



# Hystopia

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## **Hystopia** David Means

By the early 1970s, President John F. Kennedy has survived several assassination attempts and—martyred, heroic—is now in his third term. Twenty-two-year-old Eugene Allen returns home from his tour of duty in Vietnam and begins to write a war novel—a book echoing *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*—about veterans who have their battlefield experiences "enfolded," wiped from their memories through drugs and therapy. In Eugene's fictive universe, veterans too damaged to be enfolded stalk the American heartland, reenacting atrocities on civilians and evading the Psych Corps, a federal agency dedicated to upholding the mental hygiene of the nation by any means necessary.

## **Hystopia Details**

Date : Published April 19th 2016 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux

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Author : David Means

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## From Reader Review Hystopia for online ebook

### Mark says

OMG I can't believe it - this goes totally against my grain but I DNF'd this book.

David Means seemed to draw from some of the greatest writers and novels ever written. In Hystopia we are faced with an alternate history where the Vietnam war continues to rage and America is inundated with returning soldiers who have had horrific experiences.

The country is divided into two parts. The bulk of it holds the general population while the state of Michigan holds the returned soldiers who are too damaged to be 'enfolded', a process of wiping their bad memories with drugs and therapy. I immediately think of the treatment metered out in Clockwork Orange.

The President has created the 'Psych corps' charged with maintaining mental health and spying. Members of the Psych corp are not allowed to fraternize with each other. I am drawn here to the resemblances to Big Brother in 1984.

Throw in characters that seem to leap from a Hunter S Thompson book and references to rock music that made me feel like I was watching Apocalypse Now. All of these influences brought together and it just didn't work.

I found myself pushing to finish the book, by nature I do not DNF but only got half way through this. I kept realising that I had to re-read paragraphs because my mind wandered and it just wasn't holding my attention.

On a lighter note if they ever make a movie of this book, Steve Buscemi is guaranteed a role as one of the return vets that are not 'enfolded'.

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### Sara Batkie says

There are a lot of readers out there, mostly of the Pynchonian persuasion, who will probably be all in for this book. But I found it a wildly uneven reading experience. Means' prose is unimpeachable of course but it also never quite reaches the insanity that his premise suggests. Many of the scenes in the book-within-a-book have a madcap mix of Catch-22 meets Tarantino that make it both fun and frustrating to read moment to moment, but I could never entirely buy it as the product of an unhinged mind. And Means' decision to contextualize it with "supporting materials" about the book's supposed author Eugene Allen lends the novel an academic remove that feels at odds with the righteous anger at the treatment of our nation's veterans that enlivens the plot at the center. The theme of how we construct narratives to understand the incomprehensible in our lives is an admirable one, as is Means' ambition, but without knowing anything concrete about Eugene, it's ultimately as difficult to care for the creator as it is his creation.

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### Nicole D. says

<https://thereadersroom.org/2016/08/26...>

And then we came to the end ... This is one of those books that can only be fully appreciated by getting to the end. It's complex! I was so confused in the beginning and distracted by the fact that it starts out with an Editor's Note which states that certain historical facts have been twisted to fit the fictive universe, and then goes on to say that one of those "facts" is that JFK had 7 attempts on his life, and the "Genuine Assassination" happened in September in Illinois. That's not a spoiler, it's like the first page. The point of this comment is that the beginning takes concentration and I don't recommend this on audio, which is what I did. The audio was well done, but I had to rewind so many times I can recite parts by memory.

This is a SUPER creative look at the Vietnam War, and trauma in general. The characters were kind of hard to distinguish one from the other. That may have been partly the audio, but I don't think so. I'm a bit in awe of the sophistication of this book, and absolutely see why it is nominated for the prize. For me, however, I appreciated it far more than I enjoyed it. It's not something I would have read if not for this panel, and I'm glad I did. In fact, now that it's done I feel like I should go back and read it to catch what I missed. (I felt much the same with last year's winner *A Brief History of Seven Killings*.)

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### **Doug says**

"Fuck plot and fuck story and fuck the way one thing fits to another and fuck cause and effect, because there wasn't none and if there was we didn't see much of it." p. 159

Kind of Means to provide his own review within the pages of his novel. I am not so much shocked at this being nominated for a Booker as I am flabbergasted that the damn thing ever got published in the first place! I mean, just WHO is the intended audience for this? Drug-addled illiterate crazy killer Nam-era vets, which comprises the majority of the characters, don't read. It isn't weird enough for fans of alternative/speculative fiction (e.g., China Mieville). It's TOO weird for psychologists and government wonks, who are the other main characters. Means apparently has a small rabid coterie of fans for his short fiction, but even they will be turned off by the extended length of this tome, which slogs on and on without much coherence or meaning. I can only speculate someone at FS&G thought there was a market for ersatz Robert Stone - but even the REAL Stone isn't getting read much these days!!!

To call the characters one-dimensional is to afford them a depth and complexity they don't warrant. And I hate it when an author is just plain sloppy - for instance: within the last 50 pages, Singleton informs Hank there are only 4 blue pills left, and Hank says that leaves one for each of them (i.e., including Meg and Wendy). A few pages later, Singleton and Wendy each take two of the pills, so there AREN'T any more left. And a few pages later (p. 306) we get: "Then they'd stay a few days together, take the final four pills, see what transpired...." Who the fuck edited this mess?

I can only hope this is the worst of the Booker longlist, because if there is anything less worthy, I may not make it through all thirteen.

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### **Ash says**

This was a strange, dreamy book, reminiscent of *1984* and Philip K Dick. *Hystopia* is the book that Eugene Allen writes after returning from Vietnam, and it's bookended by author's notes, editor's notes, quotes from his family and friends. This is the kind of shit I go for: stories buried in stories, a self-conscious gimmick that throws the whole authorial agreement into question. This is fiction, of course: nothing is real. But the traditional agreement between authors and readers is that, for the duration of the book, the reader will

*pretend* that it is real. The structure of *Hystopia* makes that impossible; from the very beginning, you're left to question if the notes are from the real author, the real editor, or if they're from their fictional counterparts.

It's particularly fitting for a book like this (I mean Allen's book, which is of course also Means' book), where Vietnam vets are "enfolding" their trauma - that is, they're part of a government sponsored program wherein they take a drug called Tripizoid (yes) and then play-act their 'nam experiences in the woods. Doing so essentially represses their memories, shutting them off in a very tiny portion of their minds where they can't access them (unless they swim in very cold water, a baptism of sorts, right? or unless they have very good sex). So the jist of this book is that most of the main characters have been enfolded. They're missing huge parts of their memories. They're doing lots of drugs, and partially unfolding old traumas, and trying to figure out the motives of the government Psych Corps. The reading experience largely mirrors the experiences of the characters: *what the fuck is real? who can I trust, because I can't trust myself, and is anyone ever telling the truth?*

And of course, bigger questions lurk beneath the surface: how best do you deal with trauma like this? You can make that pain and suffering go away, but at what cost - how responsible are our memories and traumas and suffering for our humanity itself? If you cut them away, what's left?

The writing in here is evocative. There are these glimmers of normalcy through the web of drugs and confusion, images of the forest, lakes through the trees, memories of beach parties before the war - they were beautiful and nostalgic and I want to live in them. It's almost self-conscious, though, as if the text knows (as if Allen knows?) that it's presenting these things through rose tinted glasses. In real life (in "real" life), Meg didn't fare so well, after all.

I read this at a strange time. I'm anxious, suspicious of everything, suspicious of myself. This book didn't ease my paranoia; there are a lot of questions here and very few answers. Maybe the answers aren't the point, though. I'm beginning to think there's no *right* or *wrong*, there's just the choices you make and how you deal with them.

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## **vi macdonald says**

Not gonna lie, I was really pumped for this. A piece of gleeful postmodernist insanity that hearkens back to *Slaughterhouse-5* and *Catch-22* while also receiving comparisons to Thomas Pynchon and Cormac McCarthy with alternate history elements that reminded me of Phillip K. Dick's more entertainingly bonkers flights of fancy? HELL YEAH?! This is the kind of madness I live for!!

And then I actually read it.

And at first I was not disappointed, immediately welcomed in by 50-odd pages of humorous editor's notes that immediately brought to mind the metafictional elements of *Don Quixote* and *Pale Fire*. To say I was excited would be an understatement.

And then I arrived at the actual novel *Hystopia* itself and came to a sad realisation: this book is actually a serious letdown. It's got an amazing premise that could lead to all sorts of fun and exciting shenanigans....and then it reads like Frank Miller got coked out of his mind and decided to take that premise and use it as an excuse for completely pointless and schlocky violent edgery.

This book *really* wants to shock people with its violent content. Now don't get me wrong, I enjoy me some over the top violence - I saw the Cormac McCarthy comparisons as a reason to be hyped for this. But damn, dude. After a point this novel just feels like that part of the *Rick and Morty* parody of *The Purge* where Rick sighs and says "honestly I've had my fill, it's gratuitous at this point".

Sure, the metafictional editor's notes, interviews and suicide notes come back at the end to bookend the novel with what made me hyped for it in the first place. But by then the damage had been done. I just didn't care anymore.

I didn't want to like this book - I wanted to love it.

And I didn't.

At all.

I feel let down David, really let down.

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### **Julie says**

This book lasted as long as the Vietnam War itself and is equally as messy, convoluted and incomprehensible. A waste of my good time.

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### **Neil says**

Have you seen the movie "Mike Bassett: England Manager" where two footballers, Benson and Hedges, are plucked from minor league obscurity to play for the England national football team because the manager writes the team selection on a packet of cigarettes? I am beginning to wonder if something similar has happened with this year's Man Booker Long List.

This book might not be quite as bad a 1\* suggests, but I wanted to make sure it was clear that it is my least favourite of the 8 I have so far read from the list and I've already given just 2\* to 3 of the others. It's a mess, I think. I don't understand how the supposedly related "facts" of Kennedy surviving into a third term and the Vietnam war continuing add to the story. I don't understand how the book within a book concept adds to the story. I didn't care about any of the characters and I didn't understand the point of the story (that last could be my problem, of course).

To be honest, when I think of several other books that I have read in the last few months, the fact that this one is on the Man Booker Long List instead of those makes me rather angry and depressed! I have struggled with several of the books on this year's long list, but this is the one that has finally made me question whether I will bother with the Booker next year.

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### **Connor says**

This is without a doubt one of the best books I've read this year. It's got a format (text-within-a-text) that is mind-boggling complex, but pulls it off effortlessly. I finished it and immediately wanted to reread it.

It somehow encapsulates the violence and trauma of the Vietnam War perfectly. The entire concept of 'enfolding' was fascinating and beautiful, a make-believe way of erasing the traumatic events that the in-text author went through. It felt real, viscerally and brutally real.

Would recommend.

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## Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I would not have picked this book up based on description, and only gave it a go because it was on the Man Booker prize list. I can see 50 pages in that this is not a book I wish to finish. It just isn't my thing. I do like the zany alternate history idea but the violence and meta-story, not so much.

(But it can be your thing.)

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## Nancy Oakes says

Whew. Not an easy read at all.

There is this wonderful scene on page 154 of this novel, which is actually a book within a book, where one of the characters has a vision where she hears a dead boyfriend saying the following:

" I wonder who's going to tell the story, Meg? Nothing else to say. You see, you had to be here and you weren't. You know the one that goes: How many Vietnam vets does it take to screw in a lightbulb? How many? You fucking don't know because you weren't there, man."

And therein lies the irony of this novel -- in Hystopia, thanks to an initiative put into practice by the third Kennedy administration to help wipe out the traumatic memories of Vietnam vets, those who *were* there don't remember much more than those who'd never set foot in Vietnam.

To me, the novel reads like an examination into the role of history/memory both in terms of self and on a larger, national scale. Historical amnesia, let's call it, as just one example, keeps a government going back into wars or prolonging conflicts that are just pointless, producing people who come back damaged and traumatized. History can be remade, rewritten, reformed, and erased; on a personal level, many of the characters in this book discover a need to "unfold" -- to regain and reach down into those memories before they can make any real internal progress. The dilemma is that, as one character puts it, while "You feel good and clean with the trauma put away, but at the same time you want to know what really happened," which can often be destructive. Obviously, there's much more here; I haven't even begun to scratch this novel's surface. One more important thing that may help in trying to understand this book: in a 2010 article in Paris Review, Means notes that

" If a story wants to be told and you don't tell it, you'd better stand back because something's going to explode."

which is most certainly the case in this book, and highly appropriate as well.

I've posted more about this book in my reading journal if anyone's at all interested. I will say that aside from some things that sort of bogged this book down, interrupting the reading flow, I couldn't stop thinking about this novel after finishing it, and I think a second reading is definitely in the cards. There are some incredible moments here, especially in a section of about 15 pages (154-169) with some of the most powerful writing I've read in a very long time. Hystopia may be framed as an alternative history, but I think there's a good reason for doing it this way. And once again, I see I am swimming upstream of other readers in terms of really liking this book, but it is what it is. I would without hesitation recommend this novel -- it's certainly unlike anything I've read before. Well done.

## **Jessica Sullivan says**

Hystopia is one of those books that's hard for me to rate, because I appreciate it more than I actually enjoyed reading it. It's a complex, mindfuck of a novel that pays homage to some of the most memorable works of postmodernist fiction from the late 20th century.

Here's where I try to tell you what it's about. Okay, so it's the late 1960s, the Vietnam War is raging on, and Kennedy is about to enter his third term in office. In this revisionist history, the U.S. government has created a federal agency called Psych Corps tasked with addressing the mental health crisis that plagues returning veterans. This treatment is pretty much *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* for war veterans: they administer a drug combined with immersive therapy that, when successful, erases their memories.

Hystopia follows two separate but related plot lines, destined to converge: In one plot line, Rake, a disturbed veteran who resisted treatment, kidnaps a mentally ill woman named Meg and takes her along with him on a deranged killing spree. Meanwhile, two Psych Corps agents — one of whom underwent the treatment himself — fall in love and find themselves on a mission to track down Rake.

But the strangest thing is that the story might not actually be about what we think it's about — because, as we find out right up front, Hystopia is actually a story within a story, written by a veteran named Eugene trying to process his own grief.

Sound weird yet? It definitely is. As I was reading it, I kept thinking to myself, "I really hope this all comes together in a satisfying way." It's a very challenging book, so as a reader, you kind of need that satisfaction to justify the effort. Luckily, it delivered.

I can't say that I fully understand what I just read, but I can tell you that it evoked all sorts of deep emotions in me anyway. When it comes down to it, it's a sad story that confronts heavy, important themes — from war trauma and mental illness to grief and love — leaving us to question the depths of our own resilience.

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## **Gumble's Yard says**

Initially a promising premise, the book simply meanders and too many of the parts of the book, the reader is effectively left to work out what is happening (and more damningly does not really care).

Overall, a renowned short story writer has aimed unsuccessfully for his first novel with what could have made an excellent novella.

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## **BlackOxford says**

### **Back to the Womb**

The effect of this novel isn't, at least on me, one of a narrative opened and closed. It is more one of the creation and sustaining of a single feeling of cold vulnerability to everything in the world from its people to the natural environment. The reader as well as the characters search constantly for some reassuring meaning.

The pervasive drug-induced haze distorts everything, however, inducing the perception one has in the midst of a severe hangover of being one or two nano-seconds behind reality.

There is pregnant malice and real danger everywhere, in every human encounter, in the pollution and changeable weather of the Great Lakes, in the governmental forces of law and order, in the suppressed memories buried, by choice or through so-called 'enfolding therapy', in one's own psyche. The artistic skill necessary to maintain this 'story truth' as opposed to 'happening truth', to follow Tim O'Brien (perhaps Means's closest stylistic antecedent), is considerable; And it works. Means is undoubtedly a pro, but perhaps insidiously so.

What is, if any, the underlying theme that ties together the strands of war, horror, psychosis, self-delusion, 60's drug culture, fading industry, assassination, Northern boreal forests, indeed North itself as well as, one supposes, actual experience in this complicated work? Could it be the clue is in the title: Hystopia, from the Greek Hyster-Topos, the womb-place? A place which is beyond memory as well as before it, and yet determines so much of our response to the world; that watery place of existence before birth in which there is no time, no morality, no chance of independence, and no defence from invasion and imminent destruction except the uncertain goodwill society might provide.

Means makes much of the mitten-shape of the lower peninsula of Michigan (the left hand presumably), the place where Vietnam veterans who have failed, or avoided, the memory-erasure of enfoldment congregate. Is it coincidence that there is an anatomical abnormality, bicornuate uterus, that is frequently mitten-shaped and results in a variety of difficulties from miscarriage to foetal deformity? Not, in other words, a good place to find shelter much less in which to grow up. Hey, stranger things have happened in post-modernist lit.

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## Elaine says

Hystopia was not likely to be my cup of tea. I am not an avid devourer of Vietnam novels (although the Vietnam War just provides the pretext of this novel - it could be about the aftermath of any endless war, anywhere). I was a bit put off by the emphasis on drug use described in some reviews - I find reading about other people's altered states very boring. (But here too, while the characters are usually drugged by themselves or others, there's not much - some, but not much - dwelling on psychotropic visions. The constant pot-smoking is more of a tic than anything). And alternative history has always confused me a bit.

All that said, I minded reading Hystopia much less than I thought I would. The prose is for the most part crisp and impeccable. The bleak world created feels less like an alternative history of the 1970s (although maybe I don't know enough about JFK to understand what he means to Means) and more like another one of the grim dystopian near-future visions that have been popular, including with me, of late. PTSD, burning cities, post-industrial decay, propaganda and psy ops, pollution and societal collapse read as easily "now" or "soon" as "then". The allusions to Viet Nam are very unspecific (again, you feel like this is really any endless war - including perhaps the one we seem to be fighting now), and the repeated references to transistor radios and snowy TVs are the most period anchoring things you'll find.

That said, the novel within in a novel structure (a novel "enfolding" within a novel, as the book would put it), while an effective representation of the novel's thesis about trauma, was distancing. The characters remain cartoonish, yet I think the wistfulness of the "enfolding" plot requires us to care about them to make the novel more than a trick. Since we don't really, the novel lacks much emotional resonance.

The book is saturated in 70s cinematic tropes of bad violent outlaws on motorcycles on the one hand, and shifty government operatives on the other. The women in particular are classic 70s buddy movie ciphers -

one is a cool sidekick who can handle a gun, and the other a psychically wounded victim - but neither is a real person. (This is also the whitest book about Vietnam and a Michigan torn apart by late 60s rioting you are ever likely to read. Even all the music is white. Truly.) I think Means is doing it all on purpose to play with our expectations of those cliches, but it doesn't make it easier to care.

So I was interested but I didn't love it and I can't wholeheartedly recommend it.

Still waiting for my Booker book! (Well, I loved the Sellout but I read that before the list).

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