired wife that he loved.

I don't know how else people would deal with such excavating grief other than by filling up one's suddenly literalized world view with solemnly significant and ultimately petty acts of resistance against death, and then the most incremental steps toward acceptance.

Sarah Etter says

one day, i started following michael kimball on twitter. the next day, i got an email from him, asking me to come read a few stories for his reading series in baltimore. i said yes, went to baltimore with some books and met him before the reading. i guess this is a disclaimer because the minute i met this guy, i knew he was an

incredible person. i ended up getting my copy of Us in exchange for buying him a soda and an order of bacon cheese fries and we spent the whole night talking about everything. not bad.

before i finally cracked open Us, i'd read a few reviews about it being heartbreaking and moving. i guess there's no real review to prepare you for what goes on here - the story of a man and woman as they're both basically dying. the majority of the story is told from the man's point of view, with snippets of the wife's thoughts and the input from kimball himself, since this is largely based on his grandparents' lives and the death of his grandmother.

the sentences here are so precise as to be scalpels:

"we found ways to make our days longer. we followed the sun around our house - from our bedroom and the bathroom in the morning, to the kitchen through noon, the living room through the afternoon, and the dining room for evening."

this sentence seems simple enough, but in the context of the story, it's enough to make your heart crack a little bit in your chest.

the thing that struck me, largely, throughout this book, was how often our love stories are often death stories, how much we're all really hoping for when we love someone else and choose that person until we're dead. it wasn't easy to stomach. it wasn't easy to look at directly. but the tightness of the sentences got me through it, made me go forward step by step, made me not as afraid.

michael kimball is a rare thing. michael kimball is a great person and goddamn incredible writer. this book is a rare thing. it is one of the saddest books i've ever read and also one of the most beautiful.

High Plains Library District says

Nobody writes like Michael Kimball. Nobody.

The plot isn't what makes this book. It's simple. We have an old couple nearing the end of their lives.

What makes this book is the voice. I've never read anything like it. Michael Kimball disappears. The text on the page disappears. And all that's left is the voice of this character, this frightened old man who just wants his wife to stay with him, stay alive with him and stay at home with him.

The book is simple. What it has to say is simple. It's the way the book says it. That's how it gets in your head, travels down to the middle of your chest and breaks your heart.

-Peter

xTx xTx says

This book is a lot lot lot about love and also a lot about death. This book is beautiful. It shows love at the end of things and, to me, it seems to be a truer love. A love that is at the end of its long. It reminds us that love is not just the big things about a person, but is oftentimes mostly the little things about a person. I think it's all of these little things that Michael Kimball shines his light on for us made me moved the most.

There are so many parts in the book that moved me deeply. Parts that made me feel like crying. So many beautiful little lines that just sliced perfectly and made me be still.

Thank you Michael Kimball for this book.

Jerrod says

"Nobody told me that grief feels like fear." So says a young Michael Kimball in one of the memoirish-auto fictional sections that punctuates and animates this tale of final loss, and it is a line that catches the dark, fragile threads that make up the novel. Kimball writes in language absent rhetoric; there is nary an adjective or adverb. The only recurring exceptions are slowly, sticky and stiff, which emphasize the agonizing time warp one enters once death is acknowledged as near. I was reminded of Fitzgerald's Benjamin Button, which in a certain sense, is neither a fantastical tale nor a metaphor. Having watched the slow passing of someone near to me, I can attest that is an extreme process of imposed infantilization, and it renders all parties involved terrified and helpless. To present this reality nakedly is an act of bravery and Kimball manages it beautifully. A hard, cold, broken thing.

Superstition Review says

The story that is found in *Us* is one that is not new but the way that it is told is what makes this novel something amazing. A man wakes up to find that his wife isn't breathing, and realizing she had a seizure in the middle of the night, the husband must come to terms with what his life will be like without her. Kimball uses sparse and simple sentences to tell an accurate tale of what one man's grieving feels like. The clean prose found in the novel reads in such a way that makes the reader feel the shock and the desperation of the man waiting for his wife to wake up or to die. The work is an emotional tale of grief, acceptance and the power of love and companionship.

Review by Kate Cook

Peter Derk says

This is a terrifying and very sad book. A husband and wife are in bed together one night when the husband wakes up to his wife shaking and not responding to him.

Things go downhill from there.

Michael Kimball, who wrote the excellent *Dear Everybody*, a novel written in the form of letters left behind by a man who commits suicide, uses his ear for speech to translate into text a book that finds power in simple sadness.

Take, for example, this portion towards the beginning:

I didn't want to lose my wife. I wanted to see my wife lying down in a hospital bed. I wanted to see my wife breathing again. I wanted to see her get up out of bed again. I wanted to see her get up out of our bed again. I wanted my wife to come back home and live there with me again.

Kimball has a really subtle style, a way of saying things that makes the reader really sympathize with the narrator.

To get picky:

I pulled her eyelids up, but her eyes didn't look back at me, and her eyelids closed up again when I let go of them.

A lot of writers would have left off with ..."but her eyes didn't look back, and her eyelids..." but Kimball is a writer who makes lots of little important choices that make his books great.

True to form, Kimball also experiments with the structure, interspersing his own memories of the deaths of his grandparents into the story at hand. I'm not really sure why...but something that would normally be impossible to pull off works, and I'm more interested in the fact THAT it works than HOW for the time being.

Great book, definitely one of Pete's Top of 2011.

Now, it has to be noted that there was, unfortunately, a dream sequence in this book. As prompted by a friend earlier in the week, I would like to take a moment to express how irritating I find dreams in works of art and why I think they don't belong there.

For starters, I don't believe that dreams have much meaning, or certainly not hidden meaning that we need to mine from deep within the shitty folds of our dumb brains. Most of my dreams are fairly pedestrian, involve reasonably familiar scenarios and characters, and don't really make for much exciting interpretation.

Example: Dream where I am spooning some girl from high school, then I get up to go to work.

Interpretation: Though I don't think about that person often, there she was. And in the dream I got up to do exactly what I do five out of every seven days, so it would be more unusual to me if I weren't going to work.

It's my guess that brief thought will give you all the context you need for 90% of your dreams, and the other ten percent can be chalked up to your brain just doing whatever the fuck it wants.

That said, I know that not everybody feels that way. Lord knows we've all hung out with some fool who had a dream that his grandma died, and then it turned out his grandma died. Unless you're in a really bad movie, the death was on accident and not to somehow make people believe the kid was a dream psychic, and I have to believe that this was random chance.

Math: if you dreamt that your grandmother died once every month, and on one of these nights she died, assuming that you are 27 years old, your dreams were correct .3% of the time, which is a pretty shitty average. If you do that same math a different way, dreaming something different every night for a year, one of those dreams would come true. Thinking about it that way, that you dreamt SOMETHING every night, it

wouldn't be that much of a shock that one dream came true. Except that the brain is a pattern-seeking machine, and it has a tendency to really highlight the shit out of the times it's right and let go of the times it's wrong.

Therefore, some idiot has a dream that comes true once, and I have to hear about it constantly. Yet I don't call them every single day to ask them what the previous night's dreams held and to remind them that those didn't come true, and also I don't butt in to point out that even though the grandma death was prophesized, there was not a bengal tiger with bananas instead of claws involved as there was in the dream.

That's my feeling on real world dreams and why they aren't interesting, particularly. If you think I want to hear about your dreams, try this first: Start by telling me the most fucked-up dream you've ever had. If I'm interested in that, I might, MIGHT listen to some others. But start with the gold.

Back to books.

I want to put this question in your head: Why?

Why, in a story that is a complete fabrication, does there need to be a dream? A made up story within a made up story?

Every single thing on the page is made up, so why does there have to be something that appears EVEN MORE made up?

I have some common reasons this happens, patterns if you will:

-Dreams are a shortcut to expressing mood in a book without actually doing the heavy lifting of, I don't know, writing a book. Instead of using factors outside the character, or painting the character as exhibiting a certain mood, the writer can just say, "That night he dreamed of a black snake. It was swallowing him whole, and as the snake's mouth covered his own mouth and nose he stopped breathing and saw nothing."

-Dreams are a way of allowing a character to do something out of character or express a repressed feeling. The corporate drone eviscerating his boss and cooking the entrails in a skillet. That way, the character can do something awful, but we don't have to risk readers finding a strong dislike for a character. Because the last thing you want is for a character to evoke strong reactions.

-Dreams are a way for writers to feel like they can cut loose and get a little sloppy with their words. If it doesn't make sense, it's fine. It's a dream, it's not supposed to make sense. I really dislike that logic. It goes against the entire purpose of writing, which is to make someone understand something, whether it be an action or an emotion or whatever. But a sentence like, "He broke through the tallgrass walls and fell bellyfirst out of a thick, blue membrane of sleep and into a different world, a world where his feet were his feet but also part of everything else" is just annoying. It's like hearing someone describe, badly, what it's like to drop acid.

-Dreams are, in some of the more egregious cases, used to solve mysteries in the book. A detective-type will be looking something over for hours, and it's only when he has a dream about the papers flying out the window and rearranging themselves on the ground that he figures out the code. That, my friends, is complete bullshit and you know it.

-Worst case scenario, the dream is put in front of the audience as reality, and it's only after the dream is over

that we find out It Was All a Dream. This is a completely idiotic way to tell a story. First, how does your audience know to trust you? A real person would never say, "Here's what happened to me in real life yesterday" and then proceed to tell you a dream. It's a completely false presentation, and your audience should not trust you afterwards. Second, it undoes all your hard work. Famously, in Super Mario Bros. 2, the game ending shows Mario in bed and after he wakes up it turns out that the entire game, all those turtle shells and radishes and all that bullshit, was all a dream. THEN WHY THE FUCK CAN'T YOU JUST JUMP IN THE VERY FIRST PIT IN THE GAME, WAKE UP, AND GET THE EXACT SAME MOTHERFUCKING ENDING!?

Here, in another list-y format, are some more reasons I really hate the use of dreams in all formats of fiction:

-You never know where you stand with a dream because rarely does the dreaming character say anything about the dream in particular or express it fully to another character. Therefore, the reader now knows something that other characters may potentially know and may not, for all intents and purposes, exist at all in the fictional universe. If a fictional character cannot or does not remember a dream, it becomes a complete waste of time, no different than if a writer wrote a chapter and then followed it up with, "Just kidding, ignore that chapter, let's move on."

-On that same note, setting the tone with a dream is sort of like being a lawyer and asking a question that you know will be overruled. You didn't get the answer, but the jury can't just pretend they never heard it, and they can't help but speculate. A dream puts a seed in someone's brain, but it's not earned.

-I want to see characters do shit. I don't want them to dream about stabbing someone. I want them to stab someone. Or have sex with someone, or wreck their car, or do whatever the hell it is this book has been promising me so far. A novel is entirely an exercise in "What would happen if..." so you might as well make it worthwhile. There was a famous writer who suggested a technique that I remember as "Snake in a Drawer." The idea is that you throw something incongruous into the story and see what happens. Not something impossible, a pirate doesn't show up out of goddamn nowhere, but maybe someone opens a dresser drawer and there's a snake inside. Cue action. Take the snake out of the dream and put him in a drawer. Get out of my dreams, get into my car, damn it.

-I understand that dreams can be used to try and avoid cliché, using a dark dream instead of a dark sky, but the dreams end up falling back on cliché anyway. The language of dreams is less universal than the language of, um, language, and a dream has to be a lot more pre-explained and pre-loaded with what we already know in order to make any sense.

Okay, it's out of my system.

There's a time and a place for dreams, sure. Certain genres, certain types of books, can pull it off. I'm not a fan of hallucinations in any kind of media, but Fear & Loathing would not make a whole lot of sense played straight. Nightmare on Elm Street has to be the way it is, and it works because the distortion between dreams and reality is the whole point, not a throwaway scene. There's a scene in the terribly dated Empire Records where a character has a hallucination that he's at a GWAR concert being eaten alive by a giant plant, and it's funny because the character is watching himself on the TV and the audience sees his expression change as things go south.

In summation, dreams are a very specific tool in media and should not be used as a swiss army knife to solve whatever problems may arise.

