



# The Businessman

*Thomas M. Disch*

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Bob was the happiest man in the world. His wife was dead, and no one suspected him of the murder. His mother-in-law was dying, and would probably leave him an inheritance. With both of them gone, Bob could live the good life. But then Bob's wife came back from the grave . . . and she brought her mother with her.

## **The Businessman Details**

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Author : Thomas M. Disch

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## From Reader Review The Businessman for online ebook

### ♥ Marlene♥ says

This was such a crazy read. At one point I thought it had become too crazy for me (a walking statue comes to mind) but even though it was crazy I liked it. I liked the writing and the main characters so yes Crazy but fun

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### Traummachine says

Disch started his career writing sci-fi, and I enjoyed *Echo Round His Bones*, so I was interested to see what the Supernatural Minnesota books were like.

The book begins with a husband trying to cover up the murder of his wife, and with the wife realizing she's dead and in a coffin and can't get out. She eventually does (of course), and realizes that she's supposed to haunt her husband. Sometimes she wants to & sometimes she doesn't, but they're bound to each other regardless.

Both husband and wife have very strange difficulties, and this novel had a little bit of a Piers Anthony Pontification thing going on; lots of theorizing, exploration of odd ideas, etc. Disch does good characterization and explains the strangeness in a way that kept me in the story. I really like his style. Overall this felt more like a supernatural drama than horror, although it definitely had some horror-worthy moments. Very different than I expected, looking forward to *The M.D.* next!

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### James Oxyer says

A darkly comedic and satirical fantasy that reads like a combination of *The Lovely Bones*, *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Omen*, and *The Frighteners*...from the author of *The Brave Little Toaster*.

All the ingredients are ripe for a good fantasy/horror/social commentary piece - with a set-up that reads like a morality tale ripped straight from *The Vault of Horror* - and they certainly could have been if the final product didn't give off such a strong "making it up as I go" vibe. A positive because this book is never predictable and unlike anything I've ever read. A negative because the main point of it all is lost in the jumble. The side characters are fun, the horror elements are suitably horrific, and the depiction of the afterlife is interesting, even if the mythology of it is extremely muddled.

I particularly enjoyed some of the weird visuals. A possessed Virgin Mary statue and a naked woman look in on the woman's own funeral. A tree and a frog get in an argument. HBO is readily available in Heaven, and a certain Biblical superstar appears at the end in a very interesting way. Most poetic of all and in true EC Comics fashion, the ultimate comeuppance of the titular businessman is a cathartic hoot. Talk about fitting punishment.

I can't say this is what I'd call an engaging read, but it's certainly interesting and unlike anything else you're apt to read. I'm happy this put Disch on my radar, though. Dude's got a hell of an imagination.

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## **Rebecca McNutt says**

I wasn't sure at first that I'd like this one because of its negative reviews, but I really enjoyed its classic horror story setup and the author's prose.

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## **Randolph says**

While its subtitle is: A Tale of Terror, and it is, it is also a horror story in the truest sense and one of the funniest books you will ever read. Volume 1 of 4 of "Supernatural Minnesota" by Disch, it chronicles the story of Bob Glandier, failed businessman and wife murderer, as the afterlife, specifically his dead wife Giselle's ghost, tries to haunt him literally to death. The problem is it isn't really working out all that well for Giselle. Glandier willfully refuses to be haunted and fathers a helpful demon with the dead Giselle that is intent on "protecting" Glandier from his various real and dead tormentors. Along the way we will encounter mass murderers, possessed animate and inanimate objects, magnetic potholders, and a (real, not fictional) dead alcoholic suicidal poet who tries to help Giselle with her haunting. We also visit Dante's various rings of Paradise where heaven can be just like a Dayton's department store if that's what you want.

Almost everyone "gets it" in the end, which was pretty much what happened also in The M.D., volume 2 of Supernatural Minnesota. Only Giselle's gay brother survives the ordeal, inheriting everything from everybody and using it to promote gay rights and safety. Oh, and Jesus shows up in a blimp to rescue the saved.

While the suspense is mainly focused around whether Glandier is ever going to get his just desserts, Disch takes some pretty wide swings at everything from the Catholic Church to the concept of reincarnation (it rarely works out as planned, even by heaven's standards - there are a lot of detailed rules in heaven.).

The only criticism I have is Disch plays fast and loose with the metaphysical rules of the afterlife seeming to make it up as he goes and to take the plot where he needs it at the particular time. New rules pop up as needed. It's like one of those Moorcock sword and sorcery novels where you know he is just making the sorcery up as he goes along. Unlike Moorcock however, Disch knows where he wants to go, he just plays with not only his omniscience but his omnipotence as a narrator, but maybe that's part of the point.

The book, unlike The M.D., is a real page turner so the "suspense" in the loosest sense is still there. There is a wonderful and scholarly foreword by author John Crowley (Little, Big) that is best read as an afterword; it gives too much away.

These trade paperbacks in the Supernatural Minnesota quartet are all beautifully produced by the University of Minnesota Press.

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## **Jaime Contreras says**

The problem I have with this novel and all of Mr. Disch's works are that we have to suspend our intelligence and cover our mouths. All police departments are not that stupid, people are not all that trusting and lastly, the villain is not supposed to be a symbol of success because of his elusiveness. This author follows a formula and loves to go over the top as far as violence is concerned. This was worst than his M.D. novel.

## Eli Bishop says

This was Disch's first foray into horror thrillers, and at first glance it looks like a familiar sort of thing (although unusually funny), but it's really remarkably weird and often beautiful. Violent mayhem does happen, but it's less interesting than the digressions about the afterlife, the spiritual ups and downs of an addled murder victim, and affectionately biting portraits of believable Midwesterners. The new Minnesota U.P. edition has a really nice intro by John Crowley.

(Edited to add: I put together some annotations I made during a recent reread here.)

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## Harris says

I have to admit, I am not entirely sure what to make of this bizarre, disturbing, humorous, annoying, thought provoking "Tale of Terror." In the end, I feel that I liked it, though I may have to read it again in a couple years. At this point, I would probably give a 3.5 if possible. I am certainly interested in reading the rest of Thomas M. Disch's "Supernatural Minnesota" series. I have only become aware of Disch in the last two months, after stumbling on the University of Minnesota's 2010 editions of the series and then happening to have read another of Disch's stories in an anthology. I had only heard of one of his previous works in the past, "The Brave Little Toaster," through the animated film. As a writer and poet, Disch seemed to have had some interesting ideas. In the end, I may have enjoyed the ideas brought up in "The Businessman" more than the actual story or the characters he depicts.

Set mostly in the suburban Twin Cities, "The Businessman" involves a lot more than the blurb would suggest, of the disgustingly bland murderer Glandier being haunted by his apathetic wife Giselle. Equal parts droll comedy and shocking terror (both extremes exist side by side in this genre defying story), there seems to be a lot more going on behind the rather conventional supernatural thriller plot. The events of the book, on the other hand, feel very early eighties, very rooted to the period it was written As a "ghost story," in that it involves the activities of ghosts, Disch has created an interesting take on an afterlife complete with heaven, reincarnation, ghosts, and a "virtual reality" Limbo with real time TV feeds from Earth. It is interesting to posit that imagination is what truly shapes your afterlife; a more vacuous personality will end up reincarnated as a plant, for instance, as vegetation is the best reflection of a life lived without higher thoughts. Still, life as a tree actually sounds fairly nice. This was the most interesting aspect of the story, reflecting that life after death is what people make of it, whether taking an easy reincarnation as a plant or animal or another human, hanging out as a ghost, spending time relaxing in "the waiting room" watching TV, or dissolve into the bliss of the "higher heavens" or the oblivion of sinking into the vastness of the physical universe.

Generally, on both earth and the afterlife, the innocent suffer almost as much as the guilty, though, truthfully, everyone is deeply flawed, whether through hypocrisy, thoughtlessness, or just plain apathy. Everyone, even the murderer Glandier and the ghost poet Berryman, come off as average, everyday people even as they are surrounded by the utterly bizarre. Even Jesus, in his cameo, seems like a normal guy (but of course, he is being viewed by conventional Minnesotans, so his appearance couldn't be too strange). In particular, the character of the ghost of the poet John Berryman, was among the most interesting. Trapped in Minneapolis after his suicide, the erudite spirit puts aside his quest for booze in order to attempt to fix the injustices of Giselle's death, perhaps with the ulterior motive of being allowed into the afterlife. Disch was a poet as well as a writer, and he, like Berryman, later took his own life. This adds another layer of tragic feeling to the

subject matter of "The Businessman." In any case, the book, though flawed in some ways, was one of the most unusual I have read for awhile.

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### **Themistocles says**

What the *heck* did I just read?

Wow. This is just bizarre. I started the book not quite knowing what to expect (I don't even know where I got it), and I still don't know what I got.

It's got humour, sometimes in an absurd Douglas Adams-way, but it's not that funny.

It's got ghosts, but it's not spooky.

It's got gore, and terror, but it's not terrifying.

What shines through the humour, the supernatural entities and spilled guts is a very interesting pragmatism and matter-of-fact way that Disch deals with the material. In that he manages to create something quite unique, without shining in any specific criterion.

It's nothing really special, but I'll admit I enjoyed it quite a bit. An unexpected little gem :)

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### **Bobby says**

I read a pretty compelling essay by John Crowley in *In Other Words* concerning the Disch trilogy which starts with this book.

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### **Graham P says**

Absurd. Grotesque. Caustic, philosophical, and at times, oddly melancholic. And with all that, 'The Businessman' is still kind of a letdown.

Disch is a master at dripping acid on the American fabric - whether a novel set in a futuristic prison or ghetto, or a short story set in the stars where an American astronaut is in orbit watching the Earth flare up from nuclear attacks. His fiction always floats and bends between many genres, but this novel, 'The Businessman', is his stab at more conventional horror. At least that's what the book jacket tries to say.

This novel is as horribly uneven as it is uniquely fantastical. It is a madcap meditation on the afterlife, using the suburbs of Minnesota as the stage. A scumbag of a husband has murdered his wife after she left him for Las Vegas. A year later, his wife's mother is dying of cancer, and he awaits her death so he can inherit her wealth. But the daughter comes back from the grave as a spirit in vengeful limbo. But instead of haunting her murderous husband, she has sex with him and soon becomes pregnant with a demonic halfling. This halfling has the power to transcend body and it ruthlessly attacks in the form of a terrier, a heron, a child. This spirit is the timebomb to the story, and gore-flecked insanity ensues because of it. Add in the ghost of John Berryman, the poet who can't make heaven because he committed the sinful act of suicide by jumping off;

Jesus in a blimp; a frog arguing with a tree spirit, and in the most ridiculously wonderful image, a spirit animating an old lawn jockey in what is the most bizarre and hilarious scene in the book.

I just wish Thomas Disch pulled out the tongue from his cheek and let the narrative take its course. You can tell he sees these characters as puppets to mock the afterlife, religion and what humans see as 'doing good' in a mundane world. He brilliantly tackles it, but at points, his intellectual banter (nudge, nudge method) loses its luster and I felt I wanted to lose myself to the narrative. Still, a damn good book. Just not up with the par of his masterpieces ('334', 'Camp Concentration' and the collection, 'Fun with your New Head.')

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## Nancy says

One of the more bizarre books I've read in a while. It's part fantasy, part horror and part black comedy. An overweight executive kills his lovely young wife and despite her wishes, she returns from the grave to haunt her murderer. As much as I enjoyed the book, the cast of characters was mostly very unlikeable and I have no desire to spend any time with them again. Still, Disch was an extremely skilled writer and I will be looking for more of his work.

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## BlackOxford says

### Voices From the Grave

I am fascinated by the abiding religious influence of 'secular' writers, especially when they demonstrate a commonality which is otherwise difficult to articulate. The Catholic Thomas Disch, for example, is remarkably like the Jewish Stanley Elkin. Each wrote about the specific cultic guilt of his tribe with profound wit and wry humour. Disch's epigraph in *The Businessman* quoting President Eisenhower could have been used by either man: "*The issue always and at bottom is spiritual.*" They both flippantly reject the modern idea that evil is merely "*a quality and not a substance; an adjective and not a noun.*" On the other hand, both would probably agree with Disch's angelic escort, "*Who ever suggested that heaven is fair? Is predestination fair, would you say?*"

Justice, that is, has little to do with grace. Which is why both writers are fascinated by their respective religion's doctrines of grace, that mysterious, entirely arbitrary, haplessness-inducing force which seems to control our lives as we bounce from event to event like a cosmic billiard ball. In Elkin, as in his *The Franchiser*, this shows itself in a sort of persistent fatalism. In Disch's *The Businessman*, the tone is almost Zen: "*The source of grace has its favorite bloodlines, for which there is no accounting... it has no relation to merit... For the source of grace -- let us be honest and call it God -- is also an ironist and a dweller in paradoxes; He produces good from evil as a matter of course.*" Forget the mutual historical objections of Judaism and Catholicism; it is their shared sense of irony that unites them.

So it isn't surprising that Disch and Elkin share the occasional trope - in this case, the buried body with an axe to grind, and friends on the outside who can supply the necessary oomph to wield it. Elkin's *The Living End* as well as *The Rabbi of Lud* also have the dead influencing the action from the grave, not as ghosts but as a living presence. The oppressive weight of tradition - the dead in all the multitude of their respective communities of saints - is something else the two share after all. So Disch comments through his narrator: "*Time past passed the time.*" And "*Hell is a tape loop that keeps playing the same stupid tune over and over and over forever and ever and ever*" Heaven, on the other hand requires crawling out from under since it is "*no more than a fantasm generated by the excess energies of the pooled imaginations of the blessed.*" Both

hell and heaven are 'merely' shared metaphors of imaginative thought.

Maybe it's the imagination to overcome the weight of time and tradition that accounts for the similarity in humour, most notably the dead pan commentary on one's own prejudices. Disch's departed female soul could be a character out of several of Elkin's novels as "*She was of the widely held opinion that at bottom everyone believed what she believed, if only they'd be honest with themselves.*" Disch's cultural asides are equally Elkin-esque: "*not even automobiles require as large and constant a cash outlay as children. The Roman matron who said that her children were her jewels was not exaggerating.*" And so too is there a shared presumption of impending salvation in the observation by Disch's narrator that "*The work was the thing that kept him going. The work and the idea that somehow things were going to change, that he was on the verge of something important.*"

Being on the verge of something important is, for me, the subtle theme throughout the work of both writers - like an 11 year old with oppressive parents "*All they've got is the distant hope of parole.*" This barely suggested attitude of anticipation, perhaps even hope - in the first or the second coming of the messiah; it makes little difference - is what I find most fascinating about them despite their frequent irony, sarcasm, tribal criticism. For example, in contemplating the motto inscribed on a five dollar bill, "*IN GOD WE TRUST. Yes. Of all possible messages this was surely the most urgent.*" Sometimes, in other words, a cigar is just a joke.

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### **Adam Light says**

Darkly humorous, bizarre and utterly different than most books I have read, *The Business Man* was nothing like what I expected it to be.

In fact, a friend who read it a while back told me he felt it was an early incarnation of *bizarro*, which is about as dead on a description as can be made. It wasn't terrifying, but then I'm kind of jaded when it comes to horror, so it takes quite a bit to rattle me.

This book was unique, and full of black humor which did stir up some chuckles from this reader several times throughout. I would recommend giving it a read if you are looking for something to break up the monotony. It shouldn't disappoint.

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### **Kathryn says**

This was my third Disch novel and the only one I regret opening. *The Genocides and Camp Concentration: A Novel* were both excellent socially conscious novels. *The Businessman*, not so much. In trying to be so, the novel sunk into itself and became lost in a gobbledygook mess of its own conceit. The entire tale fell flat with me. My initial 3 star rating was based on denial.

Within this story, Disch created an absurd afterlife. I appreciated the idea but *A's for effort* are only awarded in grade school. And maybe the afterlife. Ugggh, the book is rubbing off on me. Disch just failed to connect with his readers and I do not feel as though I am overstepping my bounds stating *readers* instead of referring to only myself. If I were to mention some of the things that happen within this book (**Major Spoilers!**(view spoiler) then your interest might be peaked but Disch failed to connect. His characters were wholly unlikeable. There wasn't even a bad character I liked, either badly written or evil in action that I cared about. The characters annoyed the hell out of me. I did not care what happened to any of them, in any way shape or

form. I can think of few other more negative things to say about a novel. I also did not connect with the humor. I'm still unsure why, since my type of humor (satire, at times extremely absurd) should have meshed with the author's.

Even after all of this, I will not give up on reading Disch. If this had been my first by him, it would have also been my last.

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