



# Players at the Game of People

*John Brunner*

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## **Players at the Game of People** John Brunner

A savagely lacerating satire, this is an example of the sort of literature of ideas sf was before commercial formulae & interminable series took over. A lot of today's readers won't get it & may be pissed off by its unresolved ending. But it's a very good story—though perhaps not quite as good as the socially conscious SF Brunner was producing during his peak a decade previous—& its unapologetic defiance of convention is a breath of fresh air when nearly everything today seems an attempt at a franchise & some authors are happier chugging out Star Wars novels for an easy paycheck than coming up with original sf.

Players at the Game of People is an attack on the leisure class, that fundamentally European institution of bygone days translated into a near-future milieu. Godwin Harpinshield is one of a select number who've entered into this quasi-Faustian arrangement with mysterious beings referred to as "owners." His every desire is catered to. He always gets the best table, the best women. He can travel across the globe & even, apparently, through time in the endless & yet increasingly futile pursuit of pleasure. He has only one obligation: he must recruit someone. This he does by rescuing a pathetic & naturally vulnerable young prostitute from her dead-end lifestyle while she still has a spark of hope & ambition. While it isn't altruistic, this act spells the beginning of the end. Unexpectedly, he meets the girl's mother, who's come looking for her. This encounter not only offers up a surprising personal revelation, it also prompts him to be bold about questioning the nature of the owners & what they're getting out of all this.

Brunner deliberately leaves several aspects of his story unexplained, not the least of which is who the owners are. While this won't make those folks happy who have to have boldface explanations for everything, the novel as it is wouldn't have worked as well without these elements of mystery. By leaving certain key questions up for speculation, he puts you squarely on the same playing field with Harpinshield. A book that could have been terribly obscure is made more accessible, not to mention suspenseful. The cynicism won't appeal to all. There are a few early scenes which come off as uncomfortably racist & sexist by today's standards. But readers who appreciate a dark, satirical edge to their fiction—stories that neither let you off the hook easily nor spell everything out—will find this bitterly ironic yet truthful tale a winner.--T. M. Wagner (edited)

## **Players at the Game of People Details**

Date : Published November 12th 1980 by Del Rey (first published 1980)

ISBN : 9780345292353

Author : John Brunner

Format : Mass Market Paperback 215 pages

Genre : Science Fiction, Fiction, Dystopia

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## From Reader Review Players at the Game of People for online ebook

### Juan says

No wonder it's out of print to never come back again. Meandering, pointless, with not-so-bad set pieces but not adding up to anything.

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### tENTATIVELY, cONVENIENCE says

review of

John Brunner's Players at the Game of People

by tENTATIVELY, a cONVENIENCE - October 14, 2013

Yet another Brunner. The most recent one I've read yet. 1980 publishing date. At 1st I thought of just listing all the permutations that the alien animal name goes thru. Tempting, but not enuf.

"Beside the couch, looking as though a four-foot fir cone had been carved out of anthracite, then flattened like a cowering hedgehog, lay Adirondinarigo." - p 54

""Oh, that's Canaptarosigapatruleeva,"" - p 55

"All the while Potanandrusabalincta lay immobile except for an occasional ripple of its carapace." - p 55

"Apticaragogapetulami stirred and readjusted the pattern of its scales by a few millimeters here and there." - p 57

"Apitaculabricomulapariti folded its scales and resumed a condition of inertness." - p 58

"Lurabanguliticapulanduri remained as motionless as though it were carved in ebony." - p 59

"But Abutaralingotogulisica lay as unresponsive as a bone." - p 60

"Had Hermann known in advance about Arikapanotulandaba's amazing powers?" - p 97

Brunner being a writerly bloke, he doesn't always directly describe, he writes around, he tantalizes w/o immediately, if ever, spelling it out. "Hugo & Diana": "By this time she was fondling Gorse's clitoris and his prick was standing at attention." (p 63) ""No, no!" exclaimed Hugo & Diana in dismay. "Not at all like this! This is mine![""]" (p 64) ""Well, we don't," Hugo & Diana said, turning her back and pushing off into the empyrean and beginning to caress his clitoris with sighs and moans of pleasure." (p 64) Amorphous. Hermaphrodite? Conjoined twins? ""Hermaphrodite, of course. Maybe one of these days you'll meet the surgeon who performed the transplants. Brilliant man."" (p 67)

This cast of phantasmagorical characters have extraordinary lives imparted to them by unseen puppet masters, they're owned like pets. In exchange for performing tricks they get spectacular treats.

[reviewer's insertion: As I'm writing this, I'm listening to the Piano Music in America Vol. II: 1900-1945 VOXBOX, Roger Fields, pianist - Shields is phenomenal, it's Wallingford Riegger's wonderful "Six

Movements from "New and Old" (1944) right now - liner notes by none other than Lejaren Hiller, one of my favorite composers, whose Piano Sonatas 4 & 5 I've been listening to repeatedly lately]

Godwin's treat is a George Medal given him for heroism performed by him whilst apparently time-traveling or some such. But is it 'real':

"September the twentieth," Bill said at last, tapping the paper with a blunt forefinger.

"Yes!"

"1940?"

"Yes, of course—during the Blitz!"

"I don't believe it," Bill said with finality, surrendering the paper again.

"Nobody's asking you to!" Godwin snapped, returning it to his pocket. But a sour taste was gathering in his mouth, and he forced himself to add the crucial question: "Why?"

"Weren't no George Medals then, nor George Cross neither. Didn't get introduced until September the twenty-third." - pp 85-86

'Commonplace' details accumulate & set the atmosphere w/o ever being put into a defined context:

"A moment later Godwin was back in the dingy street under a dismal sky. People seemed to be looking at him more than even they had at Bill in his out-of-date finery. Their faces were cold and pinched with hunger. Some of the children playing in the gutter wore only ragged vests or outgrown dresses and were mechanically masturbating as they gazed at him with dull eyes." - p 86

"Masturbating"? What time is this?!

"But when he arrived at Harry's basement flat, in a narrow street of sleazy gray-brick houses beset—like the whole of London—with abandoned cars, there was no reply to his ring . . . this being one of the few doors which did not automatically open even to his touch.

"The most likely explanation was that Harry had been called, and for that there was no help. There was never any help.

"Perhaps it didn't matter. Harry's forgeries were—naturally—the finest in the world, and Godwin had not actually been warned that he shouldn't use a passport too often; it just seemed like a reasonable precaution, because there were so many countries where the police were forever demanding "*Vos papiers!*" and "*Ihr Ausweis!*"—or whatever—and the presence of a visitor unrecorded at any port or airport might entrain problems . . ." - p 87

"As he trudged toward the nearest street where a cruising taxi could logically be intersecting with him" - p 87

"Abandoned cars"? Forged passports? Taxis everywhere? What time is this? Is it London at the time of the bk's writing w/ some new explanations for the despair? For the deterioration? No, not exactly, but I reckon that's in there somewhere. Instead, Godwin is "enjoying his isolation and his suspension in time as well as space", he's beyond jet-setting, a pampered pet, utterly privileged & totally owned. &, yet, there's still no explanation for the background degradation:

"Oxford Street having been for a long while closed to all traffic but buses and taxis, and in any case being beset by homeless hawkers, peddlers, and prostitutes, Godwin detoured via Wigmore Street and made his eventual way to Holburn and the slums of the City, where squatters swarmed like ants in the abandoned office blocks—some bombed, some burned for the insurance, some simply left to rot when the owning company collapsed. Hordes of ragged and filthy children rushed out to celebrate this rare event, the passage of a car, and when he halted more from force of habit than necessity at a blind junction, they converged on him screaming for money and displaying stump wrists and carefully cultivated sores.

"He scared them off with a roar of his engine and thereafter crossed intersections without slowing, blasting his horn.

"Thinking of Sittingbourne, he turned south to A2. In greenwich an armed fascist patrol had set up a roadblock guarded by stern-faced boys with stolen army guns wearing Union Jack armbands on their black leather motorcycle jackets. Luckily a trio of policemen had paused to pass the time of day with them and someone had cracked a good joke which made them all chuckle. Barely glancing at him except to ensure he was white, they waved him by." - p 95

Another of Godwin's 'treats' seems to be traveling in time to an earlier more aristocratic time.. &.. yet.. it goes awry & he's held captive under brutal conditions.. to be eventually taken before the despot.. where he hears music.. "It was by William Walton. / It was *Belshazzar's Feast*." (p 102) Twentieth century music in a pre-20th c context. As w/ the George Medal it does not compute. [Coincidentally, I'd just been listening to Walton's "Facade" shortly before I read this passage.] This apparent delusion, this apparent hallucination, this 'treat' transforms from one ill-inspired illusion to another: "Shaw! Androcles who took the thorn out of the lion's pad! The whole setup was so illy". (p 105)

&, yes, Brunner does recycle his material a fair amt: "And there, dead ahead of him, was a nearly naked girl tied to the face of a smooth gray rock." "As it began to crisp around the edges in the blasting-hot breath of a creature waddling toward her on scaly legs with claw-tipped toes like an overgrown cockerel's" (p 108) is reminiscent of his *Father of Lies*; "Two or three had, on cheekbones or wrists, the long-lasting subcutaneous hemorrhages indicative of scurvy" (p 118) is reminiscent of *Bedlam Planet*.

All in all, I enjoyed reading this, as I enjoy reading all Brunner.. but I read it as a way of distracting myself from more important things to be read.. & I've reviewed it here as a way of avoiding writing more important things to be written - wch is not to say that Brunner's not a great writer, he is, but this was too much entertainment & too little intellectual rigor for me personally.

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## Scott Rhee says

"Players at the Game of People" by John Brunner is nothing more than a mildly interesting science fiction premise, done numerous times before, and probably better than Brunner's attempt. Nevertheless, the book is short and decently-written, so it's a quick one-day read on a cold rainy day at a coffeehouse, if nothing else to read.

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## Adam says

Good christ, that's bleak. Seems deliberately obfuscating. Brunner's descriptions and despair are top notch,

but the whole premise, that it could not be interrogated sincerely, feels kind of like an intentionally evasive writing exercise. Oversold as hell by the copy. Still, has a kernel of greatness.

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### **Dan says**

Admittedly, I'm not loving it. What I do love is this is one of those books you never heard of by a reputable author and the only place you can find it is at your local used bookstore. I'm even using the faded bookmark that I found between the pages.

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...and now it is done. I just looked over the huge synopsis that has been written for this book and I think: "yeah, right on."

As usual a "starred" review just doesn't do justice to a book like this. It's NOT a perfect book--part of me thinks its one of those noodly, in-between novels that only shape-up when the author hitches hold of the thrust of his argument and steers it towards its conclusion.

But I do like its unconventional, bizarre update on "Faust" and the Mephistofelian pact--as well as the existential dilemma of which life is one worth living: leisure vs. labor. It's a good one to chew on. And a refutation that SF has to be all bug-eyed monsters and ray guns.

I suspect this book is out of print--that's a freekin shame if it is.

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### **Lee says**

At the heart of the book is an attack on the leisure class. The main character of the story, Godwin Harpinshield, has his every desire catered to. Food, women, clothes, cars, you name it, it is his for the asking. There is a catch though. He must recruit someone new. He recruits a young prostitute who he thinks might have a future. Although he doesn't know it yet, this act begins his downfall.

Brunner deliberately leaves several aspects of his story unexplained. Many readers are probably put off by this. I myself enjoyed it. The narrative wasn't spoon fed and it leaves a lot of interpretation to the reader. If you like your sci-fi based on ideas, then this book is for you.

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### **Maerdi says**

An interesting idea and some neat world-building, but I felt the central themes ended up being a bit too small (or too rushed at the end?). That, or possibly it didn't feel as new to me as it should have given that I've seen the 28 years of fiction / sci-fi / fantasy that has followed...

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### **John Loyd says**

Players at the Game of People (1980) 212 pages by John Brunner.

This story is set in some dismal version of the present, i.e. 1980. There are mentions of beggars on the street, slums, etc. That may be a factor in why Godwin and those like chose the life they did. A life of their choosing whether it be Doctor, beautician, designer, astrologer, detective or in Godwin's case man of leisure. The story begins with Godwin saving a little girl from a collapsing building during one of Hitler's raids on London. We later learn that this is one of his "rewards" -- being a hero -- for lending the use of his body for a day or two. After this Godwin visits Irma, and gets his body renewed to the look and feel of a man of thirty-two.

Godwin is given [post hypnotic(?)] instructions to recruit Gorse. Gorse is 18, has run away from school, become a prostitute, might even have been sold into white slavery. Generally a bad life with prospects not looking very good.

Brunner never tells how or shows who is behind the luxury, etc. Just gives the perspective of Godwin, Bill, Irma, and the others like them. It's a psychological tale (like Quicksand) even those these people have everything they could ever want they don't seem to be excessively happy. They just have something that keeps them interested for a while, then they get bored and have to do something else.

I think you're supposed to read this and feel better about your own life with its peaks and pitfalls rather than wanting something given to you, that you don't have to work for, and eventually just pales. It's not put in those terms, we get to see God being introspective, and the way he is torn.

Brunner does a good job with Godwin. He's a hero (but never a hero), he's a man of leisure, he's a puppet, he's pulling the strings, he's a psychiatrist, and he's the patient.

I had a book club edition and didn't have to strain my eyes reading this, so it went really quick. It was good.

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## Colleen says

Takes place in the 1980's in London. The main character earns rewards from his alien masters like being able to travel back in time to earn a medal of honor by rescuing someone in WWI, or adding any feature he want to either his house or body. All the people he knows work for the aliens, and some have chosen weightless environments, off-world houseplants, really odd rewards. The only work he really has to do is recruit others to this exclusive club and to loan out his body to an alien for a month. He can completely recover from the damage they do by visiting the others he knows for their rejuvenation care. The names of products and services his club members have are dropped like our media drops the names Harrods, YSL and Gucci. It's a very disturbing exploration into shallowness, evil and having that monkey on your back. Needs 6 stars.

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## Olethros says

-Todo tiene un coste, no nos olvidemos-.

Género. Ciencia-Ficción.

Lo que nos cuenta. Godwin Harpinshield vive en el más cómodo lujo a cambio de ofrecer "servicios" a unos desconocidos amos que buscan siempre nuevas adquisiciones para su círculo de peones, pero todos ellos personas que coquetean con la autodestrucción de una forma u otra. Cuando Godwin se aproxima a Dora con la intención de incorporarla al círculo, cree recordar algo que parece imposible.

¿Quiere saber más del libro, sin spoilers? Visite:

<http://librosdeolethros.blogspot.com/...>

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### **Ubik 2.0 says**

aggiornamento vecchio libro letto chissà quando

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### **Erik Graff says**

John Brunner was one of my favorite science fiction writers because so many of his novels, particularly the linked *Stand on Zanzibar* and *The Sheep Look Up*, dealt with contemporary social problems in near future contexts. *Players at the Game of People* is at once both a moral tale and a social critique.

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### **John says**

Grade D

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### **Jay Michaels says**

This 1980 novel finds Brunner examining the question of whether or not human beings actually have free will, or if we're being manipulated by forces beyond our perception. Unfortunately, while Brunner's protagonist senses that there's *Something Going On*, he never pulls the veil back to identify who's pulling the strings behind the scenes.

Kind of like real life. (\*Exactly\* like it, in fact!)

Feb. 24, 2013.

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### **Keith says**

A modern sci-fi variant on the central themes of the Faust myth, set largely in late 20th century England. This is not a retelling of the Faust of either Goethe or Marlowe *per se*, but definitely and self-consciously touches on the same over-arching theme, if with significantly less of the politico-religious overtones of those earlier, and decidedly more classic, versions. Where it does have a somewhat political subtext in simply in the background detail of a presumably post-Thatcherite England, which could perhaps grate on arch-conservatives.

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