



## Pretend I'm Dead

*Jen Beagin*

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**NAMED A BEST BOOK of the YEAR by *O, THE OPRAH MAGAZINE, REFINERY 29, and KIRKUS REVIEWS***

**SHORTLISTED FOR THE CENTER FOR FICTION FIRST NOVEL PRIZE**

Miranda July meets Mary Karr in this brilliant debut novel from Jen Beagin, Whiting Award winner and “one of the freshest voices I’ve read in years—funny, wise, whip-smart and compassionate” (Jami Attenberg, author of *The Middlesteins*), about a cleaning lady on a quest for self-acceptance after her relationship with a loveable junkie goes awry.

Jen Beagin’s quirky, moving, “frank and unflinching” (Josh Ferris) debut novel introduces an unforgettable character, Mona—almost twenty-four, emotionally adrift, and cleaning houses to get by. Handing out clean needles to drug addicts, she falls for a recipient she calls Mr. Disgusting, who proceeds to break her heart in unimaginable ways.

In search of healing, Mona decamps to Taos, New Mexico, for a fresh start, where she finds a community of seekers and cast-offs, all of whom have one or two things to teach her—the pajama-wearing, blissed-out New Agers, the slightly creepy client with peculiar tastes in controlled substances, the psychic who might really be psychic. But always lurking just beneath the surface are her memories of growing up in a chaotic, destructive family from which she’s trying to disentangle herself, and the larger legacy of the past she left behind.

The story of Mona’s journey to find her place in this working-class American world is at once hilarious and wonderfully strange, true to life and boldly human, and introduces a stunningly one-of-a-kind new voice in American fiction.

## Pretend I'm Dead Details

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Author : Jen Beagin

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## From Reader Review Pretend I'm Dead for online ebook

### 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.)

Any book that starts with a young volunteer at a needle exchange developing a crush on one of her junkie clients, deducing from his refusal of sterilizing equipment that he's not sharing his needles and is therefore single and eligible, is definitely a book for me; and that's merely page 1 of Jen Beagin's remarkably subversive *Pretend I'm Dead*, all the more astounding for coming out from the esteemed academic publisher Triquarterly Books at Northwestern University. A nearly perfect combination of character, plot and dialogue, this short "novel in stories" tells the engaging tale of super-messed-up protagonist Mona, a twentysomething slacker in a pre-iPhone world who starts the book as the only young white house-cleaner in the entirety of New England, where she engages in such art-school-flunky activities as taking photos of herself as a murder victim in clients' homes just for her own amusement. As Mona's world starts expanding, then (including an actual romantic relationship with the junkie in question, trying heroin herself, then through a series of complicated circumstances ending up in Taos, New Mexico, now cleaning the trailer homes of burnt-out New Agers), our trainwrecky hero stubbornly refuses to learn anything from it all, but nonetheless starts becoming just a little wiser about the world almost against her best intentions. A feverish page-flipper that I burned through from start to finish in only 24 hours, the only reason this isn't getting a perfect score is that the storyline loses track of itself for a large chunk of the second half, the result of this book originally being written as four long self-contained stories and only afterwards being hooked together as one narrative; other than that, though, I can confidently state that this is one of the most enjoyable and emotionally moving novels I've read in the last year, a strong recommendation to one and all that will undoubtedly be making our best-of lists at the end of the year.

Out of 10: **9.7**

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### Sheryl says

Wow, this was different! I've not read anything quite like it before or at least in a while. I'm not sure really how to write the review, the protagonist, Mona kept me on my toes that's for sure.

Mona seems to be a tortured soul who is a cleaning lady by choice, she takes great pride in her work. She goes from volunteering in Lowell, MA by handing out clean needles to addicts one evening a week to ending up in Taos, New Mexico starting her own cleaning service.

I have to admit this is was a fast read and it held my interest as I stated earlier Mona kept me guessing throughout the entire book. It did have an odd ending, I had read that in other reviews before I reading this novel.

I would like to thank the publisher and NetGalley for providing me with a copy of this e-galley in exchange for an honest opinion.

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## Jenny Dunning says

Even as a kid, I didn't read favorite books over. Or watch favorite movies again. But I just finished rereading Jen Beagin's debut novel *Pretend I'm Dead* a few weeks after reading it for the first time. I'd been recommending it to my book group—and couldn't call up enough details to be convincing. So I started over. And two days later, well, it was just as satisfying a read as the first time through. Driveway moments, or their reading analogue. That's another measure of how good a book is. For me, those are the passages I can't help myself from reading aloud to my husband, lying in bed before going to sleep. I didn't actually count them—but there were more than any other book I can remember, and it's a short novel, just under 200 pages.

Before you read any further, I should warn you that I won't be able to help myself from quoting passages here either. This isn't a spoiler alert so much as a heads-up that some of the language is, well, explicit. The c-word, etc. What do you expect from a novel that opens in a needle exchange clinic?

So the novel is gritty—lots of using and abusing of all sorts. Hilarious and hilariously clever, it tells the story of Mona belatedly (in her mid twenties) coming of age. Maybe that's a time-worn plot—but Beagin tells it whacky and makes it new. A loner (as her name suggests), Mona cleans houses for a living, the activity providing her a kind of intimacy fix. She also takes liberties with (and sometimes drugs and talismans from, as well as photographs in) her clients' homes. She's on a journey, an odyssey, if you will (yes, the reference is made directly—but Beagin does literary allusions better than anyone, turns somersaults with them, actually). Mona's road map is laid out in a goodbye letter from a boyfriend she refers to as Mr. Disgusting (he's older, an addict in recovery, and has lost his teeth in an industrial accident). He tells her to get out of "Hole," aka Lowell, Massachusetts, to move to New Mexico and start over: "Rent an adobe casita. Paint some pictures. Join a healthy cult of some kind. Get a guru. Surround yourself with [illegible]. I really want you to be—" Which is more or less what she does. Her gurus include an actual guru (of the British Buddhist sort) and his wife, a dying man, and a psychic who might actually be, um, psychic. Along the way, Mona has frequent conversations with a God she calls Bob (as in "thank Bob"), as well as imaginary conversations with her clients and others, often running in parallel to actual conversations.

Novels tend to be either/or: character-and-story-driven or language-driven. *Pretend I'm Dead* nails both. There's plenty of narrative momentum—the questions and allegiances that keep a reader turning the pages. But it's Beagin's language that provides the wild ride. She puns and funs but somehow manages stunning descriptions at the same time. Describing the light in New Mexico, she writes, "The light had a quality of being everywhere at once, even in the shadows, and she felt suspended by it as if by an enormous hand. The Hand of Bob. When the sun was out, the hand held its sweaty palm wide open, and she often imagined she was traveling along the dust in one of its creases." How about eyes "a shade of blue she associates with Ukrainians and hummingbirds"? Or her evocation of grief when Mona learns of Mr. Disgusting's suicide: "She was struck with a sudden awareness of her nipples. They felt chafed, as if she'd been nursing a bearded man for the past thirty minutes. Then she realized it was loneliness." Or how she characterizes Mona not telling her mother about her father's actions: "Not telling her mother was essentially like tossing the secret into an abandoned well—without nourishment and in spite of its hoarse screaming, it would eventually die." (But of course, it doesn't, hence the novel—though Beagin is too good a writer to make whatever happened the centerpiece let alone explicitly tell it.) Beagin's gift is to hit multiple registers in the same passage—lyric, comedic, emotionally hard-hitting.

But what's even more remarkable about her prose is the way she piles up and weaves in and out of chains of associations, all them completely grounded in character and world. Here's an example of what I'm referring

to. One night, Mona hooks up with an architect from out of town—an architect who actually designs fire escapes and elevators (a tidbit we get in scene, when she meets him in a bar); later, she remembers the encounter: "He was handling her cunt deftly, as if he'd designed it himself ..."; recalling their conversation in the bar, she imagines him saying instead that he designs "vaginas—for office buildings." Which sets her on a pell-mell metaphorical dash: "In fact, for many months now, her body had felt like an office building—neutered, utilitarian, without ornament—but he seemed to be remodeling it. His left hand cradled her fire escape, and the fingers of his right hand were inside her elevator shaft. His tongue—or was it his thumb?—kept grazing the elevator button, over and over and over." Talk about an original erotic metaphor.

The pace picks up at the end of the novel, moving toward some kind of epiphany in which Mona expunges her demons, or at least hammers them to pieces. Again, Beagin uses her associative pile-up technique. Mona has not actually read *The Odyssey*, but the British Buddhist gave her a copy and told her that she's on the boat, heading home, and it's time for her to "sit orderly upon the bench and smite the gray sea with her oars."

But I have to interrupt myself. Earlier I described Beagin's literary allusions as the best, and I realize now I never got around to expanding on that. No two allusions are brought in the same way—and all are treated with irreverence. Though a book lover, Mona hasn't had much in the way of formal education. The literature she knows, however, she knows well. So when the psychic demands she say whatever comes into her head when she looks at a photo, she quotes part of Sylvia Plath's "Daddy," to hilarious effect. Then there's the problem of her books with white spines. She's stashed them in the closet because they don't fit in with the colored spines. Finally, she gives them their own shelf—and arranges them so they form sentences: "Man walks into a room with the pharmacist's mate as I lay dying of accidental blindness and assorted fire events, of white noise and housekeeping and ..." You get the idea. Now back to *The Odyssey*.

At the end of the novel, Mona tells her new friend Jesus about being on that boat, smiting the gray sea with her oars, yada yada. Jesus jumps from smiting the oars to smiting the doll she's taken from the psychic's house, a doll that stands in for the childhood dolls who terrified her (she was convinced they had cameras behind their eyes, and witnessed the secret she keeps from her mother). And so she smites that doll, or more precisely, pulverizes ... her porcelain head, hands, feet.

I haven't said anything about the title of this book. It's intriguing, right? But I've told you enough already. You'll just have to read it for yourself.

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## **Mel says**

I'm at a loss as to how to best describe what I just read, but if you like snarky black sheep characters, cynicism, and the writing of Alexandra Kleeman- this is for you. I couldn't help but toss my head back and laugh at the absurdity. Mona is a 24-year-old cleaning lady and an artist. She sometimes calls her somewhat estranged father for random conversations despite her complicated history with the one-armed man who handed off to another family member when she became too difficult and her mom had left, but otherwise she has no friends or social life apart from the minor interactions she has when caught snooping on the job or is accepting her meager pay.

The droll 3rd person narration really uplifted her subtleties and odd-ball-ness. At the beginning of the book she is in a relationship with a man she names Mr. Disgusting, an ex-addict whom she met while volunteering at a needle exchange. She stops hearing from him and assumes he's dead after their last meeting involved her

momentary death after he shot her up with the heroin/coke concoction he'd assembled for himself. Mona is soon laid off from her cleaning company and takes advice from the voice in her head (Mr. Disgusting) and moves to New Mexico where she can insert herself into a small cast of bizarre locals: Henry, her first regular client; her new neighbors "Yoko and Yoko"; Betty, the psychic; Johnny the bouncer; Jesus the closeted gay man.

Quite entertaining. Will look out for more from Beagin!

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### **Diane S ? says**

I think I've dnf'd more books in the last month than I have in the last year. Started out promising, very different, quirky main character who volunteers with a needle exchange program. She falls for one of the users that she calls Me. Disgusting, who ends up breaking her heart. She goes to Taos, which was a big draw for me, in an attempt to reclaim her life. She shares a house with two strange characters Yoko and Yoko and we'll this is where it lost me. Half way no less. It turns a bit crude, lewd, and I'm a bit of a prude. Well kind of, but only when I feel it is unnecessary. Anyway, I will leave Taos and start another, with which I hope I have better luck.

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### **Abbie | ab\_reads says**

3.5 stars - strange, quirky, funny, off-beat, dark

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### **Geoff says**

God, I loved this book. The narrator's voice is so compelling. (So much so that I just had to go back and check that it was in fact in the third person, not the first person). And hilarious--I genuinely burst out laughing at several points. Everything about Mona feels real and immediate and believable. And it's not just her -- the characters she interacts with feel real, too. Sometimes in a book like this, with a main character like this, the main character is the only one who seems to "get it"--who recognizes the world as it really is, while everyone else is blindly stumbling. But the people Mona talks to pick up on her little comments and respond as other intelligent, real people might--which is delightfully refreshing.

I wish this book had been two, three times longer. I would have loved to spend more time with Mona. And I'm definitely going to read whatever else Beagin writes!

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### **Rebecca says**

I read the first 65 pages, which was one long chapter (almost like a standalone novella) called "Hole." Mona, a 23-year-old art school dropout turned cleaner, was raised by a cousin after her addict parents' death. Like Beagin, who cleaned houses for five years to support her art, Mona collects vacuum cleaners and considers vacuuming her primary hobby. She enjoys the repetition and inadvertent intimacy of her job – it gives her glimpses into other people's inner lives. In her spare time she volunteers for a needle exchange program and

thus falls in with “Mr. Disgusting,” the nickname she gives to a thief and Dumpster diver 21 years her senior.

It's all super-quirky and unnecessarily crass. The closest comparison I can make is with Miranda July's *The First Bad Man*. Throughout I kept thinking to myself, *this should really be written in the first person*. This is a strong character who can describe things for herself. The style is readable; I could have forced myself through the last two-thirds as Mona lights out for New Mexico. But with so many other books waiting for me, I decided I didn't want or need to keep going.

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### **Chrisolu says**

The book ended like a French movie. 4.5 stars.

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### **Bandit says**

This was a strange sort of attraction at first sight (the title alone is so intriguing) negotiated down by reluctance to engage with a 24 year old protagonist. Yes, I know, I'm an ageist, but can you blame me? This generation has been just all sorts of unattractive. Although I'm very glad to have finally decided to follow my initial instinct and check this book out, because a. it's pretty terrific and b. it's set judging by cultural clues in the mid 90s, entirely different, far more tolerable generation. Also weirdly aimless and existential, but in much more agreeable way. And, despite her young years, the protagonist here is actually the real deal, someone who can carry an entire story by her idiosyncratic self. In fact, she's a singular literary creation, stumbling through life to a very distinct and distinctly irregular beat, ghosts of her past shaping the shapeless contours of her present in a subtle and compelling way. Not an easy book to describe, not particularly action driven, definitely more of a personal journey (discovery just sounds too new agey) sort of thing, about a young woman and a variegated cast of supporting characters in her life. But it's just so good, so well done, so original, darkly humorous in a perfectly understated manner, quirky in the best possible way, such an original perspective. Not often can someone so unrelatable be so completely engaging and for this major kudos to the author, it's quite an accomplishment, particularly for a debut. Strikingly odd, immensely readable and definitely memorable book. Brief at only 208 pages and such a quick read, I actually didn't want it to end, but it was lovely while it lasted. Thanks Netgalley.

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### **jordan says**

Lucid and smart, without a hint of self-consciousness. Induced laughter, tears, and a few PTSD panic attacks. Well worth the heart palpitations, though. I wish I'd written it.

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### **MisterHobgoblin says**

*Pretend I'm Dead* is a really unusual, psychedelic gem of a novel. Mona is a twenty-something volunteer in a needle exchange programme. Her dad, Mickey, is a deadbeat and the only stability she has in her life is the sole-trader house cleaner she works for. Mona has a brain but no particular drive. She works hard, but without direction. When she tells people she is a cleaner, they assume she must have something else she is

working towards - white girls don't clean houses.

The novel follows Mona over a couple of years, focusing in turn on four relationships and how they change the direction of her life.

First up, there's Mr Disgusting, a middle aged junkie to whom Mona supplies needles. She begins a friendship because why not? Apart from the junk, he's a decent guy. He tells Mona to move from her Massachusetts dead end to Taos, some kind of hippy Mecca in New Mexico. So off she goes, with the remaining three sections focusing in turn on her relationship with her neighbours Nigel and Shiori (English and Japanese); then a rather sick businessman called Henry who seems to have lost his inhibitions, and finally a psychic called Betty.

Each of the relationships allows Mona to grow in unexpected directions. And always, behind everything, there is the fractured relationship Mona has with her father.

What makes the novel is Mona's charm. She is utterly guileless, but not stupid. She is aware of people's failings and deviousness; she simply chooses not to get involved. As a cleaner, she sees people's secrets. She could use them for good or for evil, but mostly she just dwells on them in a brain that seems to be perpetually half-tripping. She has a strong personal morality and will happily do things that are against her best interests if she thinks they are the right things to do, yet her morality is unlikely to coincide with those of 90% of the population. She looks at the world with a mixture of astonishment and resignation.

And for the lack of direction, she dreams. Idle dreams, not always nice dreams - a bit like Jenny in the Threepenny Opera - where something will change and she will be the lynchpin around which the action revolves.

There's quirkiness too. Mona likes photography, taking selfies in compromising positions in clients houses. Just to mix things up a little.

Looking back on this, it all sounds a bit whimsical. It really isn't. It is gritty, it is real, it is funny and it is sad. If it were a film, it would be Amelie.

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### **Gianna Mosser says**

Disclaimer: NUP book! This author is daring and brutally honest. Though her narrative became painfully personal and self-deprecating, I thought the strength of the ending gave the reader some hope that Mona might yet come out the other side.

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### **Jaclyn Crupi says**

Not at all what I was expecting, this was funny and dark in a Miranda July/Ottessa Moshfegh kind of way. I was unsure about it at first but the voice won me over completely.

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## **Kelly (and the Book Boar) says**

Find all of my reviews at: <http://52bookminimum.blogspot.com/>

Overdue book review #437. I read this **IN JUNE**. I suck so hard at posting shit this year. Good news is I kind of remember this one – better news is it kind of meanders a little bit of everywhere so there's no reason to get wrapped up in the details. Basically, if your idea of a good time is reading about a 20-something housekeeper (with a side hobby of taking bizarro selfies in her employers' homes) who volunteers at the local methadone clinic handing out clean needles (with a side of looking for love in all the wrong places) who moves across country to find herself (with a side of hippie dippie neighbors and a commune in New Mexico) then this might be the book for you. It earns every single one of its Stars from me for being unique (well, maybe an extra one for that title and cover because that's the only reason I picked this up in the first place). Originality is something that has become almost extinct but Jen Beagin delivers it in spades . . . .

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