



# The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium: American Culture on the Brink

*Mark Dery*

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## **The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium: American Culture on the Brink** Mark Dery

From the far left to the far right, on talk radio and the op-ed page, more and more Americans believe that the social fabric is unraveling. Celebrity worship and media frenzy, suicidal cultists and heavily armed secessionists: modern life seems to have become a "pyrotechnic insanitarium," Mark Dery says, borrowing a turn-of-the-century name for Coney Island. Dery elucidates the meaning to our madness, deconstructing American culture from mainstream forces like Disney and Nike to fringe phenomena like the Unabomber and alien invaders. Our millennial angst, he argues, is a product of a pervasive cultural anxiety—a combination of the social and economic upheaval wrought by global capitalism and the paranoia fanned by media sensationalism. The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium is a theme-park ride through the extremes of American culture of which The Atlantic Monthly has written, "Mark Dery confirms once again what writers and thinkers as disparate as Nathanael West, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Sigmund Freud, and Oliver Sacks have already shown us: the best place to explore the human condition is at its outer margins, its pathological extremes."

## **The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium: American Culture on the Brink Details**

Date : Published December 15th 1999 by Grove Press (first published February 1st 1999)

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Author : Mark Dery

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# **From Reader Review The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium: American Culture on the Brink for online ebook**

## **Wythe Marschall says**

Mark Dery is one of the sharpest writers on modern culture I've ever discovered. His feverish, post-everything essays about American/global/technological/millennial culture (what he calls the "pyrotechnic insanitarium," recycling a gem of Coney Island barkery) reverberate with the right mix of the hip and the academic—curmudgeonly, making this collection a joy for casual readers and sine qua non for futurologists, skeptics, and genealogists of the uncanny.

Neither technophobe nor fool for the fake gold of a happyshiny techno-future, Dery composes each of his Marxian/Lacanian theses about our deep-seated fear of clowns, obsession with morbid anatomy, and other just-under-the-conscious-of-the-collective memes while somehow remaining grounded in the belief that within each of us—buried perhaps beneath a metaphorical pile of discarded cell phones, ticket stubs from slasher flicks, scuffed pairs of Nikes, &c.—still glimmers a more or less \*human\* psyche and spirit.

This belief is, in my otherwise nearly 100% skeptical book, a noble and necessary one. Dery clings to this lifeline of humanity in a sea of Unabombers, cultists, corporate zombies, and forgotten (but resurgent) freaks, ultimately concluding that increased connection and nonstop information-flood demand more, not less responsibility to society—not to mention more questioning of what really matters to us.

My one gripe with this collection is its mild redundancy: Each essay features, for example, nearly identical jabs at \*Wired\* magazine (home of neo-futuro-techno-bio-nano-positivism).

But many readers will not read the book straight through, over four days, as I did, and I hope all will find the diverse offerings of the Insanitarium too compelling to put down.

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## **Madison Santos says**

Required reading for how we went from Obama to Trump, from the 2008 image and figurehead of pure hope to the pyrotechnic insanitarium of 2016.

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## **lisa\_emily says**

Reading The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium is like attending a class reunion of the last decade; you get to revisit all the things you kind of forgot about and all the things that you wish you could forget, like big-boob jobs and Jim Rose Circus Sideshow. He even examines those horrid daytime tabloid tv shows and validates their existence with some compelling reasons (although not convincing enough for me to watch).

The first chapter covers the gamut from the X-files and Crag Baldwin to Umberto Eco & Adorno. Then the rides really begins. Mark Dery's one of those facile writer who eviscerates obscure pop-culture with the scaple of critical theory. He digs into some of the cultural signifiers that dominated in the '90s and some possible raison d'etres to their madness. I mean, who would have ever thought to compare Jim Carey's

grotesque facial gyrations to Bataille's philosophies. Strange, but I guess you have to read it to believe it.

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### **Anya Weber says**

This is what it feels like when the End Times are Nigh--which seems to happen every hundred years or so, and more recently, about once a decade. Mark Dery wrote this book of essays in the late 1990s, about the "fin de millennium," and it's still equally relevant as our fractured, kaleidoscopic, socially-networked-to-death decade of naughts draws to a close. The essays explore everything from the Unabomber to killer clowns, placing disturbing 1990s American pop culture in a larger technological and scientific and sociological context. Dery's description of "the nonstop theme-park simulator ride of mass-mediated reality" hit home with me in a big way. He's also a witty and thoughtful writer, who's erudite without getting all wrapped up in labels and academic terminology. Very enjoyable and brain-expanding.

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### **Dixie Johnson says**

very interesting essays about some of my favorite morbid topics: killer clowns, damien hirst and the xfiles. its about the coming of the year 2000 so its a little dated but still relevant

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### **Jessica says**

it's been years since i read this book, but i really remember enjoying the hell out of it. i should reread this.

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### **David says**

Highly recommended.

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### **Kate Walker says**

Written 10 years ago but feels like it could be today. Very fun writing style and an interesting topic.

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### **Mike says**

14 years old, and as a compilation that means some pieces are even older. Regardless, Dery's insights pry back the linoleum and reveal some surface truths about (mostly) American culture which can be disturbing. Dery's takes a slightly askew angle and this approach brings forth more truths than are in the words.

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**Cwl says**

Similar in content to the superlative Apocalypse Culture anthologies, but oddly interspersed with Naomi Klein-style economic critiques. I suggest that you peruse the wonderfully-written paeans to Coney Island and sideshow bodies, but skip over any page that devotes space to income disparity. And read Apocalypse Culture first.

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**Scott says**

i re-read this book and enjoyed it as much the second time. its focus is really on some of the darker threads of the fin-de-millennium american culture. end of the century apocalyptic schizo kinda stuff. killer clowns, branding, post humanism, aliens, and conspiracies. it is just as relevant now as it was when i first read it at the end of the 90's. it confirms to me that somewhere near the end of 2001 time started running in reverse...

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