



Dead Americans and Other Stories

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Welcome to a world where bands are named after the murderer of a dead president, where the work of Octavia E. Butler is turned into an apocalypse meta-narrative, and John Wayne visits a Wal-Mart. and men and women tattoo their life onto their skin for an absent god.

Dead Americans and Other Stories Details

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From Reader Review Dead Americans and Other Stories for online ebook

Lorraine says

“Dead Americans” is a collection of short stories by Australian writer Ben Peek. And yes, Americans, death, or dead Americans feature prominently in pretty much every story. Which is interesting, coming from an Australian writer, and perhaps a commentary on how American popular culture has seeped into our own.

Peek is an original and powerful writer. For me that meant this was a collection I picked up and put down several times; a number of the stories deserve some digestion time rather than moving straight on to the next. These are also, generally, not particularly easy stories to read. They require the reader to think, and draw inferences, rather than spell everything out.

So, this might not be a collection for everyone. And given the range demonstrated in this volume, most likely not every story in it will be for everyone. However, I appreciated a collection which challenged me as a reader – challenging ideas, framed with strong characters and vivid settings, and strong writing.

The majority of these stories have been published elsewhere first; primarily in small presses, and I must confess that I could remember only one as a story I’d read before. For many readers, this will be an opportunity to read stories they may well have missed. The stories have been published over a decade or so, which also provides a chance to revisit stories you may have read before.

If you enjoy speculative fiction, this is a collection worth picking up. Although these stories fit very clearly within the genre, Peek does not rely on traditional tropes or ideas. He pushes the boundaries a little, while still providing stories that are entertaining, engaging, and self contained. They’re not suitable for a day when you want to be spoon fed your entertainment, but will shine on days when you’re willing to engage your brain a little.

Geoffrey says

NOTE: This book was provided by the publisher, through NetGalley, in exchange for an honest review.

This is a collection of short stories by author Ben Peek that are an odd collection of fantasies – some with historical figures and some without. They’re a bit dark but nothing that qualifies as horror. I didn’t read the entire collection; I found the writing style to be somewhat tedious and overly done. I didn’t care about the characters and I didn’t find their situations particularly interesting.

I read the first 4 stories which make up the first third of the book and I found myself distracted in each of them – looking forward to that particular story to be over.

It may be that this particular collection or this particular author just isn’t my thing; but I usually enjoy short story collections. In this case, the stories didn’t have specific grammar problems or anything simplistic I could point to, it’s more the overall writing style that did me in.

2 Stars

Tsana Dolichva says

Dead Americans and Other Stories by Ben Peek is a collection of short and long stories. Mostly on the longer side, really. They were an odd bunch and some of them went a bit over my head for various reasons (see below) but several of them did involve dead Americans, as promised in the title. (Somewhat unusually, the collection is not named after one of the story titles.)

My favourite stories, looking back over them were, in order of appearance, "The Dreaming City", which was the only Australian-flavoured story, "Johnny Cash", which was pretty funny, "The Souls of Dead Soldiers are for Blackbirds, Not Little Boys", and "theleeharveyoswaldband", which was a relatively straight forward, albeit it definitely speculative, tale.

"The Souls of Dead Soldiers are for Blackbirds, Not Little Boys" along with three other stories, "Possession", "The Funeral, Ruined" and "Under the Red Sun" were all set in the same world. They were set in very different parts of the world, so that it wasn't until I got to the third story, which referenced both of the two before it, that I realised. I am fond of short stories expanding on the same world. In this case, all the stories dealt with death and life after death, both in the religious sense and in the sense of coming back as a cyborg. I liked the way in which Peek touched upon, for example, the war that affected different aspects of the world, without centring the story on the war itself, just some of its ramifications. And the different attitudes that different people had towards cyborgs were broadly explored throughout the stories.

I have to admit that some of the stories went a bit over my head, I suspect as a result of not being familiar with the right part of American culture. Especially "John Wayne". I caught some of the social commentary, but definitely not all of it. Similarly, I enjoyed "Octavia E Butler (a remix)", but I am positive that there are references to that author's work which I missed on account of not having read any of it (I know, I know, bad me, I'll get to it eventually).

Anyway, as usual, comments on individual stories are below. Peek's writing is well developed and I highly recommend this collection to fans of speculative fiction, especially the kind tending towards the weird, and horror. Also, aficionados of the short story (well, up to novella length, I think) will find much to appreciate here.

~

There Is Something So Quiet and Empty Inside of You That It Must Be Precious — ok, the title of this story makes it even creepier; I had forgotten it while I read. I also went back and read through the chapter/section headings and they were eerie. A story whose creepiness creeps up on you (heh). The kind of horror with a drab and mundane setting that puts the fear in the commonplace.

The Dreaming City — I did not know, before reading this story, that Mark Twain had ever visited Australia (apparently he circumnavigated the world in his 60s). The story is told from several perspectives and time-frames. We have Mark Twain on his visit to Sydney and Mark Twain being spoken to by an Aboriginal spirit who shows him the past and, briefly, the future. There's also the point of view of an Aboriginal tribesman told from the landing of the first fleet to his death. That particular story is more of the "progress marches on" variety, whereas Twain's is (sort of) more neutrally observational. There are also some excerpts from the introduction to a more-or-less present-day travel guide, which talk about Twain and Sydney's history. It's a rich story with many layers and very different to the one that preceded it. There are even footnotes on a few historical points, explaining them further.

Johnny Cash (A Tale in Questionnaire Results) — This story was pretty funny and quite short, coming in at

50 answers. It is not about Johnny Cash. It is about Reagan, demons and blood sacrifices. And clean-up.

Possession — This story started a bit slowly but then improved. Shows us a glimpse into a desolate future and a look at a particular subterranean botanist's life. The future combines some sort of (post-) apocalyptic event and cyborgs as longevity-proofed humans (sort of). Really interesting once it got going.

The Souls of Dead Soldiers are for Blackbirds, Not Little Boys — Similar in setting (that is, subterranean) to the previous story and well placed for being so. Otherwise quite different. The title actually describes it very well. The world building was detailed and very much added to the foreign setting and mystical (sort of) story.

The Funeral, Ruined — Same world as the previous story, but a different country. And, actually, as I realised a little way in, they are both also set in the same world as "Possession". Addresses some of the personal social consequences of cyborgification from an entirely different perspective to "Possession".

Under the Red Sun — Same world as above. Set in a very different place to the previous two stories. I have a particular fondness for short stories set in the same world, and I enjoyed the windows into different societies in this set. This one deals with death (again) and the beliefs surrounding it from the point of view of people who can choose to come back as cyborgs but don't necessarily think that's the right thing to do.

John Wayne (As Written by a Non-American) — a story about John Wayne and Orson Welles. I don't think I quite "got" it. Maybe one needs to know more US culture? It just seemed a little odd to me (ironic, given that some aspects were supposed to seem odd...)

Octavia E. Butler (a remix) — this was a really weird story. The opening confused me, because at first I thought it was going to be about the real Octavia Butler, like how some of the earlier stories featured real people. But as soon as it became clear, it was a science fictional story, set in a near future with a complicated (and, as it turns out, sentient) disease infecting humanity. Possibly, it was a reference/homage to a story the Butler wrote, but I haven't read any, so that aspect would've been completely lost on me, if it did indeed exist. Beyond that, I'll just add that it was a fairly depressing story, spanning many years and, more or less, the main character's entire life.

theleeharveyoswaldband — OK, all the stories in this volume were a bit weird, and this one probably falls into the less confusing category. I quite liked it. Told by following a key character and through an interview with someone else in Rolling Stone, it was about a one-man-band's surprising rise to fame and the bootlegger who helped him get there.

4 / 5 stars

You can read more of my reviews on my blog.

Richard Derus says

Rating: 4* of five

#ReadingIsResistance to complacency in genre reading...look at the US through Aussie Ben Peek's eyes...I give it 4 stars of five because DAMN this man's imagination is intense!

Nik Nevins says

There are two cultures represented in this book. The fantastical 'Red Sun' stories are strongly informed by Australian history and geography, while the 'Dead American' stories are an outsider's view of the US. These thematically entwine in the Dreaming City story- a magic realist retelling of Mark Twain's visit to Sydney. A given reader's mileage with the sum of the stories will vary- unless you have a foot in each culture, as Peek

does, some stories may resonate with you less. If you are American, Australian, know either, or are interested in either; or, are a reader of magic realism, speculative fiction, steampunk or literary fiction- this book will have something wonderful for you.

full disclosure- I know and love this author. I did not receive this book for free.

Jessica says

This was an excellent collection of weird little gems! I especially loved all the Red Sun stories. If only there were more! Highly recommended to lovers of weird fiction, half-explained apocalypses, semi-benevolent alien viruses, and alt-history.

L. says

The linked stories about the strange world with the red sun and mechanical people are passable. The rest is just typical twenty-first century ethnomasochism: all white people are beastly, all aborigines pure saints-- written by a white guy whom we can rest assured has no intention of returning *his* ill-gotten sliver of Australia back to the natives.

Also: typos. Tons of them.

And you'd think a guy as smart as he thinks he is would know the difference between "subscribed" and "ascribed."

Ruby Tombstone [With A Vengeance] says

That was an absolute dog's breakfast. I'm sorry, but there's just no other way to describe it. I'm not saying there aren't great ideas in there, possibly even the beginnings of a great fantasy/sci-fi novel, but as a collection of short stories, it was just such a mess structurally. It starts off well enough - if you ignore the way-too-many gushing blurbs at the front followed by a lengthy introduction, which can best be described as a-writer-nobodys-ever-heard-of-gushing-about-another-writer-nobodys-ever-heard-of. The first actual story, "There Is Something So Quiet and Empty Inside of You That It Must Be Precious" is a really well crafted story, in which the sub-headings form part of plot. As a stand-alone story, this is a winner. Then things start to go bad..

The next story is the first of a series of stories that form about 2/3 of the book, in which Peek takes famous Americans and imagines them at various times in history. To what end? Well that is the question. As far as I can see, these stories don't contain any great insights or ideas, they're more like daydreams. The first of these centres on Mark Twain and his visit to Australia in the early 1890s. This actually happened, as did his support for the Indigenous people here, and their shocking treatment by the Europeans. This is really important, really deeply horrific subject matter. And the story did nothing to help the cause. It didn't give away any new insights, any new information, any alternative ways of seeing the situation - it just reads as an idle...what if.....? My view on this is that if you're going to write about this subject matter, you need to make

it count and don't treat it lightly. I found the story verging on disrespect in that sense. The other "Dead Americans" stories didn't seem any meatier, unfortunately.

Then there's the rest of the book - a series of fantasy/sci-fi stories set in different parts of the same imagined world. Dark, beautiful, fascinating, original - all the things you'd like to see in a full-length novel, not shoved part-way inside a book of mediocre stories about the imagined doings of American celebrities.

To add insult to injury, the spelling and English grammar weren't the best. I don't think these were typos either, but a genuine lack of understanding. For example, throughout the book Peek uses the word, "bought" instead of "brought", and "too" instead of "to", then "antichamber"..... just shoot me. This went alongside a slightly clunky sentence structure throughout - words on the wrong sides of commas, slightly disordered sentences etc. I do have to wonder what the editor was thinking.

So this is what I mean when I say the book is a dog's breakfast: messy, careless, wasteful and ever so slightly distasteful.

Full Disclosure

**I received an ARC copy from the publisher via NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.*

**I read to 70% of the way through before skimming to the end. I do genuinely make every effort to read ARCs through properly, however this is not the only book on my review pile, and I do think I saw enough to have an informed opinion.*

Rob Slaven says

As usual I received this book for free in exchange for a review. Also as usual I give my scrupulously honest opinions in spite of NetGalley's generosity of providing a free copy.

This really is a tale of two books. About 60% of the content of this book revolves around what I could only succinctly describe as alternative history. Familiar names like John Wayne, Orson Welles, Mark Twain and others all do things that seem reasonably within their respective characters but most assuredly did NOT actually happen and at times perform perplexing anachronisms. The remaining 40% of the book is a series of related tales centered on a fictional world in which the dead are sold for parts and many have their life histories tattooed upon their bodies. Personally I'm a fan of the latter practice and may soon enact it myself but that's irrelevant to any qualitative statement about the book.

On the positive side, the author has a tenacious talent for the bizarre. All of his stories have a quality of perplexity that is rare to find in any author. In the portion of the book that I describe as the "dead are sold for parts" there is a particularly strong thread of continuity and I'd like to see that milieu expanded into a novel or even a series of them. This is a delicious and darkly foreboding place that one would giddily and guiltily visit time and again in the written page but never likely admit to anyone for fear that you just couldn't do it justice in describing it.

To the negative, the portion of the book that I describe as alternative history left me rather disappointed. Perhaps it's my own idiosyncrasy but I was far too distracted trying to unravel the reality of Twain and the others from the fiction that was woven around them. This is a perpetual weakness of the alternative history genre in my mind and one this book just didn't manage to properly address.

In summary, the author is a grand talent but I think the book focuses on the wrong thing. The very cover emphasizes the wrong part of the book. I acknowledge fully the author's talent but I think that, as the saying

goes, his light is hidden under a bushel and that the real meat of this book lies in the middle and is filled with unfamiliar and notably unAmerican names.

S.B. Wright says

You know, since I got into this writing about Speculative Fiction gig, coming up on three years ago, Ben Peek's always been there. It's odd that I haven't actually read anything by him before (besides his blog posts). Sure, I have work that he did with Twelfth Planet Press (on my notorious TBR-after-review-copies-are-done pile) but one thing leads to another and I never quite make it through that pile.

In some respects though, reading *Dead Americans*, which collects some of his best work over the last decade, is the best way to discover him. You get to see a good range of work and you get to see a consistent facility with words and style. I have no reservation in saying that he'd be one of Australia's best writers. He demonstrates in *Dead Americans*, the ability to play inside the science fiction genre, riffing off it's history or building dark futures so real that you shake the ash from your coat after reading. Then with seeming ease he will walk you into some fractured liminal zone between genres where you don't quite know where you stand or what the rules are.

[Read the longer review at [Adventures of a Bookonaut](#)

Don says

Extremely bizarre collection of short stories that twists the reader's own imagination by placing in your mind completely different concepts never really considered before.

Without going into detail... Overall, most of the stories were really quite good. What you first thought was transpiring was not what you figured would occur upon the conclusion of each tale.

Once started, I simply devoured this book.

Mike says

Picked this up at CanCon 2016 - thanks Chizine.

Ben Peek says

I wrote it, so you cannot trust me to be honest. The main point of this 'review' is to simply list the stories in the volume for those curious about its contents. There are also links to story notes for each story, and a soundtrack. Consider it the online extras portion of the book.

Introduction - Rjurik Davidson.

There Is Something So Quiet and Empty Inside of You That It Must Be Precious

<http://www.theurbansprawlproject.com/...>

The Dreaming City

<http://www.theurbansprawlproject.com/...>

Johnny Cash

<http://www.theurbansprawlproject.com/...>

Possession

<http://www.theurbansprawlproject.com/...>

The Souls of Dead Soldiers are for Blackbirds, Not Little Boys

<http://www.theurbansprawlproject.com/...>

The Funeral, Ruined

<http://www.theurbansprawlproject.com/...>

Under the Red Sun

<http://www.theurbansprawlproject.com/...>

John Wayne

<http://www.theurbansprawlproject.com/...>

Octavia E. Butler (a remix)

<http://www.theurbansprawlproject.com/...>

thelecharveyoswaldband

<http://www.theurbansprawlproject.com/...>

In addition, 'There Is Something So Quiet and Empty Inside of You It Must Be Precious' and 'Octavia E. Butler' are both original to the volume. Both 'Octavia E. Butler' and 'The Dreaming City' are novellas, while 'Under the Red Sun' and 'The Souls of Dead Soldiers are for Blackbirds, Not Little Boys' are novelettes.

Regardless of your opinion about the book (read or unread), I want to thank you for your support.

Marvin says

Australian writer Ben Peek writes very literary sci-fi/speculative fiction. These are the kind of stories that

bear reading twice since what is happening with his prose may not be obvious the first time. It reminds me distinctly of R. A. Lafferty and Gene Wolfe's tricky little stories that catch you up in the prose so much it makes you wonder if you really "got it".

Unfortunately Peek is no Lafferty or Wolfe. While Wolfe and Lafferty pulls you in with their exquisite even intimate style, Peek's writings end up too academic, even cold. It's not that he isn't a good writer. He may be a great writer. But there is too much calculation, too much of a "See how good I am" feeling in his stories. In this way he reminds me of Michael Chabon in that he is such an excellent writer that he forgets to connect past the mind and into the heart.

Dead Americans and Other Stories consists of 10 short stories. They seem to be split between stories about a world with a red sun and "Dead Americans" tales which puts famous Americans into some fantastical situation. The "Red Sun" stories are the better of the two. Yet there appears to be Australian references that may hinder the enjoyment of non-Australian readers. Regardless, they are good stories that just don't rise above the ordinary. The "Dead American" tales seem experimental to the point that they are literary exercises more than stories to be read for either entertainment or revelation.

In a way, this is a hard one to rate. I appreciate the level of skill in these works. Yet ultimately a story needs to reach the reader and these pieces of fiction do not accomplish that. For that reason I can not rate this collection any higher than 2 stars.

Josef Hernandez says

A strong short story collection of bizarre tales

For a full review, please go to <http://www.examiner.com/review/dead-a...> and follow me on Twitter @josenher
