



Mad Skills

Walter Greatshell

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Unconscious for fourteen months after a debilitating accident, Maddy Grant awakens at the Braintree Institute, where scientists have successfully implanted her with a radical technology designed to correct her brain injury. But Maddy is more than cured. Her intellect has been enhanced to process information faster than a computer—an ability that's sending her emotions into overdrive.

To monitor her condition, the institute sends Maddy to the nearby village of Harmony, where she will be free to interact with the community. But Braintree's scientists are not only monitoring her behavior, they're modifying it, reprogramming her personality to become someone else.

A killer.

Mad Skills Details

Date : Published December 28th 2010 by Ace

ISBN : 9780441020126

Author : Walter Greatshell

Format : Paperback 320 pages

Genre : Science Fiction, Fiction, Young Adult, Thriller

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From Reader Review Mad Skills for online ebook

Michael Hirsch says

I think this was intended for the YA market--it wasn't interesting enough for me. It started off with this girl in an amazing predicament and how she managed to rescue herself using her incredible thinking skills, then goes back to tell the story of how she got those skills. But the story never connects back to the first chapter or goes beyond it. So is there supposed to be a sequel, or is the book editor an idiot. You make the call.

Jessica Strider says

Pros: clever plotting, thought provoking story, interesting characters, hard SF

Cons: occasionally the protagonist would learn important things offstage that would have been better learned within scenes of the book, climax felt like a rushed information dump, Maddy is surprisingly unconcerned about the consequences of her actions with regards to others

Maddy Grant and her potential step-brother are in an accident at a fair. Ben dies, but Maddy is left severely brain damaged. Luckily for her, her parents contact the Braintree institute, which is experimenting with the use of computer implants.

With the implant, Maddy's as good as new. Better even. She knows things - things she didn't know before, things she doesn't want to know now. Like how to make a rocket out of convenience store items. Like how to kill a man.

Her heightened intelligence causes Maddy to question things that most people ignore, don't question or take for granted. Where does fast food come from? Why do people live in suburbs and commute to cities to work when it takes so much time to get back and forth? Why do we adhere to gender mores that demean and cripple (dieting, high heeled shoes, genital mutilation)? Mr. Greatshell avoids too much social commentary by mentioning these points for discussion from readers but not dwelling on them in the book.

I don't know how accurate the scientific technobabble was, but it sounded convincing and wasn't overwhelming in quantity or detail.

And when Maddy starts to learn what's really been done to her... Well, it's a fascinating story. It's also a surprisingly quick read for all the thought provoking points and scientific experimentation.

At least once in the novel, she learns something off page that confused me when it was mentioned, as there was no hint of it elsewhere in the story. And the 'reveal' finale was quite an info dump, requiring a few chapters to explain. I'd have liked a slower climax to match the pacing of the rest of the novel. I liked the nod to the Firemen of Fahrenheit 451 and the (perhaps unintentional) one of indentured slavery a la Parable of the Sower.

If you like hard SF set in the modern day, I highly recommend this.

Audiaa says

I really liked the beginning of this book and thought that it might make a nice scifi movie. Maddy, the main character, is a bit like MacGyver - she can make any kind of technology out of rubber bands and peanuts - and not in a believable way. Towards the middle of the book, too much stuff started happening that wasn't real. I started having a hard time determining what was real and what wasn't (probably the point), but it got to the point that I started thinking that nothing that happened was real when some of it was supposed to be real. Finally, near the end, everything had to be explained to the reader outright and the ending was not conclusive and didn't seem right.

Montzalee Wittmann says

Mad Skills by Walter Greatshell reminded me a bit of Flowers for Algernon in the beginning, lots of differences but the overall science of it was similar. But ending was totally different and I was so glad! It didn't get you emotionally wrapped up in the character like Flowers did, or at least to me but enough I still felt for the girl. I don't think I would want to cry like I did in Flowers! This book had good interaction and showed how she was becoming more and more. Pretty good.

Julia says

This book reminded me a lot of The Giver by Lois Lowry in a sense that society is trying to create a perfect world but really ends up being a dystopia. The Braintree institute is the business of creating robot like people whom they can make do whatever they want but it's a typical scenario when one of their creations is made to be too smart and start questioning the creator. Maddy Grant is constantly causing trouble, really through out the whole book she is either in trouble or getting out of it. It was like Greatshell was so focus on making this book such an action packed, sci-fi thriller that he forgot to develop the characters and the story more, although he created many twist in the story that kept me guessing who was who and what was really happening. The science in the story was a bit over my head that I feel like I still am not sure what really happened.

The ending was a bit of cliff hanger leaving it open for a sequel or even a series but I think that I am done with this particular story.

Benjamin says

I almost gave this a 3 but decided to go with a 2 - because it really was just "okay" to me. It started out fast paced but there were times after the 66% finished mark where I found myself starting to get a tiny bit bored and then (as others have commented) I felt the ending was a bit too rushed and a little "crazy".

That said, overall, I did enjoy the read and it did seem like a quick read. The story reminded me a tiny bit of

the movie The Matrix from time to time as I read it. I did enjoy the thought provoking, conspiracy theory, government sponsored research, techno-thrilling parts of the novel and felt like much of the technological specifics weren't TOO far out there. Though, the MacGyver like capabilities and skills that Maddy showed early in the novel and then again in other scenes while in the Pleasantville-esque town of Harmony were a bit hard for me to swallow. They were simply too convenient and far fetched (even for a super genius), despite being fun to read.

Would I recommend it as a read - definitely, it's a good quick paced, entertaining, SciFi journey through some interesting and thought provoking ideas of what is and isn't reality. I definitely enjoyed that aspect of this book but for me personally, it was 2.5 out of 5 stars overall.

Jason Pettus says

(Reprinted from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com]. I am the original author of this essay, as well as the owner of CCLaP; it is not being reprinted illegally.)

While this is far from a badly written book, I think that maybe Walter Greatshell's *Mad Skills* is perhaps a victim of mistaken categorization; because now that I've finished it, I find it hard to describe in any other way than as a Young Adult action-adventure version of Daniel Keyes' classic *Flowers for Algernon*, although it was promoted to me by the publishing company as a grown-up book for grown-up audiences. And so as an adult book, this simplistic novel leaves a lot to be desired, a sort of clunky tale of a brain-damaged girl turned into a supergenius through an experimental procedure after a bad accident, who comes to realize that it is merely a byproduct of a secret governmental/corporate plan to mentally control a docile population through innovative brain implants, with both a plotline and dialogue that feel much more often like they're plodding along instead of sailing or soaring; but if you instead assume that this was meant for teenage readers, nearly all of these things can be excused, with the manuscript suddenly much more on par with something like Scott Westerfield's hugely admired "Uglies" series. I've got another title from Greatshell in the pipe as we speak, ready to be reviewed here later this year, and I'll be interested in seeing whether that one appeals more to adult readers, or whether Greatshell simply writes in a style more appropriate for a teen audience.

Out of 10: **7.2**, or **8.2** for Young Adult fans

Neema says

Pretty fascinating story, got a little bored after getting 3/4 way through. Ending was little weird and seemed rushed. Overall, decent read.

Sheree Kenner says

Good action, fast paced. Science concepts were original, but not hard to follow. Characters were compelling and I hope Walter writes a sequel. Would definitely recommend to someone that likes intelligent action scifi.

Ann Wilkes says

What a ride! You SOOOOO have to read this book! Read my review and interview with the author on Science Fiction and Other ODDyseys <http://sciencefictionmusings.blogspot....>

Crazy for Books (Stephanie) says

Started out interesting and reminded me a bit of the film that will be coming out called HANNAH. But became a bit slow and dragging in the middle. I found myself skipping whole paragraphs in the effort to move the story forward quicker.

Then the story got very convoluted by the end. I kind of got what the author was trying to do, but it was poorly executed a bit crazy in its ultimate outcome.

Could have been good, but fell short.

zxvasdf says

I don't know how long it's been since I've read a thriller, but this was a great choice to jump back into the genre. The plot summary on the back of the book, despite being adequate enough to hook the potential reader's interest, doesn't do the book justice.

Mad Skills is actually a philosophical treatise of Man's nature in a rapidly technologizing world, and throws in as an appetizer an interesting essay on alienation and displacement of identity. It is a faint echo of novels like Speed of Dark and Flowers for Algernon. Maddy has to come to terms with her role in the natural order of things in a suburban life. She has gone from a normal all American teen to a paraplegic to a supergenius. How does she fit into an identity whose pleasures and conceits have become trivial in her transformed outlook of the world? And what does she do when she finds out the Man doesn't have the people in its best interests?

In a nutshell, I think the times calls for someone like Maddy to transform the world. With her mad skillz she could easily gain funding and begin to mass produce much of the technology that may let people live easily and cheaply, and most importantly, more free. The lust for money is an obstacle in the progress of mankind, and despite appearances, hobbles a brighter future.

Greatshell's talent comes with leading the reader through a sequence in which our natural assumptions are in play, then throws in a small amount of information that changes our perception of the passage. He also does a wonderful job of extrapolating future technology in a way that is absorbing yet not *too technical*. *I loved how he wrote the scenes in which Maddy needed to pull a MacGyver, creatively using common household items to build a means of escape.*

Thanks, Mr Greatshell, for giving us a great read! I'm a fan now, and am glad that your body of work is not

large (yet) so I can easily play catch up.

I received the book for free through Goodreads First Reads

LadyTechie says

I really am not just an easy grader. I tend to pass over books that I know or think I will not like. The ones that get 3's or less are the ones that surprised me somewhere after I started them. Honestly, I thought this one did that. I stopped reading it 1/3 of the way through it. I read the one review on Goodreads earlier today to see if I was just not giving it a fair shake. I saw two other numerical reviews without any data to advise why they gave it a 5. I was going to start another book after my raid on the bookstore earlier today. I also have another book going on Kindle right now. But, I gave it another try this evening just to be sure and continued where I left off and was floored. The action was there. The surprise was there and my beloved technology was in there. Great book!

Benjamin Newland says

Dear Kenny,

Glad you liked Unwind. Yes, I agree, it's pretty %@*\$ed up.

Here's another one. I mean, what's the deal with all these people practicing mad science on teenagers? We've all been tempted, sure, but yikes.

Mad Skills is, you guessed it, another near-future dystopian. I really like these—hope to write one myself, hence all the research—and Greatshell doesn't disappoint.

I mentioned in my last letter, fairly off-handedly, that all YA novels are coming of age stories at heart. I'm not sure I want to defend that premise against all comers, so maybe I should temper "all" to "most". This one is, for sure. In this case Maddy, our protagonist, isn't struggling to become a new person, she's struggling to come to terms with the new person she's been made into by accident and experimental surgery. There are some definite perks to her new skills, mad as they really are, but that doesn't save her from having to deal with the same issues all teens do: the authority of adults, self-governance and self-reliance, boys, secret cabals attempting to remake the world. OK, maybe most teens don't have to deal with that last one. Most.

Melia will love it, Tasha I don't know. I think she'd like it, and it's really pretty clean (which in typical American terms means there's little sexuality but lots of violence), but there's an element of nihilism and self-destruction parents will want to experience themselves before letting this novel loose on their kids. I'm guessing you'll be fine with it; it might even make for a good father/daughter conversation afterwards.

The stack of library books on my desk is finally diminishing to reasonable heights. Let me get through a couple more and we can talk recommendations for each other again.

Peace(out),

Ben.

Bob Fingerman says

Walter Greatshell is a writer with whom fans of smart, propulsive, genre fiction need to become well acquainted. His first book, *Xombies* (now *Xombies: Apocalypse Blues*) is essential reading, as is its first sequel, *Xombies: Apocalypthon*. Now, with his third novel, Greatshell introduces a completely new scenario (remapping the human mind) and compelling new female lead character (Maddy Grant). I won't synopsize the plot here, because I enjoyed going in blind and discovering what was there without prior knowledge (no spoilers!). What I will say is that Greatshell turns out beautifully crafted sci-fi stories with richly developed characters. If *Flowers for Algernon*, *Die Hard* and *MacGyver* had a baby it might be named *Mad Skills*. I sincerely hope this book is just the first of many to chronicle the ongoing adventures of Maddy Grant.
