



Meeks

Julia Holmes

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No woman will have Ben without a proper bachelor's suit . . . and the tailor refuses to make him one. Back from war with a nameless enemy, Ben finds that his mother is dead and his family home has been reassigned by the state. As if that isn't enough, he must now find a wife, or he'll be made a civil servant and given a permanent spot in one of the city's oppressive factories.

Meanwhile, Meeks, a foreigner who lives in the park and imagines he's a member of the police, is hunted by the overzealous Brothers of Mercy. Meeks' survival depends on his peculiar friendship with a police captain—but will that be enough to prevent his execution at the annual Independence Day celebration?

A dark satire rendered with the slapstick humor of a Buster Keaton film, Julia Holmes' debut marries the existentialism of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* to the strange charm of a Haruki Murakami novel. Meeks portrays a world at once hilarious and disquieting, in which frustrated revolutionaries and hopeful youths suffer alongside the lost and the condemned, just for a chance at the permanent bliss of marriage and a slice of sugar-frosted Independence Day cake.

Meeks Details

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From Reader Review Meeks for online ebook

Matt Leibel says

One of my favorite debut novels in years. Actually earns the ever-popular/dreaded "Kafka-esque" tag, while doing something really new and exciting that makes it more poignant than a thought experiment. In an absurd-but-really-realized world where unmarried men must get married off or face horrible, draconian public consequences, our hapless hero tries to find a mate, but is hampered by awkwardness, and more damagingly, the lack of a proper gray suit (he only has a black mourning suit, which dooms him...). Yes the premise is absurdist, but like the recent allegorical work of say, Ishiguro, it's also a powerful metaphor for our longings, our fears, our awkward gropings toward the life we want or think we want.

Jessica says

<http://www.hipsterbookclub.com/review...>

In her impressive debut novel, *Meeks*, Julia Holmes examines the institutions of marriage, family, and social order amid a satirical dystopian setting. Through alternating narratives expressed in lucid prose, Holmes shows readers a society much like our own, where disappointment looms beneath a saccharine sweet surface.

Holmes intertwines the stories of Ben and Meeks, two citizens of a seemingly perfect and orderly world where everyone fits in their designated place. She crafts a curious landscape that is evocative of classic dystopian literature without being derivative. Close inspection reveals an authoritarian society that maintains a comically happy façade through strict social regulations.

Ben and Meeks struggle to meet those social demands. Ben faces his last permitted year of bachelorhood before he must either obtain a wife or face a lifetime of forced labor. Meeks is a delusional but innocuous bum unable to face reality. Their stories culminate at the annual Independence Day commemoration, where society celebrates social obedience and castigates dissonance.

Holmes keeps the plot minimal, relying on the characters' memories and introspection to build the story. Her fluid and affecting prose reads elegantly, skillfully conveying the characters' progression of feelings and central desires. Ben observes a typical scene of a typical day and envies the life that, for him, seems unattainable:

On the other side of the bachelor's hill, families were enjoying the day. Children swung between their parents' hands. Fathers decked out in kind and modest sweaters. Men on the other side of the great divide, men who had made it, men who had seen the beacon and plunged and who had made it. And now they idled justly in their summer sweaters, and there were children who worried about them and women who worried about them, and who, behind closed doors, comforted them as if they were boys.

For much of the story, Holmes employs satire and dark humor to convey the book's themes. A close look at

the absurdly wholesome society exposes a gluttonous obsession with food and fixation on fashion. Superficial pleasures and concerns hide the underlying absurdity of the social oppression. In a move that forces readers to examine our society's position on marriage, Holmes flips traditional stereotypes by placing the pressure to wed on men. Unmarried men are consigned to life as laborers, prisoners, and executioners. Ben recalls a scene from his childhood:

When he was a boy, Ben and his mother had watched the failed bachelors being marched down the street at the end of each summer, on their way to the factories, to the work crews in the park, to the river's edge, to the prison. The men in gray smocks shuffled past, and boys and girls threw apples at their feet, and rowdy men jumped down into their yards and shouted, "Throw out the trash! Throw out the trash!" until their wives cajoled them back up onto the porch, and Ben's mother rested her hands lightly on his shoulders, and said, "This is our shame."

As the book progresses, Ben's behavior and attitude become more preposterous. His growing obsession with finding an appropriate suit in order to fulfill his social requirement spoofs the pressures we put on ourselves to conform to inane social demands.

By adding darkly comedic elements, Holmes challenges traditional ideology without being imperious. Ben accepts his role in life without question, becoming so fixated on fulfilling his obligation that it results in paranoia and crime. The pressure to take a wife and start a family by a legally enforced deadline signifies the pressures we perceive in modern society to follow a certain path. No one in Ben's world appears happier or better off due to their cookie-cutter lifestyle, but very few take a stand to question the norm.

Holmes takes a soberer and more elegant tone to examine family relationships, an extension of the marital obligation. Throughout the story, she highlights the expectations and disappointments children and parents feel for each other. Meeks and Ben fondly remember their mothers as resilient, tender women, and they struggle to fulfill their mothers' hopes for them. As one character tellingly wonders, "All our relationships deform us (i.e., make us 'human'), but how do these loving creatures (our mothers) survive the person-imploding disappointments of their sons?"

They don't show the same affection for their fathers. Ben's father abandons him and Meeks fails to accept his. He reflects, "What a heartbreaking disappointment a father could be when one held him up against the beauty and complexity of the world that existed before him." Holmes illustrates that society cannot issue instructions on how to construct a model family. Despite their society's strict, practical regulations, these families ultimately fall apart.

Holmes subtly warns readers that simply satisfying perceived social responsibilities, rather than embracing genuine ambitions and desires, can only lead to disappointment and failure. Her message is simple and beautiful: live the life you want.

Holmes tackles these weighty topics with charm and polish, combining the right mix of humor and sincerity. Strange, surreal, and challenging, Meeks is a strikingly compelling examination of the social and personal demands we impose upon ourselves.

Jennifer says

I usually ignore back cover text but for me this book was impossible to interpret without it. It was not immediately obvious to me that some of the situations were intended to be funny and I didn't realize it until I'd gone back and read the description. It was also difficult to tell the characters apart because of their, no doubt intended, similarities.

The book reads like it is packed with meaning, hidden, lurking, decodable but by the end I felt no closer to understanding it than at the beginning. I don't mind endings that don't end and I prefer books that aren't wrapped up neatly but this end left me wondering why I'd read the book. I even went back and started the book again to see what I'd missed but couldn't find anything in the first few chapters to shed more light on it. Overall I'd say this is a challenging book that may be worth the time you put in to it but I'm not inclined to spend any more of mine on it.

Catherine Siemann says

I can't help but use the word Kafkaesque when thinking about this novel, though the jacket copy helpfully provides Haruki Murakami as another, quite valid, point of comparison. This is in part the story of Ben, returned from military service and thrust into a "Bachelor House" from which he must attract a wife or face the consequences of becoming a "civil servant" -- a faceless municipal drone. My academic field is the nineteenth century novel, where the consequences of spinsterhood weigh heavily on women; the male take on the problem is intriguing, and has me speculating about the world of the novel and how it got there. It's also the story of Meeks, a homeless man who lives in the city park, and feels an odd kinship with his namesake, the founder of his society. The outcome for both characters feels inevitable, particularly in the shadow of a third, less-frequent narrative voice which provides a prologue, but the story is nonetheless compelling. Both main characters keep the reader at an emotional distance, which fits the dystopic setting effectively. An impressive first novel for Holmes; I'll be eager to see where she goes next.

William2 says

This is an excellent dystopia. It's certainly every bit as good as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* or P.D. James's *The Children of Men*. It's far better than Yevgeny Zamyatin's dashed off *We*. I'm rereading it now. What higher praise is there? Not to be missed.

Jessica says

I abandoned this book after 70 pages. I hated it.

Britt says

Let me start by saying that I am in general a great fan of dystopian novels. I accept that sometimes you must

carry on reading in the face of ignorance of the ways of a given dystopian world, hoping to learn more as you read. And so I read, and read, and read, waiting for the payoff where everything was going to become crystal clear and careen together into a point or conclusion or anything at all coherent. In the end, nothing surprising happened. The thing that was implied would happen at the beginning of the novel did indeed transpire. Nothing useful or interesting was revealed, about the culture, about the Enemy, about anything. I emerged from the book confused as to the favorable reviews and mad at the New York Times review for steering me so very wrong.

Robyn says

Absolutely original. And guess who drew that cover?!?! Starts with a Robyn...

quail says

The originality of this novel is astonishing. Must read.

Ash says

Alternates telling the story of two men in a society where a portion of the population is delegated to manufacture happiness for others to enjoy. Ben is a bachelor whose only hope to escape the work house is to have a girl choose him for marriage and Meeks (named for the society's founder) is a bum who plays at being a police officer. Many aspects of the society are portrayed as ridiculous (black humor): constant vigilance against an unseen/unknown enemy, the absolute necessity of having proper attire to announce your current station, the complete (although not always physical) separation of the different castes/age groups, and especially the illusion of happiness. It is hard to swallow forced marriages and sweets as the ultimate happiness worth sacrificing choice to build a society around. Her prose is poignant and beautiful. It reads more like a short story in that you get dropped into a world and never quite grasp everything. I particularly appreciated Ben's musings on choosing insanity (an unlimited life inside your head) to the current restricted reality. Wish the story were more developed (more novel, less novella) and gave insight into the life and thoughts of a non-mother female character.

Ulysses says

As a guy who loves depressing books, it's kind of bizarre to hear myself say this but... this book was actually too depressing, even for the dystopian fiction genre. But the bigger problem with it is that unlike 1984, Brave New World, etc., the society in which the story takes place and the "historical context" that produced this society are never made sufficiently palpable to allow the reader to feel completely engaged with the characters and the plot-- the atmosphere is too murky and dim to make it all comprehensible. However, considering that this is the author's first novel, written in 2010, and not a perennial classic of Modern English Lit written by Orwell or Huxley, I suppose it's solid enough for what it is. If you're a fan of dystopian fiction in general, this is probably worth a read. Otherwise, don't bother-- it'll just make you want to pull the covers over your head and stay in bed forever.

Meagan says

I read some of the other Goodreads reviews of this book, and, frankly, I'm a little surprised. (Especially at the book's own proofreader, who gave it a negative review. Isn't that a conflict of interest? Bad business ethics? Talking smack in a public forum about a product put out by a company that also signs your checks? Eh, freelancers.) Yes, I can see how this isn't a book for everyone - it's a dystopia, not a utopia. Probably not headed for a happy ending, here. But it's imaginative and well-written - one of my favorite sentences is, simply: "I kicked my boot heel against the rock and knocked free the pressed tread of snow." Economical, poetic, evocative. "Meeks" is full of just this sort of precise, eloquent detail. And yes, it's somewhat Kafkaesque, with shades of Margaret Atwood and Ursula K. LeGuin, too. In all honesty, I picked this up because the author's brother-in-law is one of my boyfriend's best friends, and I figured I'd better have something to comment on if we all ended up at a shindig together. But I kept reading because it's damn good. Color me impressed.

AJ LeBlanc says

I did not understand this book. I felt like I was in high school trying to figure out why the teacher had made us read it. I understood the distopian setting but couldn't figure out who was really in charge. The Enemy was never explained, but that did make sense because the people were taught to believe in The Enemy without ever knowing (or even seeing) them.

The roles of women were fascinating but had nothing to do with the book other than to be vehicles for their men. I think I might have liked it if it was told from their point of view, but then it would have been a completely different book... which is why I might have liked it.

The reviews all talk about how it's a hilarious read in its rigid construct but I never saw that. There was no humor for me.

I did get into the last bit of it because I wanted to know what was finally going to happen since clearly a huge Something was on the way, but when it was there, guess what? I didn't get it. The scene that started the book didn't have any explanation and I had no clue why the character was trying to do his thing.

I think I'm not the right kind of smart for this one.

An early sign that this wasn't going to be a winner for me: I lost it under a pile of papers for about two weeks and didn't even remember that I had started it.

Emily says

Holmes has created a fabulously surreal dystopia where to be married is the only way to find true happiness. Bachelors spend their days cultivating skills to impress ladies in what is essentially a lottery, and if they aren't successful, they are consigned to a life of civil service (or worse). Darkly comic and lyrical, MEEKS provides a unique satirical lens to look at our own changing perceptions of marriage, home life, and success.

Amy says

“Duly noted: the official exhortation to pursue one’s own happiness or be put to the task of generating happiness for others, or worse-to be not in the picture.”

Meeks is the first dystopian novel that I’ve ever read, and I’m glad I started the genre with an exceptionally good title. For in this imaginary world (if indeed it is imaginary rather than futuristic), nothing is as it seems. The complexities of life are narrowed down to the need for a good pale suit to woo in, and an appetite for lovely and varied cakes.

Two main characters alternate in the novel: Ben and Meeks. Ben is desperate to find a pale suit, because that’s what all the suitable bachelors wear in the city park, flirting with women and insuring their actual health and future by finding a wife. You see, there’s a deadline...an unmarried man is either forced to become a civil servant (who can only wear gray smocks) or be killed. This desire to be married doesn’t appear to have anything to do with romance, instead it’s just a means to continue living and enjoying the sweets that the ladies provide in abundance. That, and the ability to wear lovely seasonal sweaters in pale colors (all the happy married men wear them prominently). But all Ben has is a cheap black suit, and despite his efforts, he can’t get a pale one. He resides temporarily in a home for bachelors, where suitable “manly” hobbies are assigned to the residents. His fear is tenable: “what if he was becoming, or had become, an unlovable man? What if the toxin of failure was already coursing through his veins, what if he was already stinking of defeat?”

The character of Meeks is a bit more complicated. He really doesn’t know who he is, and his namesake, Captain Meeks, is rather ambiguous. The city park boasts a statue of Captain Meeks, and his poster appears in certain city buildings. Is he a hero? Or is there an alternative reason? Our character Meeks appears to be something of a bum, one who insists that he’s helping the police in different investigations. Is he, or not? I don’t want to reveal spoilers, so I must word all of this carefully. Suffice to say, no character is typical. Are his police buddies sincere?

The environment around these characters is bizarre: the city park is home to most every function, and there’s little talk of life outside the park, or work, or even family activities. Women are rarely mentioned in terms of romance, only as mothers (who seem to only bear sons) or as dainty little things who pack luscious picnics for their chosen man. And then there’s the mints...it seems the citizens are all overly fond of the tiny foul-tasting mints made right there in town in less than appealing factories. Between candy and cakes, little else of nutrition is mentioned. In fact, throughout the book, it even appears that the only real places of color appear in the park-other locations tend to be dark, gray, and gritty.

So what’s it all about? Reading this with a mind to a review was difficult-I was trying too hard to find meaning. I tried another tack, to just enjoy the novelty, and that made the difference. You have to let go of the need for explanation and symmetry to fall into the story. That isn’t to say there are no undercurrents of

meaning: at times I wondered if the mints were actually a commentary on the pharmaceutical industry that numbs people into stagnation. Then again, the focus on fluffy frostings and sweets, rather than the fruits that Ben craved, could be an illustration of society's dependence on immediate pleasure and sensual appetites over moral fortitude. Even without a deeper meaning, the story holds your attention and the writing is original and crisp.
