

## ***The Postmortal: A Novel***

By Drew Magary

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Reviewed by:

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Drew Magary's *The Postmortal* is the type of novel that stands out on a bookshelf. On the bright yellow spine is an illustration of a syringe filled with some unknown injection. Upon its lime green cover is an illustration of the Grim Reaper impaled on his own scythe. The death of death? The prospective reader is left wanting to know. As the reader turns the pages and gets inevitably pulled into the story, an alternate future unfolds in which "the cure" for aging has been discovered, and a myriad of negative implications of that discovery come forward. Magary has written a work of fiction, but while progressing through the pages, the reader cannot help but wonder whether it will soon become a work of fact. Student readers would be pulled through the text by the intriguing and fast-paced storyline. Almost without realizing it, students would be challenged to learn about themselves and to think about the implications of their actions, and our actions as a society, as they follow the life of the main character, John Farrell.

On page one, the work begins with "A Note about the Text: From the Department of Containment, United North American Territories" dated February of 2093. This note informs the reader that the book is a compilation of blog/online journal entries that span sixty years of the twenty-first century. They are written by a man named John Farrell. This compilation was saved by the "Department of Containment" and published for two main reasons: it is the most detailed first-person account of "the end specialization industry," and it is "incontrovertible evidence that the cure for aging must never again be legalized" (p. 2). Following this intriguing introduction, the entries are separated into four sections: "Prohibition: June 2019," "Spread: June 2029," "Saturation: March 2059," and "Correction: June 2079."

In the first entry, it is the year 2019, and John Farrell is en route to meet a black market doctor to get "the cure." Aside from the existence of the cure, John's world is much like ours. "The cure" is a series of three injections that will prevent the patient from aging past their "cure age," or the age at which they received the cure. John's cure age is twenty-nine. This cure has been made illegal in the United States, but that hasn't stopped countless people from getting it. For \$7,000, John is about to become immortal, or rather a "postmortal."

Many are violently opposed to the cure and begin bombing the homes and offices of doctors known to give out or support the cure. On the other hand, swarms of people begin to protest the government's ban on the cure, and the fervor of the protestors increases to a near frenzy. Society begins to reel out of control as people try to reestablish the meaning of life and everything that is a part of it. John is a lawyer, and his law firm begins to specialize in handling divorces and "cycle marriages," which are marriages that both parties agree will only last for a set number of years, as people begin to realize that "till death do us part" means a lot longer now.

Throughout all of this, John himself is struggling to understand and to decide how he feels about it all. At the end of "Prohibition," John's best friend Katy, a fun-loving young woman who is absolutely giddy over the idea of getting to live and party for an eternity, dies in a bombing. The cure prevents aging, but one can still die of any other cause. Katy's death marks the beginning of a continuous state of fear and grief into which John, and the rest of the world, will be plunged. Katy's death symbolizes the death of the idea that there will be no negative repercussions of the cure. John is left reeling from his best friend's death, and "Prohibition" ends with the president addressing the

nation and legalizing the cure. Throughout the rest of the story, John struggles with the grief, loss, and fear that took hold in this first part of the book. He also struggles to answer the fundamental questions: “What is the point of an immortal life?” and “Does anything have meaning?” People who come in and out of John’s life bring on all of his points of clarity and grief, and loss permeates this book.

In the sections “Spread” and “Saturation,” both John and the world are in a steady state of decline. Almost everyone has now received the cure, and the depression and desperation are palpable. With so few people dying, there simply aren’t enough resources. The rich are staying rich and building apocalypse compounds, and the poor are living in cars on the sides of roads and desperately fighting for what little water and gas remain. Infrastructure is crumbling; governments have lost control of armies, China begins nuking its own cities to lower its population, and gangs are pillaging and murdering unchecked.

As the decades go by, John has done everything he can to avoid his grief and numb himself to his fear, and society is struggling with many of the same questions that John is. A new religion called “the Church of Man,” also called “Collectivists,” develops. This faith is based on the idea that man is god and that all people are sacred. At the exact opposite end of the spectrum are the “Terra Trolls.” The Terra Trolls are an organization of people that are against the cure and dress in all black and paint their heads green. They seek to ruin the immortal lives of others by permanently disfiguring them and instilling terror. John falls prey to them and has his true birth date carved into his arm. His fear now has a face, and it is painted green. John gets hope when his ex-girlfriend gives birth to his son, David, and when he starts dating a woman named Alison. “Spread” ends with John facing the debilitating losses of his father and girlfriend Alison to unfortunate deaths.

Part three, “Saturation,” opens with John seeking employment as an “End Specialist.” An End Specialist is a new profession that has developed since the advent of the cure. Essentially, people that are ready to die hire a government licensed End Specialist to kill them. John is asked in his job interview why he wants to help others die, and he responds by saying that he has seen people die without a say in it, and he wants others to have a say in when and how they die. “Saturation” ends with John discovering that his son was killed in a bombing. Just as he learns of his son’s demise, he is called by his employer and informed that they are now ordered by the government to conduct “Hard ES’s,” or the killing of those the government deems unfit to live any longer, as a means of population control. John concludes this section by saying, “I have my purpose. I am the correction” (p. 292). The world has gone to hell and so has John’s life, and his life’s only purpose is now to end the lives of others.

In the last section, “Correction,” the world is spiraling out of control. This entire section of the book is dedicated to John finding a woman named Solara Beck. John saw Solara Beck the day Katy died in the bomb blast, and she was later identified as a terrorist who helped plant the bombs. John spends the book obsessed with finding her. In the final section of the book, he runs into her in a market and, instead of killing her, as his ES job requires, he discovers she had been forced to participate in the bombings, and he falls in love with her. The book concludes with John finding his humanity again. He finds hope and love and a purpose. He does everything he can to save Solara as nuclear bombs fall around them. Whether they were launched by the United States or another country is unclear. John is mortally wounded in a panicked riot, but manages to get Solara to safety. In John’s last thoughts, he has found peace, and he reflects on the fact that one cannot hide from the world, and that immortality means nothing because nothing is permanent.

This book is haunting. As John’s life unfolds, the readers are forced to ask themselves many of the same questions John is asking: “What is the meaning of life? Can anything be done to change society? *Why* do I want the things that I want?” For first year students going through a significant amount of transition and questioning, this work would encourage deeper thought and exploration.

This entire book is an examination of what could happen to our world and how people respond to life. It leaves the readers with an urgent need to figure out what they believe in and to fight for it no matter the cost. John spent his entire life trying to figure himself out and running from his fears, and all he experienced as a result was grief, anger, and loss.

If selected for a first-year or common reading program, this book would be successful. This is not only an engaging and alluring read, but it also is very timely. Apocalyptic works are in vogue, and *The Postmortal* would intrigue students. This book would also appeal to educators and Student Affairs professionals as it incites thought, encourages self-exploration, and promotes a critical analysis of our society. This book could be offered to the general student reader, but could also be successful and provide ample discussion for learning communities or special interest groups.

The discussion opportunities in this book are vast. Main points for discussion could include implications of scientific advancement, environmental concerns, dealing with grief and loss, fear of the unknown, violence, and ethics. All of these discussion points are central themes throughout the book. Other less pervasive discussion topics could include the role of religion in society, mob mentality, and economics. Though this book would encourage student development if it were read without guidance, the discussion opportunities are so vast that it would perhaps be best paired with other new student programming, such as a freshman introductory course or a freshman English class.

There is one area of concern some professionals may want to consider before selecting this book for a new student reading program. The book does contain some crude humor, an extensive amount of drinking and partying, and some drug usage. These things are portrayed in such a way that they are illustrated as being a crutch and detrimental to an individual's development; however, some professionals may wish to steer clear from the topic.

Drew Magary's *The Postmortal* exhibits one of the beautiful characteristics of fiction: the ability to transport the readers to a time and place that challenges them to reevaluate themselves, almost without them realizing it. This work is timely, thought provoking, and intriguing. *The Postmortal* would spark thought and dialogue in such a way that it would be an excellent choice for a first-year or common reading program.