



## If Then

*Matthew De Abaitua*

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In the near future, after the collapse of society as we know it, one English town survives under the protection of the computer algorithms of the Process, which governs every aspect of their lives. The Process gives and it takes. It allocates jobs and resources, giving each person exactly what it has calculated they will need. But it also decides who stays under its protection, and who must be banished to the wilderness beyond. Human life has become totally algorithm-driven, and James, the town bailiff, is charged with making sure the Process's suggestions are implemented.

But now the Process is making soldiers. It is readying for war — the First World War. Mysteriously, the Process is slowly recreating events that took place over a hundred years ago, and is recruiting the town's men to fight in an artificial reconstruction of the Dardanelles campaign. James, too, must go fight. And he will discover that the Process has become vastly more sophisticated and terrifying than anyone had believed possible.

## If Then Details

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Author : Matthew De Abaitua

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## From Reader Review If Then for online ebook

### **fromcouchtymoon says**

With a first act that feels like a critique of the idea of fully automated luxury communism, and with the following segments delving into WWI imagery and a full-frontal assault on the war machine, while one of its most consistent themes is the depiction of love, marriage, and possibly mid-life crisis in an alienating political system. One of the most complex and most scifi books I've read all year. Worth the read.

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### **Yzabel Ginsberg says**

*[I received a copy of this book from NetGalley, in exchange for an honest review.]*

Very difficult to rate: interesting ideas and mind-challenging themes (the horrors of war, a dystopian United Kingdom after a huge financial and societal collapse, one man's vision to stop the war once and for all...), but quite a few chapters seemed to be meandering rather than carrying their purpose, and it made some parts somewhat dull to read.

The beginning introduces us to "If", a current-era dystopian world where markets collapsed, people lost their jobs in droves, and where the mysterious "Process" (a computer? A mere clump of algorithms? Actual people behind it?) relocated some people into an apparent dream-slash-experimental community, making them coming back to simpler ways of life and set places in society in exchange for happiness. In this community, James, the bailiff, regularly dons his huge armor to evict those judged unworthy by the Process, blissfully unaware of what he actually does to them thanks to the implant in his brain controlling his actions. Where do the evictaed go? Not his problem.

Or is it?

As James starts to question his place in this new world, and his wife Ruth struggles with determining whether what her husband (and the Process) do is good or evil, made-up soldiers appear near the community: mindless, half-formed creatures given shape by the Process, to serve a goal nobody understands. Except for one, Hector, who seems to be more "advanced" than the others. The Institut, under the care of Alex Drown and Omega John, wants to study him, and task James with observing him. And so James is dragged little by little into the first World War, through the mystery behind Hector's existence. Meantime, in Suvla Bay during the Great War, a group of stretcher-bearers also try to make sense of their surroundings, of their role, and of a strange sniper always following and targetting them...

A lot of elements intertwine and mingle in this narrative. What is real and what is dream/illusion only isn't so clearly defined. Is War-James and Bailiff-James the same person, or not? Jumped back in time, or not? Is he forced to relive events of the past as an observer accidentally thrown in their middle, or does he stand a chance of actually making a difference? The story explores such themes, and more, through James and his fellow stretch-bearers, as well as through Ruth's parallel narrative. Reality and illusion are difficult to tell from each other, not before the last third of the book, and this strengthens the feelings of ubiquity and confusion the characters are going through. The futility of one's life in the trenches, fighting faceless enemies again and again, being wounded and dying for what appears to them as "nothing" – because they just cannot make sense out of that war anymore – hits right home when it comes to the Great War and to what it must

have represented to people who lived it: the first such conflict the world saw, where the older ways of war were turned upside down and new, even more terrible ways of battling were born. (At least, that's always how I've felt regarding this particular set of events in history.)

The writing itself flows nicely, carrying well both the horrors of the illusion-or-not-illusion war and of the modern world, the feeling of betrayal Ruth and James have to contend with when it comes to the Process starting to behave erratically, and the betrayal experienced by the soldiers as their leaders remain so remote. “Abandoned by their leaders” is what may sum this up the best.

And yet I struggled through a good half of the book, very likely because the Great War part seemed to meander and loop on itself: good to enforce what the characters had to make sense of, but not so good for a reader trying to keep tabs on what was happening and find out what the true goal of the novel was. As for that, I'm not exactly quite sure, though I cannot help but think that, as misguided as the means may have been, the reasons of the “brain” behind it all made sense. A horrible sense, granted, but sense all the same.

It's hard to tell whether I liked this book or not. I'd probably give it 4 stars if the second third wasn't so confusing (in that it seemed to chase its own tail more than playing with my nerves). It was interesting, at any rate, and intriguing.

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### **Jerry Rocha says**

Great characters who have no idea they're maybe being forced to repeat the same WWI battle over and over in this fucked up maybe Matrix thingy. I say maybe because De Abaitua does a fantastic job throwing his characters and readers curveballs. It doesn't get annoying though. A great tale of war, actions, consequences and wondering just what the fuck is real. Even when it gets trippy, it's never not beautifully written.

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### **Peggy N says**

IF THEN succeeds brilliantly in what might seem a near-impossible task: it is a novel of ideas, wrapped in an action film, inside a science fictional alt-reality; an adrenaline-pumping adventure that also forces you to stop and think.

IF starts nearby (conceptually) with algorithms running smart towns, AI running factories staffed with robots, and hapless citizens attempting to keep calm and carry on while the gods of quantification take over their working lives, relationships and even identities—it's the marketing paradise dreamed of by Google, Facebook, and digital evangelists everywhere. Except that, curiously, it isn't. A marketing paradise, that is. The multi-tentacled forces of marketing, so prominent in de Abaitua's The Red Men, have here been subsumed into something more uncanny.

But if the AI isn't after heightened brand awareness, if productivity is not in service to consumerism and growth, then what is it after? What are the algorithms for? And why have the factories started producing robot soldiers?

Sure enough, a robot soldier escapes and starts wandering the edges of the smart town, where his presence upsets the algorithm. In attempting to remedy the breach, James, the town's bailiff, coaxes the robot to a

place known only as The Institute, which is nominally in charge of developing and improving the algorithm, but is actually in kind of a mess. Part-robots and wetware psych experiments lurch around like inmates in a pre-Prozac insane asylum, bodily fluids and half-eaten lunches rot in corners, and the doctors aren't doing so well either. Instead of depositing his charge into custody and smoothing over the discrepancies in the everyday flow, the bailiff is instructed to take the robot back with him—whereupon the seams of the smart town, already straining, burst apart.

The problem is that the seams are not just issues in urban planning. Like the Panopticon, the power structure of the town is internalized by its occupants, with all the features and limitations that may entail. People behave in alternately autistic and violent ways to each other (all sanctioned by the algorithm), and are haunted by the memory that their near-past (our present) of hypercapitalism hadn't exactly brought out the best in anyone either. In an inverted relationship to history and landscape, archaic rituals are revived and technologized, while people have dispensed with Big Brother because they tell themselves what to think and feel all the time. As unsettling and believable as any Gibson-esque or Ballardian cyber-dystopia, *IF* creeps under the skin of the present day, questioning the nice ordinary things we'd like to not worry about, smartphones, Starbucks, the craft economy, the internet...

Meanwhile, the robot is growing more human. He doesn't talk much, he doesn't really interact, but the town senses him morphing into something perhaps more organic than they are, they who are nominally, "actually" alive. At least, that is, until the sounds of artillery and warfare waft in on the breeze, as new trenches are dug, and the war inches closer.

What war? World War I of course. With robot reenactors. Leading them, and us, unavoidably, into *THEN*.

Drafted into the ranks, along with the robot, who now has a name, James and Hector join an ambulance brigade, fulfilling Hector's oft-repeated Quaker vow to serve but not fight. The part of the war they are reenacting is Gallipoli, part of Churchill's disastrous Dardanelles campaign, that well-documented algorithm of futility. James and Hector are dropped into the scene with all the abruptness of the new recruit: under fire, in confusion and noise, and woefully underprepared for anything they encounter. Bit by bit, they adapt, rescue some people, immerse. And as they do, the focus of *THEN* shifts more and more to Hector. Here de Abaitua pulls off another master-stroke: the character who was the least sympathetic, literally the least human, in *IF*, becomes the object of our passionate sympathy by the middle of *THEN*. With James, ok—we've been invested in him as the protagonist, but he's done some reprehensible things, and is a more or less unreliable narrator—if a shell landed on him, it wouldn't be the end of the book. But Hector! Hector has become indispensable. You realize this suddenly, in the middle of the combat-fueled rush that powers the second half of the book. Without losing track of the ideas raised in *IF*, *THEN* becomes a war thriller, impossible to put down until you've seen just how this one thing works out, then the next thing, and the next...with a start you realize you've been holding your breath.

And *THEN* things get weird. With a series of deft Escher-esque twists, de Abaitua brings the two halves together, into an open weave of history, dread, imagination, and "what-IFs".

Does the battle get resolved? Does the town survive? What happens to Hector, and to James? Was the algorithm right? What does it all mean, for them, and for us? In researching the book, de Abaitua has delved deep into some lesser-known history, events and people that would not seem out of place in an alt-reality thriller, as here, but whose activities may especially resonate for us now. A possible key to the enigma glints into view, appropriately enough, right at the very end; in fact after the end, in the Author's Note (which is really the final chapter), when de Abaitua reports an alt-reality imagined by one of the original architects of the War: a regret and a hope wrapped in an afterthought, inside a room from which that future never

emerged.

IF it is not too late, THEN we might consider whether it could.

Finally, although IF THEN is the second of a trilogy of works by de Abaitua that began with The Red Men and ends with the forthcoming The Destructives, it can be read independently. The Red Men is brilliant: funny and fascinating, and I highly recommend reading that too; when The Destructives comes out I'm going to re-read the entire trilogy. But IF THEN is strong enough to stand alone.

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## **Daniel says**

This review originally published in Looking For a Good Book. Rated 4.25 of 5

In the near future, in a post-apocalyptic town, a small community is controlled by a computer which calculates all the algorithms to determine precisely what each person needs and can provide for the community, and also determines who stays and who is no longer necessary and must be expelled from the community. This is called The Process, and each member of the community must abide by it. James, the town bailiff, is the human responsible for seeing to that The Process's requirements are fulfilled, including the removal of residents to the outside.

When the computer begins to make robot soldiers in preparation for a war (the recreation of a battle from World War I, to be more precise), a fight in which James must also be a combatant, James struggles to understand how something he has believed in and served faithfully can be not just predictive, but proactive and planning as well.

How does a faithful follower of The Process deny everything he has believed in, even when he recognizes that The Process has evolved to something he might not agree with?

This is a really tremendous speculative fiction book that examines humanity and society. Making people relive a war, wasting human life for no apparent reason has us thinking back in history and wondering how it's different. And how is it different, to send the people to fight a war, than removing them from the safety and comfort of their homes simply because a computer says it should be so?

The tenor of this book reminds me of the speculative fiction writers I was reading back in the 1970's. Michael Bishop, Thomas Disch, Gene Wolf, Roger Zelazny. I consider some of their work to be thoughtful, introspective studies on humanity and self. And while it reminds me of these authors, this book strikes me as quite original.

I was hooked early on with author Matthew de Abaitua's descriptions of the people and the community. He created something very real and easy to believe in, and managed to let us know right away that we were outside our modern norm. And James' journey of discovery is our journey as well, even if we don't identify with him.

The book is intense and complex. It is not an easy read, and will demand that the reader pay attention. I will admit that in my first reading, I got lost for a bit in the middle section of the book, and had to go back and re-read portions of it to keep up. Part of this is on me for not keeping up. Part of this is on de Abaitua for not drawing me tight enough through the entire book.

I am impressed with science/speculative fiction is headed these days. If you want something more than just a space opera or fantasies with trolls and elves and lots of magic, there are strong works out there, such as this one.

I'd also like to comment on the publisher, Angry Robot. There was a time when I'd visit the bookstore and look for a book published by DAW and know that more than likely I'd get something worth reading that was powerful and imaginative. I discovered Michael Moorcock and John Brunner and Ron Goulart and many others through them. And while there are many VERY GOOD publishers of fantasy and science fiction out there, and some of the best books I've read have come from other publishers, Angry Robot is probably the most consistent. With few exceptions, I've been really captivated and impressed by books under their imprint. They are proving to be a company that you can recommend.

Looking for a good book? *If Then*, by Matthew de Abaitua is a powerful speculative fiction book exploring humanity and community and is a book fans of the genre will want to read.

I received a digital copy of this book from the publisher, through Netgalley, in exchange for an honest review.

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## Scott says

No doubt you've encountered numerous dystopias in your reading life: zombie hordes (*World War Z*), post-nuclear wastelands (*The Road*), Changing Climate (*The Drowned World*), population destroying plagues (*Earth Abides*, *The Stand*) religious zealotry (*The Handmaid's Tale*) and even a world turned on its side by gravity flipping 90 degrees (*On*).

I am, however pretty sure that you haven't encountered a scenario like the unique (and plausible) one that is the foundation of Matthew De Abaitua's *If Then*.

*If Then* is built around a dystopic future whose fascinating roots deserve a novel of their own. Human labor, under pressure from automation, AI and algorithm based investment, has become absolutely worthless. The great number of people in this future have no jobs and correspondingly no value whatsoever to the investors that desperate governments around the world have started selling land and assets to. Accordingly, the residents of these acquired areas are seen as nuisances, and are evicted by their new owners, made refugees in their own nation without even the value traditionally given to serfs or slaves.

The town of Lewes, has avoided this fate. Its inhabitants live an almost pre-industrial low-tech lifestyle, each performing an essential role in a stable and safe community. But this safety has come at a high price. Lewes, along with its surrounding area, has entered a Faustian pact that governs every aspect of their lives. They and the land surrounding their town have been sold and collectively integrated into an organic, algorithmic computer system known as 'The Process' that controls every aspect of their lives.

Every resident of the town has an implant, a 'stripe' that communicates with The Process, measuring their happiness, their fatigue, their skills, their energy needs and the level of disruption they create in the community. The Process responds to this stimulus, allocating food, roles in the community and the materials needed for each person's job. If a person is unhappy the process may shift things in their life to improve their demeanor. If a person negatively impacts the happiness of others, or is even predicted to do so in the future,

they can be banished from the community, cast into the desperation and poverty of life outside Lewes.

The strange impact of this on the villagers is well told, a mix of superstition and paranoia running riot in the minds of the people of Lewes. Residents coming to regard the process as an almost godlike presence that they must make offerings to, while others fear offending their neighbors lest their actions reduce the happiness quotient enough to have them cast into the wilderness.

The central character of De Abaitua's novel is James, The Bailiff - an agent of the process, tasked with carrying out the opaque system's regular evictions of townspeople. Via an implant James is completely taken over by the process during each eviction, becoming an extension of the system, and as such, individually blameless for the actions he is forced to take. In a monstrous set of robotic armor he forcibly removes evicted villagers, before returning to his regular life in the town, feared by his fellow citizens, no longer understood by his wife and struggling with the changes his implant and his role have wrought upon his personality.

James is patrolling the countryside near the town when he discovers an artificial World War One soldier, a perfect simulacrum of a man with little volition or self direction, struggling against a barbed wire fence. It soon becomes clear that this warrior was created by The Process, and that it has created many more historically accurate men like him. It appears that the system that rules everyone's lives is gearing for war and a very specific historical war at that.

I won't say anything further as the reason for The Process' creations is pretty cool, and the implications for Lewes and James are profound.

*If Then* is a damned entertaining read, set in an original and compelling dystopia the likes of which I haven't encountered before. De Abaitua is a capable writer and I found myself highlighting various passages to return to later, impressed by the lyricism of his prose and his insights.

I did occasionally wonder if this novel was an excuse for De Abaitua to write a World War One war story (A little like Adam Roberts' *Polystom* which ironically gets bogged down in the trenches) but *If Then* keeps things humming along and tells a story with real heart and some very interesting observations about life, love and what we will sacrifice for certainty and structure.

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### **Elaine Aldred says**

The citizens of Matthew de Abaitua's 'If Then' appear to live in a peaceful, pastoral community that bears all the hallmarks of a post-apocalyptic society. It seems to be surviving well. Everyone has a 'stripe' which feeds their neural impulses back to something called the Process. The Process, through its calculations, then adjusts supplies specifically allotted to each person to supposedly maintain them in a suitable state of satisfaction with their lives. But in this case the apocalypse has been due the collapse of a comfortable society driven by money and wealth. Now there is no let up on the surveillance in order to prevent the same thing happening again. Along with the 'stripe', animal drones also spy on the population to pick up any action or display of emotion that can be fed into the algorithm to maintain a citizen's meek acceptance of their lot and keep the community in a suitable equilibrium. This sometimes has to be achieved by the ruthless removal of citizens from communities. As the story unfolds, the town of Lewes and the Sussex Downs give way to something that will sweep James, the town bailiff, and his wife into a traumatic episode of First World War military history.

Right from the beginning of the novel when James finds the manufactured soldier, Hector, caught on barbed

wire on the edge of the Sussex Downs, you know some impending unpleasantness will shortly emerge amidst the bucolic landscape. Sure enough it does. The drip feed of information to give character background and description of the world of the Process really ratchets up the tension and then does not let go, causing 'If Then' to vibrate with the type of uneasiness Orwell elicited in '1984'. Only in this book the dictatorship and the effect on the people of the faceless computing algorithm feels far more sinister.

The plot is complex, but there is never any sense of the author losing control of it, and the way the story is written causes a sense of acceleration of the narrative the further into the book the reader gets. De Abaitua has managed to pack something with the feel of an epic into a modest 416 pages. When you finish you will feel wrung out. Always a sign of a great read.

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## **Daniel Etherington says**

I grew up reading end-of-society, dystopian, apocalyptic and PA fiction, from John Christopher, to John Wyndham, then to J.G. Ballard. It remains my favourite genre. I've read plenty such fictions set in London, but it's intriguing to have such a scenario played out in small-town England. The small town where I live to boot.

This is Lewes, in Sussex, south of London, near the coast. It's a small town, steeped in tradition, proud of its heritage, and not entirely welcoming of outsiders. It's the hub for the action of *If Then*, the second novel by Matthew De Abaitua, who was shortlisted for the Arthur C Clarke award for his first novel, 2009's *The Red Men*.

Like *The Red Men*, *If Then* concerns the place of technology in society, how we're abdicating more and more personal, community and national responsibility to technology - specifically networks and algorithms. Individuals become data sets, to be exploited by commercial organisations.

*The Red Men*'s technology was burgeoning AI, but was still digital. Here the technology has transitioned to an organic form, its origins becoming clear as the novel progresses. This organic technology is The Process; it's not specifically called AI, but instead a set of algorithms that manage Lewes and its residents. Roles are assigned, resources allocated, and evictions from the town decreed. During riotous rituals reminiscent of Lewes's famous Bonfire Night, the evictions are enforced by James, an outsider and now the town bailiff, sporting "the armour" - a formidable mecha outfit. The divergent experiences of James and his wife Ruth when engaging The Process are the book's heart.

Like *The Red Men*, this is very much a book packed with ideas and ruminations about the trajectory of modern society. As such it's serious fare. But de Abaitua isn't afraid to have fun - as exemplified by scenes involving the mecha; these play out in fan-boy territory, despite how grim they are, as houses are ripped open to find the residents whose time has come. Or it's sort-of fan boy territory. De Abaitua has a unique tone to his writing, and *If Then* is a unique take on social collapse and its aftermath. I've read a lot of the recent social collapse and apocalyptic novels\*, from various quarters of genre fiction, even several set in England, and this is the one that feels most pertinent. Even when it goes deep into First World War history.

The Process starts creating WWI soldiers, and recreating part of the Gallipoli campaign. This transition from post-collapse small town England to the trenches and horrors of the Dardanelles expects a certain amount of the reader's imagination, and it's persistently jarring. Indeed, my slight struggle with how the elements cohere is probably why I'm not going for the full five star review; let's call it a four and a half as these scenes are also intimate, evocative and gripping. As well as thought-provoking about the nature of warfare, the human

urge to fight and brutalise, and the point of warfare for the human psyche and civilisation. It's fascinating stuff.

If Then is loosely connected to The Red Men, and de Abaitua is working on a third novel, The Destructives, which will hopefully maintain the same quality and idiosyncrasy. I wish there were more books like this: genre-straddling, intelligent literary SF that is not just well-crafted but relevant.

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\* The Ship, The Chimes, Memory of Water, Intrusion, The Girl with all the Gifts, J, Station Eleven, New Model Army etc etc.

## **The Professor says**

"What had begun as a last resort had become an ongoing experiment in human potential." All Hail The Process! Digital age John Christopher with society plunged back pre-industrialisation, a nasty subcutaneous (Tripods-esque) augmentation and a mysterious "Process" passing the time xeroxing off soldiers and re-enacting World War 1 (a la Star Trek). These days modern "Day After Tomorrow" narratives like to reference what would happen to people sans connectivity; here folks are still reflexly reaching for their mobiles and mourning their virtual lives. Sounds like bliss, if you ask me, but "If Then" turns out to be a useful warning to those of us currently wishing a benevolent AI would come online already and assume management of human affairs. The setup reminded me a little of the dystopian episodes of Joss Whedon's "Dollhouse" and any number of "computer takes over" stories but the nice difference here is that "the Process" doesn't start off as a full blown AI but a series of "If...Then..." algorithms extrapolated from aggregated social media trends, behavioural data, medical records and the like. It's part of a modern trend of novels which take a pulp trope and drill into it with modern tools. Acolytes of the Process (which would almost certainly include a curious yours truly) have walled off Lewes for this experiment, got a bailiff in a mecha-suit to evict elements it deems disruptive (such as children) and leveraged nature itself to collect and archive its data. So the birds in the trees are literally spying on you and roots in the ground are network cables. This is all depicted within the first fifty pages with minimal levels of straight info-dump and I'm reading it, nodding my head, thinking "this is how it will happen, this is the road map." You could argue this is just a narrative spun off a "Wired" thought experiment, or a "New Scientist" feature (or one of 2000AD's "Future Shocks") and you read it kinda hoping for the usual narrative payoff of some grand finale confrontation, the machine burned down but everyone agreeing to build a better world than before. That's not quite what happens, that World War 1 element gets more important as events unfold. An unusual read distinguished by the obvious effort gone into rationalising the back story and its steer towards something other than the straight pulp thrills we know and love.

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## **Fence says**

<http://www.susanhateliterature.net/2...>

After the collapse, the Seizure, when the world went to hell, a small village in England was chosen to live under the Process. A whole community run by a computer program. It would decide what, and who, was necessary. And of course, who was unnecessary. The Process provides for those it calculates as needed, the others are evicted. James is the bailiff. He is the one who dons the armour and physically evicts members of

the community.

All who live under the Process have a connection to the Process, a stripe on their skulls where they received their implant. But James has a deeper connection. His implant is more connected, and when he got it they also removed something. He is the physical enforcer, but he does so under the influence of the Process and its calculations and algorithms. He does not choose to act, he must act.

Ruth loves her husband, but his becoming bailiff has changed him. Of course, the whole world has changed for her and for everyone she knows. She lost everything. And before the Process she learned what it was to be powerless, to be a small woman in a society ruled by “might makes right”. She believes in the Process, although she doesn’t always agree with it. The Process is the only way forward. Isn’t it?

I subscribe to Angry Robots mailing list, usually I just give it a quick skim for authors I already know, but the cover of *If Then* attracted my attention and the blurb on Net Galley about it sounded interesting

In the near future, after the collapse of society as we know it, one English town survives under the protection of the computer algorithms of the Process, which governs every aspect of their lives. The Process gives and takes; it allocates resources, giving each person exactly what it has calculated they will need. Human life has become totally algorithm-driven, and James, the town bailiff, is charged with making sure the Process’s suggestions are implemented.

But now the Process is making soldiers. It is readying for war — the First World War. Mysteriously, the Process is slowly recreating events that took place over a hundred years ago, and is recruiting the town’s men to fight in an artificial reconstruction of the Dardanelles campaign. James, too, must go fight. And he will discover that the Process has become vastly more sophisticated and terrifying than anyone had believed possible.

And it is a really interesting book. I don’t think it will be to everyone’s taste but if you like science fiction that asks questions about society and humanity and how people relate to one another then I would recommend you give this one a try. I’m not sure if I liked the characters, but after being through the collapse of society maybe we’d all turn a little selfish and pragmatic rather than idealistic.

The World War I aspects to the book are truly horrific, the utter waste of life and how it impacted on those that served as well as the wider society. But the way that efforts to stop war, in all its forms, end up creating even more pointless death and suffering is horrible to contemplate.

As I said, this isn’t a book that will be to everyone’s taste, it is personal and focused on small details, while at the same time addressing the big questions life what does it mean to be human. In a way it is an example of the personal made political, which is something that I really believe. Even if you think this isn’t a book for you, I’d urge you to take a chance on it, it really is a fascinating read.

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### **Karina says**

Yikes. So much great stuff going on concept-wise, and a very readable first third, but, uh, then it wasn’t. Rather than just saying "I was bored out of my skull", I'll say this: There's beautiful prose and grand ideas, but the execution of the vast middle third of the book appeared rambly and aimless. It was not a good match for me. (But I wonder if it would be more inherently interesting if I had previous knowledge of, or great interest in, the relevant first world war events? Maybe? Dunno.)

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## Matthew says

*In the near future, after the collapse of society as we know it, one English town survives under the protection of the computer algorithms of the Process, which governs every aspect of their lives. The Process gives and it takes. It allocates jobs and resources, giving each person exactly what it has calculated they will need. But it also decides who stays under its protection, and who must be banished to the wilderness beyond. Human life has become totally algorithm-driven, and James, the town bailiff, is charged with making sure the Process's suggestions are implemented.*

*But now the Process is making soldiers. It is readying for war — the First World War. Mysteriously, the Process is slowly recreating events that took place over a hundred years ago, and is recruiting the town's men to fight in an artificial reconstruction of the Dardanelles campaign. James, too, must go fight. And he will discover that the Process has become vastly more sophisticated and terrifying than anyone had believed possible.*

I stumbled upon If Then whilst browsing online one day. I can't recall the exact circumstances, but I remember thinking that it sounded cool and weird. So when I finally had the opportunity to read this story I expected a tale that would fascinate and throw me off balance at the same time. And boy, was I not disappointed!

If Then tells the tale of a post apocalyptic town that survives under the control and protection of computer algorithms called the Process. The Process runs everything, from food and job allocations right down to who stays in the town and who is banished. Sound weird? It is! Everything seems to be going swimmingly, until the Process starts making soldiers to fight in events that it is recreating from the past. When James, a citizen of the town, is forced to go and fight in an artificial reconstruction of the Dardanelles campaign from World War One, he discovers that the Process has evolved into something more terrifying and dangerous than anyone could imagine.

I loved so many things about this book, from its surreal and weird setting right through to its horrific action sequences and off balanced tone. De Abaitua does a superb job of drawing you into the world he has constructed in If Then. Lewes is a perfectly described rural community, and at first you are led to believe that it is just like any other pastoral society. That is until De Abaitua sprinkles his narrative with tidbits about neural impulses, drones, and computer algorithms. This environment of normality broken by reminders of its constructed nature constantly threw me off balance and kept me enthralled as the story progressed. The Process itself, and how it controls humanity, is also incredibly well described and creepy. I adored the dark and cold tones of its reign over humanity, and found its management of Lewes fascinating (albeit very cruel in a cold and rationalistic way).

I also adored the characters of James and Ruth, and how they both evolved as the mysteries of the Process and the town were revealed. Their discovery of a construct called Hector, right through to James serving as a stretcher bearer in an artificial Dardanelles campaign, is what drives If Then. Through their eyes De Abaitua takes us on a journey that not only explores the horrific nature and senselessness of war but also asks questions about the value we place on people beyond an economic sphere. Ruth in particular does this magnificently, when she questions the existence of the town and her husband's role in it (James is the town's bailiff). This philosophical and thoughtful tone worked brilliantly throughout the novel, especially when it was also incorporated alongside the horrors of trench warfare or a forced eviction from the town.

And the action sequences... holy hell... horrific... jarring... and utterly encapsulating the utter waste that occurred in World War One. As someone who has studied war (I have post graduate credentials in military history) I was stunned by the accuracy and sheer hopelessness that De Abaitua was able to capture in this story. The pace was also frenetic, just when I was feeling level and settled I was thrown off balance by a twist or insertion of weirdness that added yet another rich layer to an already complex tale. If Then is only 400 odd pages, but it feels like a much larger and deeper tale due to De Abaitua's skill at weaving an amazing story.

If Then is an incredibly enthralling and original tale that still has me thinking about it weeks after I read it. A brilliant entry onto the scene, If Then is a must read for anyone even remotely interested in speculative fiction.

4 out of 5 stars.

A review copy was provided.

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### **Karin says**

I received an advanced copy of If Then from the publisher in exchange for honest feedback.

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"Can I stop this?" he whispered.

'Your decisions are made six seconds before you are aware of them. What you think of as free will is post-rationalization. You live in the past, James.'

'No second thoughts?'

'Your decision has already been made. Don't waste my time with excuses.' -Location 1696

Here's the official blurb:

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In the near future, after the collapse of society as we know it, one English town survives under the protection of the computer algorithms of the Process, which governs every aspect of their lives. The Process gives and it takes. It allocates jobs and resources, giving each person exactly what it has calculated they will need. But it also decides who stays under its protection, and who must be banished to the wilderness beyond. Human life has become totally algorithm-driven, and James, the town bailiff, is charged with making sure the Process's suggestions are implemented. But now the Process is making soldiers. It is readying for war — the First World War. Mysteriously, the Process is slowly recreating events that took place over a hundred years ago, and is recruiting the town's men to fight in an artificial reconstruction of the Dardanelles campaign. James, too, must go fight. And he will discover that the Process has become vastly more sophisticated and terrifying than anyone had believed possible.

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I loved the characters of James and Ruth. They used to be average people, they had white collar jobs, got married, wanted to start a family, and felt helpless when their security disappeared. When a possible solution appeared they did what they thought was necessary to survive. They put themselves in the hands of The Process trusting that it would look after them. Their sense of betrayal when The Process started behaving incomprehensibly is an amplification of the kind of betrayal we all feel when our governments and politicians let us down.

I found myself fascinated by how the author used tense shifts to signal who is in control and to keep me off-balance. When the characters are in control of themselves narration is in past tense, when The Process is in control narration is in present tense, which makes sense because The Process is in an eternal "now", constantly manipulating the eponymous "then". If A happened, B is what The Process is doing. Over and over, blindingly fast, astronomical numbers of Ifs and even more Thens, until even the story must bend into the present tense to follow James under The Process's control.

The tense also keeps the book feeling surreal. The past tense is used when describing the characters' "present", which is also a regressive future to the reader. The present tense is used when describing the present-as-controlled-by-The-Process, which is a mimicry of events in our past.

"Since the procedure, his forgeries have taken a new quality. He forged an eggshell that when cracked releases albumen and yolk which react to hot oil to form a perfect round fried egg. It is only when you eat the egg that you realize it is made of paint." -location 2177

Besides a surreal atmosphere, there is some perfectly executed and beautifully described weirdness in If Then. Every once in a while, just when things are starting to feel, if not normal, consistent, De Abaitua drops in reminders that the people of Lewes live in a manufactured reality, carefully controlled by something that can quantify, but not understand, humanity. I was drawn into James' perceptions over and over just for us to be reminded that people and their actions were not genuine.

I can't recommend this book more highly. It's slipstream fiction for polymaths. If Then flips off expectations of genre and leaves me feeling like I'm riding its shockwave into the future of literature.

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### **Caroline Mersey says**

2015 marks the centenary of the Gallipoli campaign. Matthew de Abaitua uses it as the setting for parts of his new novel If Then (published by Angry Robot, who kindly gave me a review copy through NetGalley).

The story follows James and Ruth, two inhabitants of the town of Lewes. A catastrophic economic collapse has created an even wider gap between rich and poor. Increasing mechanisation has rendered most traditional jobs obsolete, leaving many people desperately poor. The residents of Lewes have chosen to sell their bio data in exchange for having their basic needs met by a complex algorithm known as the Process. It allocates tasks and roles to residents, providing worthwhile activity, shelter and food. The residents provide their bio data in exchange, which helps to refine the Process's algorithms.

James has a special role within the Process. He acts as the town's bailiff. Periodically, the Process identifies a list of Lewes residents to be evicted from the town because they are unproductive or are predicted to become troublemakers. As bailiff, James gives up his autonomy to become directly controlled by the Process in a night of ritualised violence that provides a valuable outlet for the town's feelings of disempowerment. While on patrol one day, James finds an injured WW1 stretcher bearer called Hector. Hector is an artificial construct, a product of the Process created for an unknown purpose. James takes him into his home in order to help unlock the mystery.

What follows is a meditation on violence and war. James finds himself working with Hector as a stretcher bearer in an artificial reconstruction of the Gallipoli campaign. Through James's eyes we see the brutality and senselessness of war. We are forced to reflect on the way modern society normalises war and conflict for

the many by concentrating the horror of it in a few. *If Then* asks us what value we place on people beyond their role as economic units, and whether we would rethink our actions if we were able to truly experience their consequences at first hand.

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## **Andrew Wallace says**

‘If Then’ is a deeply original, compelling and often disturbing piece of very English science fiction. The mysterious title suggests early code with the variables removed and the book’s structure hints at the binary; it’s divided in two with the first part titled ‘If’ (suggesting the future), the other titled ‘Then’, (suggesting the past). The title also seems to be an incomplete sentence eg ‘IF this happens THEN we can expect that’. In both possibilities, there is an absence; whether of logic, perspective or humanity.

However, anyone expecting a standard dystopia will be confounded, as the book explores the many levels of fear experienced by the inhabitants of Lewes once the requirement for human involvement in work passes and society has fallen apart. The townspeople have ceded all authority to the Process, which far from being the ‘Frankenstein algorithm’ in stories like Robert Harris’s ‘The Fear Index’ instead channels human needs and desires.

Of course, many of these impulses are subconscious and do not register sufficiently to be understood, so there is a constant feeling of unease no less troubling for being eerily familiar. Rather than the dreaded artificial intelligence bringing about an apocalyptic singularity, the power behind the Process appears to be all-too-human Jungian collectivism. In return, the Process creates, allocates and polices the scarce resources available to this island of alternative civilisation, seemingly lost on the South Downs as the rest of the county quietly implodes.

The world of the novel has a low-tech feel; the Process interface is not some cyberpunk plug-in but a scar-like ridge down the back of the head that smells yeasty. Order is kept by the Armour, a Wellesian piece of steampunk that blends with its operator in a symbiotic sub-system of the Process.

The novel examines the question of what it is people actually want, especially when the usual baubles have all been used up. The answer seems to be renewal, but how can rejuvenation be achieved in a society this exhausted?

Both the novel and the Process it describes take inspiration from trench mysticism, particularly the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift movement, formed by pacifists who worked as stretcher bearers in the Great War. If that conflict can be replicated, the theory goes, so too can the inspiration it engendered. Accordingly, automatons formed like Tommies begin to appear around the town.

The imagery is stark and disturbing: the protagonist cuts the arm of one of these motionless, doll-like men and his blood is found to be a set of red beads, not yet flowing. Gradually, though, they come to life and with them the wholesale re-enactment of the Dardanelles Campaign. Here, the novel splits into those experiencing the war and those left outside.

The tragic power of history means It’s always a risk using the Great War in fiction for anything other than describing the Great War. However, if you’re going to do include the conflict it pays to really go for it, which Matthew De Abaitua does with pummelling ferocity here. These sequences don’t so much derail the narrative as create a sense of dislocation that is pure science fiction.

Those left outside the mocked up Suvla Bay landing experience the fighting as if it’s taking place on a distant movie set. Every now and then, someone will come across the badly-made white plastic dummy of a horse, which will be moving spasmodically as if injured. Later, the ‘soldiers’ will discover the same animal and to them it will be completely real. This is brilliant stuff; the Process is using basic props because one of its drivers is to preserve scarce resources as it undertakes its mysterious grand plan. Instead of fabricating a real horse, it manipulates the minds of the participants to create a multiplying reality worthy of Philip K

Dick.

All the characters are desperate whether they are immersed in the Great War or not, so there is corresponding sense of desperation in the Process and its creations. It's a condition that has chilling contemporary political parallels, as the World Wars are endlessly invoked by our extremist press to distort reality for their own dismal ends. That James, the bailiff who has been augmented to operate the Armour, uses it for seemingly arbitrary evictions from Lewes is a further twist that has become even less comfortable since the novel was published in 2015.

Fortunately, the book is also a series of insightful character studies that engage humanity and identity to offset the strangeness. The novel ingeniously posits natural algorithms as a more efficient means of information management than the now redundant digital technology; a pattern that underlies the confusion felt by the stoical James and the frustration experienced by his compassionate, angry wife Ruth. On the science front there is the lovely Alex Drown, who still wears a business suit even though she cuts her own hair 'in a grimy mirror' and the giant, gaunt figure of enigmatic genius Omega John, who has a unique talent he intends to use in order to end war once and for all.

The prose has a wonderful lightness and simplicity at odds with its complex subject; at no point is the dense narrative difficult or obtuse. Visceral yet bracingly clever; haunting but more timely by the day, 'If Then' is one of the most insightful and relevant English science fiction novels of recent years.

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