



Insane Clown President: Dispatches from the 2016 Circus

Matt Taibbi , Victor Juhasz (Illustrator)

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • Dispatches from the 2016 election that provide an eerily prescient take on our democracy's uncertain future, by the country's most perceptive and fearless political journalist.

In twenty-five pieces from *Rolling Stone*—plus two original essays—Matt Taibbi tells the story of Western civilization's very own train wreck, from its tragicomic beginnings to its apocalyptic conclusion. Years before the clown car of candidates was fully loaded, Taibbi grasped the essential themes of the story: the power of spectacle over substance, or even truth; the absence of a shared reality; the nihilistic rebellion of the white working class; the death of the political establishment; and the emergence of a new, explicit form of white nationalism that would destroy what was left of the Kingian dream of a successful pluralistic society.

Taibbi captures, with dead-on, real-time analysis, the failures of the right and the left, from the thwarted Bernie Sanders insurgency to the flawed and aimless Hillary Clinton campaign; the rise of the “dangerously bright” alt-right with its wall-loving identity politics and its rapturous view of the “Racial Holy War” to come; and the giant fail of a flailing, reactive political media that fed a ravenous news cycle not with reporting on political ideology, but with undigested propaganda served straight from the campaign bubble. At the center of it all stands Donald J. Trump, leading a historic revolt against his own party, “bloviating and farting his way” through the campaign, “saying outrageous things, acting like Hitler one minute and Andrew Dice Clay the next.” For Taibbi, the stunning rise of Trump marks the apotheosis of the new postfactual movement.

Taibbi frames the reporting with original essays that explore the seismic shift in how we perceive our national institutions, the democratic process, and the future of the country. *Insane Clown President* is not just a postmortem on the collapse and failure of American democracy. It offers the riveting, surreal, unique, and essential experience of seeing the future in hindsight.

Praise for Matt Taibbi

“Matt Taibbi is one of the few journalists in America who speaks truth to power.”—**Senator Bernie Sanders**

Insane Clown President: Dispatches from the 2016 Circus Details

Date : Published January 17th 2017 by Spiegel & Grau

ISBN :

Author : Matt Taibbi , Victor Juhasz (Illustrator)

Format : Kindle Edition 352 pages

Genre : Politics, Nonfiction, History, Writing, Journalism, Essays

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Linda Robinson says

We all lived through this election cycle, and I like reading about it from Taibbi's viewpoint much better than from my own. This book is a collection of his journalistic observations, from the introduction with pieces of The Great Derangement, notes on 10 years of noticing something was changing in American politics, beginning with Howard Dean's campaign in 2004. There is a formula to candidacy as covered by political journalists that worked up until Dean: a 3-step evaluation that could pretty accurately predict who would hang in for the long haul and who would bail under pressure before the primaries. Who would fail outright. Gradually it was clear that Americans had pretty much figured out that government doesn't work, all candidates are pretty much alike and nobody, but nobody had the real life interests of the middle in mind. Acceptable candidates (acceptable to the money, then the parties, then the media) were trotted out and we were all supposed to behave ourselves as we'd done for a couple hundred years, and vote for one of the 2 leftovers. And then this election happened. Taibbi tracks what went horribly wrong with predicting an outcome. A couple of outliers, a tired of the same shit populace, a national disgust with legacy candidates and dynasties, and a bellicose blowhard billionaire who had no interest in how things were supposed to go. Taibbi makes it all entertaining in hindsight. I laughed out loud a lot. Do not miss the debate drinking game rules. Or the casting suggestions for the movie. Excellent stuff.

Char says

3.5/5

The only thing I really miss about my Rolling Stone subscription is the reporting of Matt Taibbi. And maybe the scary-ass environmental articles written by Bill McKibben. (I canceled my 25 year standing order because they had the audacity, {stupidity?}, to put the Boston bomber POS on the cover. I'm surprised this Massachusetts girl received her copy intact and not covered in spittle.) When I saw the audio of this book was available at my library, I eagerly put it on hold, but I'm sorry to say I'm a bit disappointed.

What I liked about this book was Taibbi's bluntness about the state of our media and the role that it plays in elections. I also liked his exploration of how that role has changed over the years-especially in regards to the 24 hour news cycle that now dominates our airwaves. I also liked the fact that he was hard on Hillary and her campaign. I'm not a Trump fan but I'm not a Hillary fan either. Taibbi went into some depth about how our candidates are selected in this country and it's not by us-America's citizens. It's by money. It's by the press. It's by those powerful people behind the scenes and their machinations. It's disgusting.

Regarding the media...all these talking heads and pundits and opinions. What happened to the freaking NEWS? What happened to the facts? I hate to say that Trump is right about anything, but the media is no longer trustworthy, if it ever was. They are out to sell us what they consider news. And guess what? Poverty doesn't sell. No one wants to see homeless people while they're eating dinner. People might turn the channel! No one could go without covering Trump's antics during the campaign, or even now, because people love that stuff! Here we are 6 months into Trump's administration and what has he accomplished? We're all too interested in Russia and Trump's Twitter feed to look too closely. Every time he Tweets the public is distracted. Again.

What I didn't like about this book, at least at times, was its flippancy. The campaign drinking games portion

could have been funny-if it was done just once. Doing it twice, with lists of rules a mile long was redundant and irritating. The portion about who would play these candidates in a movie was also boring. I love Matt Taibbi's sense of humor and razor sharp wit, but I think these chapters were cheap shots and beneath his abilities and intellect. Then again, the title of the book is Insane Clown President and some of these things are insane.

Overall, I enjoyed this book and I still love Taibbi. I wouldn't recommend it to Hillary lovers though, unless they are ready to hear some hard truths. I expect that many are not.

C. says

Too much crude talk, and too offensive to read cover-to-cover, but I did skim from beginning to end.

This book sadly, is a very factual and 'on-the-mark' account of how the American people have allowed the American political process to degenerate to the point that America is now totally corporate-owned, and totally corrupt, and unaccountable to anyone.

To the point, that the most dishonest, vulgar, stupid, unqualified, Narcissist and his foreign agents now inhabit our White House, and he and his mob family are shafting the taxpayers like no politician in American history has ever done before!

An excellent history of how we reached this point, and includes an interesting view of the role of the MSM in this evolution.

Tristan says

The American presidency has been ripe for the taking by a wealthy, non-political entity like Trump for some time now. It was inevitable.

In 2016, the moment of judgment had finally come. It didn't take much doing. Child's play, really. The system was that weak and ineffective, unable to put up any substantial fight. Now, a new paradigm has been set. It shouldn't come as a surprise. The question was only how ridiculous, sad and vile things could get. The conditions had been present for at least 20 years, clear to anyone with eyes willing to see the perfect storm about to hit American politics like a juggernaut.

A large swath of disenfranchised, deeply resentful citizens with an axe to grind with its increasingly detached and myopic political representatives were ready for change, any change. Their education was generally poor, prospects few, if there were ever any to begin with. While they suffered, grew desperate and radicalised in grudging silence, the political, intellectual, economic and media elites vacantly looked on, safely cloistered in those upscale residential area's on the East and West Coasts, gorging themselves on everything the good life had to offer them.

The Trump presidency isn't an accident, neither an aberration. It's a fitting end product of American culture and politics. To a perverse mind, a not inconsiderable amount of *schadenfreude* could be derived from watching this glorious dumpster fire unfold before unbelieving eyeballs of millions around the world.

This is you, America. Democrat, Republican, it doesn't matter. Both wings of the establishment screwed up royally. Now you're reaping the whirlwind of your willful ignorance and callousness. You've reached the end of civilised political discourse, things will never be the same after this. Division is total. Now you truly are the living embodiment of a reality TV freak show.

Matt Taibbi echoes my - admittedly bleak - sentiments rather well in his deceptively titled *Insane Clown President*. Deceptive because, while Mr. Orange does get a fair amount of coverage, this series of columns which originally appeared in Rolling Stone Magazine, reads more as an indictment of the entire system which gave rise to Trump in the first place. Absolutely everyone, apart from Bernie Sanders, has to undergo Taibbi's scorched earth policy like a child about to be chided, a mode of writing which he executes rather well.

It's especially refreshing to see a mainstream journalist performing a mea culpa like this:

"This is a horrible thing to have to say about one's own country, but this story makes it official. America is now too dumb for TV news.

It's our fault. We in the media have spent decades turning the news into a consumer business that's basically indistinguishable from selling cheeseburgers or video games. You want bigger margins, you just cram the product full of more fat and sugar and violence and wait for your obese, over-stimulated customer to come waddling forth.

The old Edward R. Murrow, eat-your-broccoli version of the news was banished long ago. Once such whiny purists were driven from editorial posts and the ad people over the last four or five decades got invited in, things changed. Then it was nothing but murders, bombs, and panda births, delivered to thickening couch potatoes in ever briefer blasts of forty, thirty, twenty seconds.

What we call right-wing and liberal media in this country are really just two different strategies of the same kind of nihilistic lizard-brain sensationalism. The ideal CNN story is a baby down a well, while the ideal Fox story is probably a baby thrown down a well by a Muslim terrorist or an ACORN activist. Both companies offer the same service, it's just that the Fox version is a little kinkier.

When you make the news into this kind of consumer business, pretty soon audiences lose the ability to distinguish between what they think they're doing, informing themselves, and what they're actually doing, shopping.

And who shops for products he or she doesn't want? That's why the consumer news business was always destined to hit this kind of impasse. You can get by for a long time by carefully selecting the facts you know your audiences will like, and calling that news. But eventually there will be a truth that displeases your customers. What do you do then?"

Hunter S. Thompson would approve. What he would make of this madness though, one can only guess.

Recommended for those sadomasochists out there eager to relive one of the darkest times in American political and social history. The pessimist in me however thinks this ride will last for a good while yet, with no lever in sight to halt it.

Lynn says

Excellent. Scary and depressing as hell but excellent. My favorite quote from the book: "[Most of Donald]

Trump's supporters [seem] so stubborn in their lack of interest in 'the facts.' They [are] contemptuous of anything that [comes] from [the media]...But the ineffectiveness of 'facts' [doesn't] stop there. The election of Trump was not just a political choice, a vote against minorities and foreigners, against intellectuals, a cry for better jobs, etc. This was also a metaphysical choice. [Trump voters] were announcing that they preferred one reality to another. Inherent in this decision was the revolutionary idea that you can choose your own set of facts...But Trump voters did not agree [that facts are facts]. They believed facts were a choice."

Peter Mcloughlin says

Tiabbi's trenchant, funny and tragic book is an excellent post mortem on the 2016 election and demise of institutions like independent media, the end of facts, the decline of the Democrats and the depravity of the republicans, the tightening of oligarchy and the post-truth world. It is the story of how a vacuity of person, a self-absorbed con-man usually weeded out by our political process became the forty-fifth President to be sworn in later today. It has a surreal and disturbing funhouse cast of characters, a grotesque caricature of a political process. Just about everyone in this tragicomedy is rogue's gallery of villains with the exception of Bernie Sanders who seems like Citizen-politician oddly placed in this story as a foil for the rest of clowns. As Trump would say, sad. As we will see alarming and disturbing.

here is Tiabbi being interviewed on Democracy Now. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bdrH9...>

Leftbanker says

Consider this book the autopsy on the ascension of Trump®, a populist, man-of-the-people leader who hasn't ever pumped his own gas. Hell, I'd wager that the guy has never flushed his own toilet and leaves that task for lesser humans—and everyone is a lesser human in his eyes. Now it will be the American people forced to clean up after the dump he takes on what remains of our democracy.

Equal parts trenchant and hilarious, *Insane Clown President* is perfect reading to get you through these rocky initial days of the Trump administration and a good preparation for the horror that is sure to come, because we elected a reality TV buffoon as our commander in chief. So what did you expect? If this represents the death of our democracy Taibbi quickly leads us to the murder weapon: television news and much of the media, in general. We have turned the news into a consumer product that people can change to suit their individual tastes like they do for any and all other consumer goods.

“What we call right-wing and liberal media in this country are really just two different strategies of the same kind of nihilistic lizard-brain sensationalism. The ideal CNN story is a baby down a well, while the ideal Fox story is probably a baby thrown down a well by a Muslim terrorist or an ACORN activist. Both companies offer the same service, it's just that the Fox version is a little kinkier.”

When people wish to argue politics with me the first thing I ask them is to tell me what they read to arrive at their political views. More often than not the response is the Sarah Palin-esque “I read everything” which, as with her, means the almost exact opposite which means that they can't be bothered to read anything at all, at least nothing longer than a slogan that fits beneath a photo on some idiotic post they saw on Facebook. Welcome to the post-literate age where there are facts and alternative facts to fit any narrative.

If I have any complaint with Taibbi as a writer it is his constant use of the most arcane pop culture references to make his points. I guess this works if you are in on the reference but I wonder how readers ten years from

now will view this book as he obviously is looking ahead a bit with his mention of Hunter Thompson. I happen to think that Taibbi is a much better reporter than Thompson and perhaps even funnier. I also don't know why he doesn't attribute some of the funnier lines in the book to his fellow reporters. He's a reporter so why doesn't he write down the name of the guy who quipped, "His lawn mower is gay?" after the Wisconsin governor said that marriage freedoms would open the door to someone walking down the aisle with his lawn mower. Or after Ted Cruz claims that some kids gave him money from their lemonade stand for his campaign. After Cruz drops out shortly thereafter another of Taibbi's anonymous colleague asks, "Does he get to use the lemonade money to pay campaign debts?"

Here is a perfect example of Taibbi at his best, being both trenchant and hilarious:

"If this isn't the end for the Republican Party, it'll be a shame. They dominated American political life for 50 years and were never anything but monsters. They bred in their voters the incredible attitude that Republicans were the only people within our borders who raised children, loved their country, died in battle or paid taxes. They even sullied the word "American" by insisting they were the only real ones. They preferred Lubbock to Paris, and their idea of an intellectual was Newt Gingrich. Their leaders, from Ralph Reed to Bill Frist to Tom DeLay to Rick Santorum to Romney and Ryan, were an interminable assembly line of shrieking, witch-hunting celibates, all with the same haircut—the kind of people who thought Iran-Contra was nothing, but would grind the affairs of state to a halt over a blow job or Terri Schiavo's feeding tube."

I just decided to change the name of my make-believe punk rock band to Terri Schiavo's Feeding Tube. Either that or Very Small Hands Pussy Grabbing Riot. Or how about The Trump University Valedictorians?

Leo Walsh says

Interesting, flawed collection of essays by Rolling Stone's gonzo political journalist Matt Taibbi, **Insane Clown President** is worth a read. Here, Taibbi attacks the 2016 presidential race, from the primaries through the general election with his trademark acerbic, blunt, "take no prisoners" skepticism that borders, at times, on cynicism.

The text is series of Rolling Stone articles, unadorned and without corrections or "connected" into a coherent thesis. Instead, it's a series of Taibbi's meditations on the lunacy of the race that gave us Donald Trump. This has a lot of value, since I, too, was going through the same mental gyrations as the election season went on, so it's great to see the articles presented without adjustments. Since it's clear that, until the last two essays, published post-election, Taibbi was convinced Hillary would win.

The book's most interesting parts trace Taibbi's bafflement at how Trump, an ignorant, bumbling, sniffing, farting, racist, misogynist clown of a man beat out serious candidates during the Republican primary, like GOP party insider favorites like Jeb Bush and Marco Rubio. Guys who were contemporary politicians, blow-dried and with talking points honed in focus groups. Guys who were, unfortunately, not ready to take on Donald Trump's bloviating insults. Worse, when they did crawl into the pit with the Donald, like when Rubio made fun of Trump's stubby hands by hinting he also had small genitalia, well...

Like Taibbi, I couldn't help but bemoan the middle-school idiocy that the contemporary GOP's base that takes Alex Jones' conspiracy theories seriously. And we're talking goofball stuff, like the Jade Helm "takeover" of the southwest, W. Bush planning 9/11, Obama creating FEMA reeducation camps, Sandyhook being a false-flag operation, Obamacare "death panels," etc.

So Right-wing voters, who've been consuming this fact-free nonsense for decades, were primed for Trump's

antics, from his rampant conspiracy thinking to his transparent falsehoods. Because he consumed the same crap they did and ran a campaign based on that, and not typical GOP talking points. This, combined with his populist style, made him a one-of-a-kind spectacle that his supporters loved.

Turns out flyover Americans liked a guy who'd belch in good company and spoke at a fifth grade level. And throughout the 2016 election cycle, the main thought running through Trump supporter's heads was "Screw those prim, college-educated eggheads with their cushy lives."

But Taibbi goes on to call out GOP complicity in Trump's ability to make a successful white supremacist appeal to flyover America. This didn't happen in a bubble. Sure, Trump's appeal was repulsive and overt, like insulting Mexicans and tweeting wildly inaccurate black white murder rate statistics that he pulled from a white supremacist source. But the GOP had been paving the ways with plausibly deniable racist cat-whistles aimed at poor whites since Nixon launched his Southern Strategy in 1968 to gain votes. So any GOP insider who claimed to be shocked at Trump's success with overtly racist appeals is either lying or ignorant. Neither's a good thing.

All Trump did was take off the gloves, making implicit explicit. All to the glee of his fans and derision of those "prim, college-educated eggheads with their cushy lives."

Like I said, they liked people belching in good company.

What's more, Taibbi is spot on calling GOP politics a bait and switch of epic proportions, with the GOP's rural poor base the most reliable marks of the con-job that American politics has become. To win these voters, a politician just has to act dumb, say crazy stuff, pretend to like NASCAR, guns and Jesus while running. And once elected, vote for the GOP's tax cuts for the rich/ service cuts for the poor, policies that harm their poor white constituents in flyover America, transferring it to coastal elites. Whom flyover Americans hate.

Crazy. It's been going on for decades. And until these rural whites wise up, the GOP muckety-mucks will continue riding the disgruntled white vote to victory, pull the bait-and-switch on their constituent's, and then point the blame towards the Democrats, minorities, Muslims, gays, or whoever else is the right wing media's "bad guy" at the time.

But Taibbi also takes the Democrats, the one-time champion of the working classes, to task. Because since Bill Clinton, the DNC has been cozying up to Wall Street with free trade deals that have decimated flyover America. CEO's shutter factories in the midwest, killing many a factory town as they move production overseas. A boon to the executives and Wall Street, but devastating to families on Main Street. Instead of stepping up the help these workers and union members, the Democrats leadership provided these decent, hard-working folks out-to-dry, with nostrums like, "that's just the way the world is..."

Any wonder that these people rejected both establishment Republicans AND Democrats for the populism of Trump and Sanders?

Worse, instead of listening to the passion that Bernie Sanders unleashed, the Dems gave us Hillary. A wildly unpopular candidate with too much baggage (which, by the way, I think is mostly garbage but Taibbi convinced is real). And represents almost everything that flyover Americans hate about politics... even if most of it is garbage.

Taibbi is also blistering in his attacks on political journalism. Which has become more of an "access" game, where journalists work with the party insiders to define "who" would be acceptable candidates in a game Taibbi compares the the satirical movie **Heathers**.

For instance, most political journalists wrote Sanders off. He was loud, too serious, focused on the issues. And since he didn't have a \$500 haircut, he wouldn't make a "good Heather," so they were waiting for him to step out of the race. To make room for a "real" (AKA party-approved) challenger from the left like O'Malley. And they were just as amazed when Bernie rolled from nothing to a serious challenger by riding the same wave of anti-insider anger the Trump rode.

Strengths aside, **Insane Clown President** has its flaws. Taibbi suffers from "both-sides-itis," a common affliction of media types. That equates many made-up scandals about Hillary (like Benghazi and his misunderstanding of what her having a secured email server means) with fact-based scandals that surrounded Trump, like the Russian-connected hacking of the DNC and ensuing Wikileaks dump, and the fact that he made stuff up. Which showed him as either a pathological liar or a loon, none of which boded well for the US. And, since he culled the articles from *Rolling Stone* and republished them "as is," they lack perspective. For instance, these essays were published before most of us understood the impact Russia had on the election, and the problem posed by fake news bots, etc. And worse, since they are discrete essays without a thesis that joins them, they are often repetitive.

But still, as a record of the gut reactions of an incisive and insightful reporter to the bewildering rise of Trump from D-List reality TV star to President in real-time, it's a valuable record. And a reminder.

3-stars. A good book for Taibbi fans, but suffering from lack of cohesion that kept me from going 4-stars.

Lissa says

This book is a collection of Taibbi's articles that ran in *Rolling Stone* during the 2016 election campaign, which I believe will go down in history as one of the lowest, if not *the* lowest, point in American politics for our country's existence. How could so many people, many of them poor, actually believe that this wealthy blowhard gave one shit about them? How could an intellectual bantamweight like Trump, who had no real platform (unless you want to count racism, sexism, and isolationism as "platforms") and couldn't talk his way out of a paper bag, actually win the presidency?

Well, that's still open for debate (I will, however, point to the morass that is the American educational system as a big contributor to Trump's win - he does, after all, "love the poorly educated," as do most Republicans), and I am sure that many books will be written about it in the future. However, Taibbi does a good job of showing just how we got to this ridiculous, and downright laughable if it wasn't so fucking serious, low point in American history. Although I don't think that anyone could argue that Taibbi isn't liberal (although "liberal" does not necessarily mean Democrat, even though Trump supporters seem unable to tell the difference between those two words), he blasts everyone he believes responsible for this disaster: the Democrats, the political machine, the reporting corps, the polarization of the media, the politicians on BOTH sides who sold their souls for big campaign contributions (and so-called Senator Cory Gardner from Colorado, I am looking so hard in your direction right now, you big fat sell-out). But, of course, most of Taibbi's ire is reserved for the Republicans, who have been building up to the brink of disaster for decades.

There are so many passages of this book that are quotable, but this one, above all, I had to share.

If [a Trump nomination as the Republican candidate in the 2016 election] isn't the end for the Republican Party, it'll be a shame. They dominated American political life for 50 years and were never anything but monsters. They bred in their voters the incredible attitude that Republicans were the only people within our borders who raised children, loved their country, died in battle or paid taxes. They even sullied the word "American" by insisting they were the only real ones. They preferred Lubbock to Paris, and their idea of an

intellectual was Newt Gingrich. Their leaders...were the kind of people who thought Iran-Contra was nothing, but would grind the affairs of state to a halt over a blow job or Terri Shiavo's feeding tube. A century ago, the small-town American was Gary Cooper: tough, silent, upright and confident. The modern Republican Party changed that person into a haranguing neurotic who couldn't make it through a dinner without quizzing you about your politics. They destroyed the American character. No hell is hot enough for them. And when Trump came along, they rolled over like the weaklings they've always been, bowing more or less instantly to his parodic show of strength. (Chapter 17: May 18, 1016: RIP, GOP: How Trump's Campaign is Killing the Republican Party)

Preach it, brother.

I listened to the audiobook of this book, and I thoroughly enjoyed the narrator, Rob Shapiro, who put all of the emotion into his performance.

Trish says

Matt Taibbi is a helluva writer. Even if you don't agree with his political views, you might kinda wish you did...to see what he sees. He is really *funny*, and it is inevitable that you will choke out a few guffaws against your will when he goes after someone you fell for, or settled for. Sucker. The only person Taibbi doesn't speak of in sarcastic or cynical tones is Bernie Sanders, who never tried to entertain us so much as educate, inform, and *move* us.

After the election in November last year, Taibbi wrote a last dispatch in which he heralds some of the thoughts he exercises in this book. Called President Trump: How America Got it So Wrong this article published in *Rolling Stone* gives you some idea of who Taibbi is and how he writes, in case he slipped your notice. He no longer works full time for that magazine, but has moved to First Look Media, working with Glenn Greenwald, Jeremy Scahill, and Laura Poitras. His leaving statement from *Rolling Stone* is presented here.

Listening to Washington news today, I am getting the burning sensation in my belly again. Trump just had his first news conference (1/11/17) and listening to his incomplete sentences and careless way of speaking started my anxiety. What is he trying to say? Why should we have to have an interpreter? Who should be our interpreter? Breitbart? KellyAnne? My anxiety and frustration will kill me if I have to listen to this straight on. I am afraid I may only be able to view Trump's presidency through a filter or in the rear view mirror.

Which brings me to Taibbi. Taibbi followed the campaign trail as much as he was able this time round, and filed reports that were meant to dovetail with the illustration work of Victor Juhasz. This book, after the preface in which Taibbi takes a long view, is a collection of his dispatches from the 2016 campaign trail, following a long tradition beginning with Hunter S. Thompson.

In these dispatches, Taibbi makes comment on events as they unfolded, recognizing that the anti-truth candidate might win but still reiterating that he "*can't*." It may be too soon for some of you, scarred from that campaign as you are, to even consider laughing at the unbelievable thing we as a country did in electing Trump. But some say to jump right back on the saddle, and Taibbi is a great trail leader.

Taibbi admits, despite his writing *eight years earlier* a book about a post-truth society based on fake conspiracies and exemplified by Fox News called *The Great Derangement: A Terrifying True Story of War, Politics, and Religion at the Twilight of the American Empire*, that even he did not foresee that a charlatan like Trump could hijack an electorate that voted *twice!* for Barack Obama, and which had led movements in racial parity and same sex rights. Therefore, while he is critiquing the "childlike" crowds that throng to

Trump rallies, faces turned like believers to the clarion call of a television evangelist, throughout the year preceding the vote Taibbi can't believe this clown can possibly win.

He is disbelieving but accurate and very, very, funny in describing the absurd Republican debates fielding *seventeen* candidates for president. Clearly some folks weren't getting the memos, or, as we had surmised for some time already, were refusing to go along with the Party hierarchy. Well, they reaped what they sowed: confusion.

But what Taibbi does very well indeed is show us how long we have been living with our heads in the sand while small indignities were perpetrated upon us, e.g., Fox News Channel the only news network available on some cheap cable packages when free public television was not; news networks hiring attractive airheads who all ask the same questions and parrot one another until we get *less* accomplished in an hour of watching than if we'd had the TV off, etc. We were victims but we didn't rise up.

Taibbi helps, along with giving us a few laughs, to chart the train wreck that was the election and pinpoints moments when the cake-icing edifice melted and started to slide off the steaming heap it was hiding. For me in particular, he makes me wonder how we will manage without news organizations worthy of the effort of reading/listening to them. Traditional newspaper outlets have been under stress for many years now, and their ranks are decimated. TV news, you already know, are terrifying in their ineptness & self-satisfaction.

I listened to the audio production of this book, produced by Penguin Random House Audio and read by Rob Shapiro. Shapiro has just the right amount of incredulity and snark in his voice to accentuate the disbelief and horror in Taibbi's tale of woe.

On my blog I have posted a short clip of the audiobook for you to sample.

Susan says

This book includes Matt Taibbi's "Rolling Stones," articles, in which he covered the 2016 Presidential election. Now, I will state from the start that I am not American; but, looking on as an outsider, I really could not see why anyone would think that voting for Donald Trump was a good idea and nothing he has done since becoming President has calmed my fears. As such, I was interested to see if I could gain any understanding from this book.

What this really tells is the rise of Trump. Yes, the author obviously had a fondness for Bernie Sanders, but there is not really as much about Sanders and Clinton, as there is about 'the Donald' and that is - he recognises - part of the problem. He states that the press thought Sanders had no chance of success and covered the campaign accordingly. In fact, Trump got twenty three times more TV coverage than Sanders and the same is true in Taibbi's articles. Trump is unpredictable, outrageous, ignores all the rules - ignores common decency - and yet the press, hating itself it seems, can't take its eyes off of him.

This is the story of a truly outrageous campaign, where the most offensive, attention seeking, outrageous statements got the press attention in a deeply divided country. It seems that polls, the press and, most of all, the establishment, clearly predicted the wrong outcome. In fact, they - like those outside the States - simply could not believe what was about to happen. As in the UK, with Brexit, a large proportion of the voting public protested and so those who predict results got it horribly, terribly wrong. Matt Taibbi attempts to explain why this happened, but it feels like little consolation to those of us looking on at recent events and the rise of intolerance, not only in the USA, but around the world.

Maru Kun says

If you ever clicked on a NYT Opinion piece during the Clinton v. Sanders race then over on the left side of the screen you would read about what a wonderful President Hillary would make and how Sanders was an unelectable carpet-bagger whose proto-communist views would never be acceptable to the average American.

Meanwhile to the right of the screen in the readers' comments column you would read page after page of comments, often more than a thousand, whose common theme was that Sanders' policies were no different from those of FDR democrats of a few decades ago, that they had served any number of European countries decently well for the past fifty years or more and how the Editors of the NYT were insulting their readers' intelligence by ignoring or belittling their views. Interspaced within this flood of reader opinion you could still find a few patronizing comments from Clinton supporters, most often referring to the naivety of 'Bernie Babes' and so forth.

Now it's 2017 and NYT political coverage is in a depressing state, devoted to articles trying to mitigate the unprecedented ('un-presidented'?) national humiliation of the US becoming the first ever totalitarian state to be run by a reality TV star.

Thankfully over in Rolling Stone magazine you can still read the best political journalism of our present time in the work of Matt Taibbi, although this does beg the question, why is the best political writing to be found in a throw-back to the 1960's rock-music magazine rather than the ('so-called') Paper of Record? Should I be checking out the business pages in 'Tattoo Magazine' for my economics news and how good are the personal finance columns in 'Angler's Monthly' I begin to wonder?

If you are feeling mentally strong enough to relive the recent political turn then I cannot recommend 'Insane Clown President' highly enough. Matt Taibbi was right about the political trends years before the rest of the press. The book starts off with his foot-noting his work back in 2008 with the hindsight of the Trump win and then moves on to some of the best criticism of the media, the electoral process and the main political parties I have read anywhere.

And in addition to being right about politics Matt Taibbi is pretty funny as well. I am most certainly not a laugh-out-loud-kind-of-a-guy, but he certainly got a few audible chuckles from me. Here are a few examples. There are many more that come at you so often and are so well put together it's difficult to see how funny (or should I say tragic) his writing can be from just a few selections:

On the Republican Primaries:

"...[They] will go down someday as the greatest reality show every conceived. The concept is ingenious. Take a combustible mix of the most depraved and filterless half-wits, scam artists and asylum Napoleons America has to offer, give them all piles of money and tell them to run for president. Add Donald Trump. And to give the whole thing a perverse gravitas, make the presidency really at stake..."

Taibbi's comments on the media are particularly scathing and on point:

"... a news director who made the decision to run a Sanders speech in its entirety would worry about being accused of making a 'political statement'. Meanwhile, running Trump all day long would be understood as just business, just giving viewers what they want..."

Or:

"...The ideal CNN story is a baby down a well, while the ideal Fox News story is a baby thrown down a well by a Moslem terrorist..."

Here is an excerpt from a longer passage that perfectly summed up the essence of the American electoral process today:

"...The people who sponsor election campaigns...donate heavily to both parties, essentially hiring two different sets of politicians to market their needs to the population. The Republicans give them everything they want, while the Democrats only given them mostly everything.

They get everything from the Republicans because you don't have to make a single concession to a Republican voter. All you have to do to secure a Republican vote is show lots of pictures of gay people kissing or black kids with their pants pulled down or Mexican babies in an emergency room. Then you push forward some dingbat like Michele Bachmann or Sarah Palin to reassure everyone that the Republican party knows who the real Americans are. Call it the 'Rove 1-2'...".

I recently came across one of Thomas Mann's anti-Nazi broadcasts that is worth repeating now that we have a racist ideologue as senior counselor in the White House. Mann is talking about anti-Semitism but all you need to do is replace anti-Semitism for Bannon's ranting about Muslims or Trump's about immigrants and it holds just as true.

The anti-semitism of today, the efficient though artificial anti-Semitism of our technical age, is no object in itself. It is nothing but a wrench to unscrew, bit by bit, the whole machinery of our civilization. Or, to use an up-to-date simile, Anti-Semitism is like a hand grenade tossed over the wall to work havoc and confusion in the camp of democracy. That is its real and main purpose.

Well, it looks like Bannon and Trump are lobbing just such a hand-grenade into the American body politic right now. Matt Taibbi seems one of the few people today capable of either pissing on the fuse - if you can do that with a hand-grenade - or picking it up and lobbing it right back at them. I will certainly be looking out for more of his writing, at least until the crackdown on the 'lying press' really gets going and Rolling Stone magazine is no more.

Jack Wolfe says

One of the very worst things about Trump being president (and there are like a trillion awful things about Trump being president) is that fighting against him means looking at him and listening to him and taking him seriously as a human being, all tasks which are extremely difficult to do if you're a semi-normal, semi-decent person.

So one of the best things about "Insane Clown President" is that-- despite the fantastic title-- Matt Taibbi thinks Donald Trump himself is probably the least interesting part of the Trump story. Naturally, he spends a bit of time taking potshots at the Donald-- how could any self-respecting journalist resist, with such a ridiculous target?-- but the majority of "ICP" concerns the political and social conditions that would allow an idiot candidate like Trump to first exist, then thrive, and then become the most powerful human being in the world.

If you've got a subscription to Rolling Stone, you've probably read the whole book already-- its chapters are just articles written as a kind of "campaign diary" for the sordid saga of 2015/2016. But even if you were so lucky to receive Taibbi's wisdom in the moment, it might be worthwhile to read his essays again in the aggregate. There is a coherent narrative here. Taibbi's sensed Trump's power very early in the game, and it's only for a brief moment toward the end of the cycle (right after "Grab her by the pussy," when EVERYONE thought Trump was done) that he ever relents in his conviction that yes, this maniac can win this thing. To Taibbi, American elections are a sham. From the get go, he describes a two-party system that is completely out of touch with the interests of the public abetted by a corporate media structure that sucks up to said system and, hey whaddya know, loses touch with the public. According to Taibbi, it's this incestuous union of absent-minded political power and a brown-nosing media that people hate... Trump's people in particular. All it took to win in 2016 was a guy willing to stoke and use that hatred.

The first half of the book, showing Trump steamrolling his weak-ass establishment Republican foes, was immensely entertaining for this liberal bubbler. The second half of the book, in which Trump takes on Hillary Clinton, appears to have a rocky time, but finally comes out on top, was... err... less fun. Difficult, too, because Taibbi is a prickly guy, and he's got nearly as much venom for the Democrats as he does for the Republicans. For every excuse cooked up by Hillary Clinton and her supporters as to why she lost ("the media spent too much time on... her e-mails!"), Taibbi has a bitter rejoinder (maybe the problem here, he suggests, is that the liberal expectation that the mainstream media will "take down" a threat like Trump is both unrealistic and kinda undemocratic... an expectation borne out of that incestuous union that so many Trump people despise).

He's got some nice words for Obama, at the end. (They come in a chapter where he lays out dozens of problems with that administration, of course.) But the tone of the book is mostly one of disgust. For the whole shitshow. For Trump, obviously... But for everyone else involved, too (excepting perhaps Bernie). And why the fuck not? Our country is going to hell. The story of our descent might as well be told by writers as smart and funny and passionate and, yes, principled, as Taibbi.

Sam Quixote says

The wonderfully titled Insane Clown President reprints Matt Taibbi's Rolling Stone articles from this past election, starting in August 2015 to the aftermath of that apocalyptic Election Night. The book has its moments but Taibbi isn't the most original of commentators, more often than not going with the overall media narrative, so, if you followed the election closely like me, this reads more like a summary of the whole thing than a unique insight from the campaign trail.

Annoyingly, it takes a while to get going. His intro and reprinted intro from his 2008 book The Great Derangement(!), basically say the same thing: America's getting dumber and shallower and that doesn't bode well for the future. He's essentially taking credit for predicting Trump which, no, sorry, and besides it's a weak, repetitive beginning. To be fair though, later on in an early 2016 piece he writes a fair assessment of Trump, highlighting his good and bad points, and is savvy enough then to predict a Trump presidency.

Then (12% in! I read this on Kindle) we're into the book proper with the 17 Republican candidates (labelled the "clown car") blathering it out among themselves for the nomination. Taibbi laughs off Trump as unserious, how his very presence there shows the end of the Republican Party, and that he'll never be the nominee, let alone win against Hillary. There was also a lot of talk about Republicans needing to completely revamp their party in a 21st century style to appeal to minorities and that Trump seemingly losing the Latino vote with his offensive comments would cost him the election. I'll admit to thinking these same things, as many people did, and how wrong we all were!

It was funny to be reminded of the bizarre mudslinging that went on during the nominations, particularly what went Ted Cruz's way. Cruz was literally accused of being the Zodiac Killer whose dad was in league with Lee Harvey Oswald in the JFK assassination, and a neurologist actually wrote an article on why his face is so punchable. I laughed so much at those insane accusations - it couldn't have happened to a more deserving candidate! The drinking game articles on the Republican Nominee debates though were lame, as was the one on casting the movie of the election.

Taibbi reviews the culture that allowed Trump to rise to the top and finds its roots in Dubya. Almost as a reaction to having an intellectual like Obama as a two-term President, a trend of anti-intellectualism was on the rise which Trump was able to exploit. But of course there's more to it than that. Trump and Bernie Sanders were the two candidates people were most pumped about as Trump made it a point that he was funding his own campaign while Bernie wouldn't take corporate money. The message was clear: neither would be beholden to corporations in office unlike Hillary who couldn't stop taking their "donations". It shows the mood of the country, that people in general are sick of insider corruption and feel betrayed by their politicians hence why a significant number of voters respond to candidates who appear to be separate from it.

He also takes a look at the left, criticising the Democratic National Committee who didn't learn from Bernie's popularity and just how close Hillary came to losing the nomination, as well as noting the startlingly crazy stuff that emerged from Trump's victory with some commentators – sadly one of my favourite political writers, Andrew Sullivan, was among them – talking about changing the system to stop dumb people from voting!

The post-election article where he's trying to make sense of what's happened was definitely my favourite. To his credit Taibbi is aware of the media's shortcomings in this election cycle – including his own – in overestimating their influence (earlier in the book he talks almost proudly of the media's ability to destroy candidates like Howard Dean after a gaffe – but somehow they couldn't bring down Trump, signalling their decline in power) and talking too much amongst themselves instead of listening to what ordinary voters were saying.

More importantly he highlights the shocking failings of the Clinton campaign and why Hillary lost. Bill and Hillary were once optimistic and idealistic, pursuing policies to benefit the American people but, after decades of being ground down in the realities of politics, they've become cynical and made a conscious decision, shortly after Bill's presidency, to pursue money instead, becoming multi-millionaires in the process.

Obama indirectly criticised Hillary by noting in a post-election speech that when he ran for President he campaigned tirelessly in the smallest communities, even the ones where he was told he didn't stand a chance, meeting as many people as possible – a tactic that Trump also used in this election. Hillary meanwhile did far less grassroots campaigning, allegedly doing over 400 corporate fundraisers instead and relied on public opinion from a computer program called Ada!

Hillary was an unlikeable, unappealing candidate who ran a garbage campaign, blocking out dissent and living in an echo chamber, so divorced from reality that there was a story that in her campaign headquarters her staffers were popping champagne on the morning of the election! As weird and important as Trump's ascension was, it feels like there's a more fascinating book to be written on Hillary's enormously corrupt campaign.

If you followed the election closely, there's not going to be a whole lot new to you here, though if you didn't, Taibbi is an informative, sometimes witty, and largely non-partisan writer who does a decent job of summarising the madness, particularly as the pieces were written as the events were happening, reflecting the perceptions of the time. That's also its flaw as Taibbi tends to often defer to the mainstream political narrative than question it and try to be more objective. That said, it was such a strange and eventful election

that reliving parts of it remain entertaining and he is occasionally insightful on certain aspects to make reading it worth my while. It's not the definitive book on the 2016 Election but it's not a bad one on the subject.

Ray says

I am so glad this book exists. After the insanity of 2016, and reading current events as they were happening, I was anxiously awaiting an actual book to read which could put the whole mess into a proper historical frameworks.

Insane Clown President is mostly made up of the brilliant Matt Taibbi's Rolling Stone articles at the time (of course, the comparison to Hunter S. Thompson can't be avoided), but the introduction and epilogue alone make this book worth it.

Taibbi definitely has a very important perspective in analyzing what was happening. And it's not just about how bad Trump is, even though he really is that bad. It's about the failure of the Democrats to learn any functional lesson. It's about how the Clintons went from (somewhat) revolutionary to status quo globalism. It's about Bernie Sanders. Obama of course. Even Bush. And at last the alt-right's uniquely American racism. But yes, it's mostly about the horror of the Republican party's clown car primaries which led to the present disaster we are in.

The media analysis in particular is crucial. He knows all the games from the so-called liberal media, and criticizes the establishment with all the zeal they deserve. It's amazing how he took Trump seriously early on, and how obvious in retrospect the political media's playbook is and why it was so easy for Trump to destroy the entire apparatus.

Some things Taibbi did get wrong, which he admits and reflects on. I too thought that 2016 was supposed to be a story about the destruction of the Republican Party, rather than of the whole country. But even when wrong, it's fascinating to see just why the predictions didn't turn out that way.

This book is indispensable for anyone who is still trying to wrap their heads around the whole thing. Written with trademark wit and plenty of thoughtfulness, I hope it will somehow help in the healing process. And I hope someone out there in power is going to read it and try to understand better just what the hell is going on, and then one day use that knowledge to somehow at least get started on the fix.
