

## APL Volumes

Season 1, Episode 4: *JOHN DIES AT THE END*

*This episode was transcribed by APL volunteer Martha Ladyman.*

### BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

MADDY: Hello and welcome to APL Volumes, a new podcast from the Austin Public Library. In this first season, we're going to be exploring the horror genre and its six main subgenres: Humor, Psychological, Paranormal, Cosmic, Gothic, and Visceral.

This episode is all about the Humor subgenre, and the book *John Dies at the End* by Jason Pargin. I'm Maddy, your host for the season, and an Adult Services librarian at APL's Central library.

Later this episode I'll be joined by Bryce Wilson, a fellow Adult Services librarian here at Central, as we battle our way through *John Dies at the End*.

### MUSIC

Horror parodies, spoofs, and satires are nearly as old as the genre itself. But most agree that the first real horror-comedy piece of media, especially in this subgenre as we know it today, is the 1948 film *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*. Which is the first time I've ever heard of this movie. I will be watching it very soon.

It's pretty telling that the first one is a movie – the Humor subgenre is truly the baby of the horror subgenres.

The Humor subgenre has its roots in the books of Christopher Moore from the 1990s and Mario Acevedo in the early aughts, but many of the defining novels of the Humor subgenre were published in 2009 and 2010. Between *John Dies at the End* and Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* in 2009, the Humor subgenre started off with a bang – no subgenre, plot, or even piece of classic lit was safe from being parodied. The subgenre was solidified with *Horrorstör* in 2014 and Grady Hendrix's appearance as a mainstay author of the Humor subgenre, spoofing anything from IKEA catalogs to exorcism movies of the 1980s with great jokes and chilling terror.

At the same time, horror-comedy became an important film genre. Breaking out of the young audience trap of shows like *Scooby-Doo*, and out of the kitschy spoof trap of movies like *Gremlins*, *Scary Movie*, and the *Chucky* films, comedy-horror movies showed that adults were just as interested as kids in laughing and screaming at the same time. Wes Craven's *Scream* movies, which started in 1996, paved the way for 2004's *Shaun of the Dead*, 2009's *Drag Me to Hell* and *Jennifer's Body*, and 2012's *Cabin in the Woods*.

Horror-comedy novels and movies have boosted interest in one another ever since (*Meddling Kids*, *A Touch of Jen*, *Get Out*, *Ready or Not*), and the subgenre doesn't show signs of slowing down. Humor in horror lets us laugh from a safe distance at the things that terrify us – whether that is a serial killer at a party, or an abusive relationship – and this subgenre will exist as long as horror does.

A humor horror novel relies on the reader's knowledge of standard horror tropes, because it will immediately subvert those tropes. It simultaneously pokes fun at and respects classic horror – it will set up the horror reveal you recognize but ham it up as much as possible.

You also don't have to be an intense horror fan to have a good time reading the Humor subgenre. There will be Easter eggs throughout about novels and movies that are the foundation of the horror genre, but they won't pull focus from the fun that comes from reading one of these stories.

Plot: While the plot can vary because the Humor subgenre is essentially parodying every other subgenre, Humor stories are still very much plot-driven.

**Pacing:** Like the plot, the pacing of Humor stories can vary, but in order to keep humor itself at the forefront, the story has to provide opportunities for all those punchlines, and that usually means the pace is quite quick from the get-go, bouncing from joke to joke. Quick and light, without any real variations in pace for dramatic moments.

**Writing Style:** The writing style is usually self-aware and cheeky. Sometimes it will throw winks to the reader often, and sometimes it will play it more straight; but either way, the writing usually knows what subgenre it is in and which one it is co-opting for kicks, and it won't be afraid to let the reader know.

**Atmosphere:** The Humor subgenre relies on a pendulum that swings from one laugh-out-loud scene to a grim, gory bloodbath in a split second. You know that scene in the animated *Mulan*, where they're all singing and roasting each other and the music abruptly cuts off when they come across the ruins of a town? The atmosphere of Humor stories is kind of like that, but if that just kept happening over and over.

**Setting:** Humor stories can be set pretty much anywhere, as long as the setting allows for maximum joke opportunities – which often means it will be isolated in some way. (Grady Hendrix's *Horrorstör*, which is set inside an IKEA, is a perfect example of this.) If a story is a spoof on a classic piece of media, the setting is already predetermined and matters less as an appeal factor for readers.

**Characters:** The protagonist is usually a bit of a slacker/loser, in the 90s teen movie sense, and the big bad is often a vengeful spirit out for revenge who is blocked at every turn by sheer human stupidity and ingenuity. But Humor stories are not character-driven – the main characters act as reader self-inserts. They have enough of a personality to get you invested and make you laugh, but they are the humanness in a world of unknown horror and you are supposed to relate to them more than you're supposed to care about their own growth and arcs.

Most of what you need to know about the author Jason Pargin is covered by the fact that he was the executive editor of the humor content site *Cracked.com* – my own personal choice of entertainment in high school and college- and he was there for nearly thirteen years. For *John Dies at the End* context though, we should back up a little. Pargin started his own humor website called *Pointless Waste of Time* in 1999, where every Halloween he would post a new chapter of a story – which eventually were all combined and published in a single volume as *John Dies at the End*.

Pargin's book deal coincided with his joining *Cracked*, and he's written a bunch more books since then: the *John Dies at the End* series expanded to four total books (adding on *This Book Is Full of Spiders*, *What the Hell Did I Just Read*, and *If This Book Exists, You're in the Wrong Universe*); and his *Zoey Ashe* series currently has two books (*Futuristic Violence and Fancy Suits*, and *Zoey Punches the Future in the Dick*). I'm not completely sure I can say that on air, but we'll find out in post!

Trying to explain *John Dies at the End* is like trying to explain the note you wrote on your phone after a dream at 3 in the morning. It's bonkers, you still kind of understand it, and you do want to tell everybody you know about how wild it is.

There's no real way to start at the beginning, because even the book doesn't start at the beginning. David, our narrator, and his friend John are given a drug called "soy sauce" at a party one night, and David accidentally sticks himself with the syringe. But rather than killing him and John, as it does to almost everyone else who takes the drug, the soy sauce gives the boys the extremely unwanted ability to see creatures from another hellish world who are invading Earth through rifts in space-time.

From there, John and David try to return to normal life and ignore what they see, but a visit from the local police about the party sends them to Vegas to get answers from a paranormal expert. After a climatic battle, John and David return to *Undisclosed* and keep living life and occasionally acting as the local *Ghostbusters* chapter.

A year later, David and John investigate the return of the malevolent force and are transported to another dimension, where they discover a new god and are told that they are how the god's minions will invade Earth. They're able to escape and David's story ends... ish.

An epilogue has John and Dave find another transdimensional portal and be asked to go through it in order to save the world. Sick of having to keep doing this, the boys turn it down and play basketball while a nearby group of teens jump through the portal and save that dimension.

Like all great Humor stories in the horror genre, *John Dies at the End* is fully aware of the divide it straddles, and consistently invokes pieces of horror culture and canon for the reader, often in the funniest way possible – even the supernatural, all-powerful, oft-exploding dog is named Molly – most likely after Stephen King's own Thing of Evil.

Plot: *John Dies at the End* is completely plot-driven. It takes a lot of its cues from paranormal horror, and David and John are paranormal investigators – both of these things keep David and John constantly encountering new monsters and experiences that move the plot forward. Eventually, the plot becomes a bit repetitive because of the length, but in a way, this repetition turns the book into a slice-of-novel, which is frankly hilarious: rather than reading about a single adventure or set of one-time adventures, you're just reading about a small part of these guys' wild lives.

Pacing: On the whole, the pacing is quick and easy to be carried away on. Layered jokes, worldbuilding, and monster fights trade off to make sure there is never a dull or lagging moment.

This book originally started as a serialization of chapters on Pargin's website over the course of a couple years, which affects the pacing when you read it all together as one book. On one hand, it makes it surprisingly easy to put down the book, for whatever reason, and come back to it later without feeling like you have to start from the beginning again. Because the book has natural stopping points and plot arcs.

On the other hand, it does make the book feel a little long. And it is – 500 pages is long for a humor-based novel, regardless of genre! And while the pace of the writing never slows, be aware that this is a possible deterrent for interested readers.

Writing Style: The writing style is conversational and irreverent. Pargin has said that Douglas Adams and Stephen King are his biggest influences, and *John Dies at the End* blends Adams's cheekiness and King's straightforwardness into a writing style that keeps up with the pace and keeps you feeling like you are part of David and John's pizza nights.

Atmosphere: The atmosphere is much like other Humor horror stories – it goes back and forth from deep, you can see something out of the corner of your eye terror, to jokes that make you laugh so hard you can't breathe. Both the humor and the horror in *John Dies* can get pretty gross, so if you don't vibe with traditional, quote unquote, "boy" humor, including a lot of cursing, this might not be the humor horror book for you.

The coolest thing *John Dies at the End* does with its atmosphere is that the weird factor slowly becomes just... normal. You never stop laughing or being grossed out, but the invasions, the supernatural species... they fold into a part of daily life for David and John and then for the reader too.

Setting: Most of *John Dies at the End* takes place in and around a small unnamed town in the Midwest, starring classic Midwest-suburban features like a haunted mall, a knock-off Blockbuster, and a giant empty field where every party for the last twenty years has been held. Small town-slash-suburban life is so relatable that parts of the setting are funny because they are true, and some parts are funny on purpose.

The setting does shift to a road trip, and then briefly to a Vegas casino – the road trip, much like the town, allows for isolated incidents of horror without investigation or leakage into an urban center that would draw attention,

and so allows the horrors to repeat. Vegas, on the other hand, is pure chaos and serves as a stage for a climactic battle, and so the bright lights and big city setting are not repeated.

Characters: Ah, David and John. Two twentysomethings in a small town that is never named, whose approach to monster-fighting is so uniquely human it makes me want to laugh and cry at the same time. While David, John, and their surrounding cast often provide the humor of the book, through quips or reactions to the horror around them, and while David does undergo some character growth, the characters serve as Humor characters almost always serve – as relatable characters that readers can easily inhabit and view the story’s world through.

The surrounding cast is a bit caricature-ish, flat, and not particularly likeable, especially in the first half of the book, and you can see, practically in real time, the author’s growth and realization that his treatment of certain characters was either offensive or just generally unfunny, and these characters receive dimension later on in the book. But the fact that most characters aren’t particularly likeable also makes them expendable, which means you won’t grieve them and the plot can continue at its fast pace.

MUSIC

MADDY: So now we are going to take some soy sauce with my coworker Bryce.

BRYCE: Hi, Maddy. Thanks for having me here.

MADDY: Of course.

Before we get all the way into *John Dies at the End*, we are going to talk about your relationship with horror a little bit. So tell us what your favorite piece of horror media is.

BRYCE: Oh man, it’s kind of tough to pick. I guess I kind of always have to give a shout out to the *Evil Dead* trilogy, because they did the best to almost ruin my life by making me convinced I could go to film school.

I always also have to give a shout-out to *The Bride of Frankenstein*, which is as perfect a piece of surrealist art as was ever made.

But honestly, if we are just talking about media instead of movies, it could very well be pound for pound the *John Dies at the End* series.

MADDY: What a coincidence!

BRYCE: What a coincidence!

MADDY: That’s what we are here to talk about.

BRYCE: They’re definitely not something I can’t shut up about.

MADDY: And you and I have had the last six months to not shut up about them. And here we are today, still talking about that.

Do you often read in the humor horror subgenre, or is this kind of it for you?

BRYCE: I don’t because it’s usually just not very good. It’s funny, because for every classic that you get, every *Shaun of the Dead*, every *American Werewolf in London*, you get the laziest parodies. It’s interesting to me because in a lot of ways humor and horror are complimentary genres. They both depend on involuntary reactions

If you find something funny, you find it funny. It doesn’t matter if it jibes with your politics, it doesn’t matter if you think it’s inappropriate. If it gets that gut laugh reaction out of you, it just does.

And same with horror. You can't argue your way out of being scared or argue your way into being scared. Something scares you or it doesn't. They both deal with breaking taboos and kind of creating this social discomfort. When something is not scary in a movie you laugh at it. And when something is not funny to you, you get offended. You get horrified.

So as complimentary as they should be, you would think there would be more works that are able to walk that line and blend the two genres together. And I think in all fairness, most good horror films have a couple of scenes where you are uncomfortably laughing on purpose. But for the most part when people intentionally try to make a funny piece of horror they usually end up at the path of least resistance and just end up with nothing very interesting.

MADDY: Well, good thing this is very interesting. I feel similarly about humor horror. In the first part of this episode I talk about how it is really new. Novels in the humor horror genre really only peaked around 2009 and that's when this came out. 2008, 2009.

What elements of *John Dies at the End* do you think make it so much more enjoyable to read than other humor horror books or just make it a good horror novel in general?

BRYCE: I think it really is coming from a place of emotional reality, no matter how outlandish it gets. Maybe the best way for me to explain this is to get personal and talk about my little origin with this book.

I discovered this book right when it came out in 2009. And I had just moved home after graduating from college and failing to find a job because the economy had collapsed the year that I graduated college. And so even though I wasn't living in the Midwest, I had a lot of family ties to the Midwest. I had a lot of people who were experiencing that economic downturn. And I literally found this book, I read a review of it, it was like 9:30. I drove over to Borders before it closed and paid \$25 that I didn't have for that hardcover. Took it back home and read it all the way to the end of the Vegas chapter.

And I can remember just laughing in relief. And I don't think I would have put this together at the time, but I really don't think that it is a coincidence that this book really got, I mean it was being written in the run up to 2008, and had a self-published version come out in I believe 2008, and then this official Thomas Dunn St. Martin's Press edition came out in 2009.

And I think that it really resonated with a lot of people because you had people who had been doing what they were supposed to in the run up to this, and suddenly found that not working for them. Suddenly found that kind of a system turning on them and kicking them in the teeth.

I think it is also worth noting that this is the same time that the Iraq War was kind of at its height. And again this idea that we had come in knowing what we were doing and that just proving to be catastrophically untrue.

I think that what really comes through in a lot of Wong's books, or sorry, Pargin's books, we can get to that later, is the sense that evil is not this force with this grand plan, with this complex architecture of morality that you would get in a Clive Barker or Stephen King's books. In Pargin's books, evil is stupid, arbitrary cruel, and its effect on people is absurd.

It's just kind of looking at the world and just realizing that nobody knows what they are doing, and nobody has any answers. And when that happens you either have to laugh or scream. Pargin lets you do both.

MADDY: Yeah, I agree. I think we've both talked about this, that the characters are a great way to have that come through, where they are kind of losers. But like, this started in the 90s, late 90s, when Pargin started writing it. And they are just super relatable. It's easy to project yourself into them.

And because it's humor, it means that they have a sort of self-awareness that I think really resonates with a lot of readers without being very cheeky or off-putting in a way that humor protagonists often can be.

BRYCE: Right. And I think that, again, he's writing this from a place of reality. And I think that one of the things that Pargin has always been good at is writing from this place of economic reality where, they are working-class people and that's Pargin's background as well.

One of my favorite little things on the re-read is, after the first big night of chaos, when all the stuff goes down and it kicks off the story, the main character has to go to work. Because he has bills to pay and quite literally has to do that. The cops are able to find him because he's at his job because he has to be, because even though there is this interdimensional horror going on, he still has to pay his heating bill.

MADDY: He still has to go work at knock-off Blockbuster.

BRYCE: He still has to go work at knock-off Blockbuster. Which, again talking about the parallels in our lives, I was literally working at one of the last independent video stores as I read this. This book could not have been more up my alley.

I almost feel unfair talking about these books because even in the fourth book, even though I'm older in the timeline than these characters are, there is like a comment that John makes to Dave in the fourth book and I thought, "God dang, man! Are you talking to my wife or what?"

But yeah, just another example. When he has to go and pursue the first manifestation of the bad guy, like a big subplot is he has to gas up his car, literally, because he does not have the money to put gas in the car.

And this sort of economic tension is throughout the book. And characters cry when they can't pay their bills or are facing eviction or have the financial troubles that you don't see in a lot of fantastic fiction because that's the boring stuff.

But it's the stuff that makes it relatable and makes it resonate. No matter how wild these books get, there's just never losing that sight of this grind that we all get kind of stuck in at times, and just how easily it can push you down.

MADDY: Absolutely. I think obviously the book is very human and the way that John and Dave react to things is very human. But they basically become their neighborhood ghostbusters chapter. But at the end of the day, you're right, they are doing it so they can make some extra cash. They are not doing it for any goodness out of their heart or because they see these creatures and feel like they are necessarily the only ones who can help, though they are.

BRYCE: Right. It kind of becomes this survival mechanism for both of them in a way. And that's something that develops and changes as the books go on. But what I find interesting in this one is kind of the different approach. Because of the structure of the book, it's almost like three different stories that keep resetting themselves.

And so you almost have these three different sets of motivation throughout the book. There's that different reaction to it where, I just reread recently where the post-Vegas scenes where they are getting back to normal as much as they can and it's the characters of Jennifer, Dave and John and the very subtle way that all three of them have that different reaction as you can to that, to those circumstances, where Jennifer is just going like, "I don't want to be a part of this or anyone who is a part of this. I need to back away from this as quickly as possible."

Dave is kind of resigned to the fact that the stuff is going to happen. That he's just going to go to a McDonald's and watch Ronald McDonald autocannibalize.

MADDY: I forgot about that!

BRYCE: And John in the meantime is seeking it out and looking for weird things on the internet and looking for this.

MADDY: We are all John.

BRYCE: Yeah. And it is just a thrill for him. And it's interesting because that is kind of to a certain extent, it's that denial pragmatism or thrill-seeking behavior that it boils down to. They are all very realistic reactions. And they are all very rooted in who those characters were.

MADDY: Well, speaking of Ronald McDonald autocannibalizing himself, what are some of your favorite funniest moments in the book? We can go back and forth because I obviously have some as well. But hit me with some.

BRYCE: Well, I don't feel like we can go...

MADDY: Read a lot of these out loud?

BRYCE: We can't just skip past Ronald McDonald's cannibalizing himself, so where does that start?

"They saw a happy clown with his arms spread wide, one leg cocked at a forty-five-degree angle with a red floppy clown shoe tipped up into the air. Big smile spread across his red and white face welcoming paying customers into his burger factory. I remembered it from the last hundred times I had been there. What I saw at that moment was a clown standing there with his guts split raggedly open as if cut with a dull utility razor. He was, how can I put this delicately? In this perfectly rendered and shaded cartoon he was using his own white gloved hands to feed a rope of his own intestines into his mouth. Detailed. It was very detailed.

But it was his eyes that got me. His expressive cartoon eyes pulsed with a terror about to boil over into madness. Tears streaked his face. Sweat beaded his forehead. Those eyes pleaded with me. Looked right into me. Screamed to be put out of his misery. These eyes told a story, not just of a man eating himself, but a man forced to eat himself."

And I'm not reading that because it is the funniest part. But I think it really gets that line that he walks, where you see that image and you laugh because of the absurdity and the unexpectedness of it. But then you take a moment to think of what would it be like to be the only person seeing that? And it truly is horrific.

MADDY: Yeah. And I'm going to read a brief one where they are fighting some wig monsters. I say wig monsters. They are monsters that have hair and John and Dave just call them wig monsters because they look like bad wigs.

Someone tells the wig monster to open the box. "The thing apparently understood because it trundled over and started tearing at the flap with its beak. After several long clumsy minutes of this, during which I tried to show the little tear strip all FedEx boxes have, it finally stuck its snout inside and pulled out a sheet of wrinkled notebook paper."

I think that, and then the "Molly exploded like a meat pinata at a birthday party for very strong invisible children." It's just like a one-two punch. You think it's going to be a relatively normal description of something horrific, and then he comes in with "very strong invisible children" or that little tear strip on all FedEx boxes, and just reminds you that you are in the human world. But also that you are allowed to laugh as hard as you possibly can at all of this.

BRYCE: Who hasn't been frustrated by those tear strips?

MADDY: I know, I know. All of us. It supersedes human experience at this point.

BRYCE: I'd like to share "there was a sound like a garbage bag of pudding dropped off a tall building on the sidewalk."

And then what I think really does just sum up what someone who really didn't care about their body would react to a fatal wound.

“He righted himself, looked down at his wounds, and sighed like a man who had dropped a pie in his lap.”

MADDY: Yeah, and I feel like just, one for the corporate crowd, when he calls the monster that will end the universe, he says, “You look like you were made by a committee.” Truly Korrok is a monster that could have been an email, I think, at the end of the day.

And speaking of Korrok, we have both seen the underrated, currently streaming, movie adaptation of this first book. What are your thoughts on the movie that stars Paul Giamatti?

BRYCE: I would call it correctly rated. I feel weird talking bad about this movie because it is kind how I feel about the *Cloud Atlas* movie. It’s just a miracle that this movie exists in the first place. Jason Pargin has been very clear that this movie has helped his career a lot. And the fact that it basically is always playing on some streaming service or another acts basically as a commercial for the books. And people kind of go into it.

I think there is a lot to like in it. I think actually that if you are going to turn what would be probably a four-hundred-million-dollar NC-17 miniseries, if you had just directly adapted it into an independently budgeted horror comedy that probably cost under ten million dollars, the decisions it makes are very smart.

MADDY: I agree.

BRYCE: I like a lot of the character actors in there. I like Clancy Brown, Mr. Krabs himself, as Dr. Marconi. I think that’s great casting. I love Doug Jones as Roger North. I think that’s perfect. Whenever I reread the book I can’t help. He has that kind of strange benevolence to him, you know, where he’s just trying to help out.

MADDY: He looks human enough.

BRYCE: Enough. Yeah. But he’s just so unnerving at the same time.

Glynn Turman, who has had a remarkable career from the seventies on. If you don’t know him, if you’ve seen any of the *Ambien* films of the eighties, you definitely do as Detective Lawrence Appleton. He does a great job. He really sells his final lines extremely well.

MADDY: They all have great screaming voices, I think, as well.

BRYCE: Paul Giamatti is good.

The guys playing Dave and John are pretty good.

But I can’t help but feel like it misses the point. I even cringe to say that because it is such a fanboy thing to say. But here are two examples of things that bother me. Two jokes from the book, and the way that they adapt them.

There is a scene where in the movie Dave goes, “Who would have thought that John would be the one to end the world?” And it just trails off there. The voice over cuts.

But in the book he immediately goes, “Well, everyone. Literally everyone who met John would have thought that he would end the world.”

And the other time that gets me is, there is a scene that, for reasons that are just way too complicated to go into, Dave is forced to talk to John through a bratwurst. And so as he’s talking to him through the bratwurst, in the movie he goes basically like, “Ah, see! You can talk to me through a bratwurst! Let go of your ideas. My psychic vibrations can come through everywhere.”

In the book when he tries to put down the bratwurst he loses contact. There are literally like a chain of events that are so absurd that he does actually have to talk to him through the bratwurst.

So it's just that, the jokes that they tell, literally tell the exact opposite messages that the jokes in the book deliver. And let's face it, it does take away a lot of the complications in the third act that the book has. And without those complications I think the story gets a lot less interesting.

MADDY: I think they do a pretty good job, as someone who watched it very recently. And has only read this book once. I mean, we've touched on it earlier and I've talked about it in the beginning of the podcast, but this was a book that was written once a year for ten full years.

And it has multiple books essentially inside of it. And the way that they move from plot point to plot point I was really impressed by. Obviously there are great lines that are not in it. There are many that I can think of. The decision to at the very end, and I think they did a pretty good job handling that epilogue over the credit scene where they are, John and Dave are playing one-on-one and they go into an alternate universe and people show up and say, "You are here to save us." And they are, "We just have to go grab something from our dimension real quick," and John does the chatterbox signal with his hands and you know they are never going back.

But there is something about the book where they decide to just keep playing one-on-one basketball and let a group of teenagers nearby go in and come back out thirty minutes later having saved the world. And they are missing limbs and are all bloodied and they have swords, and John and Dave are just like, roll their eyes. They are like, "This world is for someone else now."

Which feels very human. And they are given that choice to be like, "No, thank you. Let the people who exist from the beginning of this book go in and save them."

BRYCE: Right.

You know what I miss? I miss the mural. I wish I had gotten to see the mural in Robert Marley's trailer.

Look, any adaptation is going to have the stuff that you miss. I really wish I had the chance to see that deer, though.

MADDY: Yeah, I wish... I think they do such a good job with feeding in Marconi, especially the line where, the opening of the book essentially where he performs an exorcism by mobile phone. And they are like, "He's the real deal."

But obviously the Vegas sequence where you think it is the big climatic battle of the book, and it kind of is, even though there is half the book left. You know, bright lights.

BRYCE: I've described the book before as three novellas in a trench coat. It's a strange structure, but it's also a strange book. So....

MADDY: Yeah. It kind of works.

So, Bryce, you have read the whole series. So I will kick it to you first.

What would you recommend to people, whether it's books or movies or what have you, for people who liked this book or think they would like to dip their toe into this subgenre?

BRYCE: It's kind of funny to me because I think the most one to one read alike isn't even in horror. It would be *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. And the reason I say that is because it's really, and we kind of touched on this in the horror-comedy thing, it's really, really hard to do a parody of something that is also a good example of the thing that it is parodying.

Maybe *Hitchhiker's Guide* and *John Dies at the End* are really the only examples I can think of that do it that well, where it is one to one. And where you can't say it is more of a parody or satire than it is the real deal.

So it's just, to me that's the one you want to go to. And it's funny because I always thought, "Oh, it would be cool if this series got to five because that is what the original Hitchhiker run was," and they just announced the contract for the fifth book.

I will say that obviously if you do like this then the sequels are going to be your closest thing to it. I think they are all excellent. The second one is probably my favorite. *This Book Is Full of Spiders, Seriously, Dude, Don't Touch It*.

That one is great because it's got, I think, some of the most on-point social commentary in it. Again, we discussed this kind of lumpy three books in a trench coat kind of plotting to it. But *This Book Is Full of Spiders* suddenly has the luxury of just being able to do a neat arc, and it's really well plotted. It just has a ton of momentum.

The places it goes are some of the darkest of any of his books. And it is really worth reading.

I don't want to talk too hard about it because I definitely think it is a good book, and I'd give it a solid B plus, but I'm not as big of a fan of the third book, *What the Hell Did I Just Read*, because the whole conception of it is that it is dealing with, so all the books to one extent or another deal with unreliable narrators. It's literally there in the title.

And I don't want to go ahead and say too much about it, because how that ends up playing out and how it jukes your expectations in a very real way are very much kind of the crux of the book. But I feel like *What the Hell Did I Just Read* basically deals with a creature that can mess with perception. So it's the one where you get the most time out of Dave's voice, and John and Amy have equal amount of narrator time.

But all three of them have different perspectives on the scenes that are happening and all three of them are being pushed in different directions by this creature. And it almost gets too clever. Because you have difficulty connecting at times.

I will say that I found *If This Book Exists You Are in the Wrong Universe* to be a welcome return to form. I think it was just phenomenal. It is definitely one of Pargin's best-plotted books. It just moves. It's funny, but it seems less concerned with being funny than the other three.

You kind of hate to say it for this franchise that is based around absurdist despair, gore, and the dirtiest jokes you can make on every page. But it is like a bit more mature than the other works? There is almost a kind of gentleness to it at times that caught me off guard.

And I say this as a book where people straight up got their eyeballs ripped out of their heads and have their faces stolen. It's just a fantastic read. My favorite book of 2022 in a lock.

I'll touch on just two more real quick. I'll just say everything that I've said about the *John Dies at the End* books also applies to the *Zoey* books, which is Jason Pargin's other series. They are science fiction, but they are very similar in tone, so if you like the genre of the *John Dies at the End* books, give them a shot. They have very much the same kind of social and class commentary. There is a lot of body horror style of stuff in it, if you like that element of the *John Dies at the End* books.

If you like the one, you'll like the other. I guarantee it. The sequel is very strong. Third book is supposed to come out this year or next and I am really looking forward to that.

And if I did have to pick a straight horror book to go with this, the one I'd go with would be *Horns*, by Joe Hill, his second novel. It's imperfect. It's got some very strange structural issues in the third act where I am still not sure why he did some of the things he did. But it does have this real similar dark humor and grunginess to it.

*Horns* is one of those books where when it works, it works, so it almost makes you forgive everything else. It's about this guy who is accused of his girlfriend's murder. He gets off, but everyone thinks he's done it. And so several years afterwards he wakes up from this night of blackout drinking and he has devil horns growing out of his

head. And basically anyone he meets instantly tells him their darkest secret, their worst thoughts, the worst things that they want to do. And he can basically make them act on it or tell him anything.

So he basically uses these abilities to piece together who did murder his fiancée. And it's interesting because there have been a lot of books over the years that have been, what if the devil is good, actually? They kind of have this sympathy for the devil thing in this very bland and kind of one-dimensional way. But *Horn* twists it, because the idea is he has more and more trouble acting like a human throughout the book. Face it, if everyone you met instantly showed you the worst side of themselves, how could you do anything else? If you literally saw the worst in everyone, you couldn't help but be a misanthrope.

Third act issues aside, it's a really fascinating read.

MADDY: Wasn't there an adaptation with Daniel Radcliffe?

BRYCE: Why, there was! And we don't have to talk about it.

MADDY: We don't have to talk about it! I was like, this sounds strangely familiar.

BRYCE: Let's put it this way. That was significantly worse than *John Dies at the End* and let's put it this way. If the book had some third act issues, the movie's third act, I saw it at Fantastic Fest, I was so excited, I was supposed to interview the director that day. And somewhere around the fifty-minute mark my jaw just literally hit my breastbone. I was going, "What are they doing?" And I didn't stop thinking of that for the rest of the run time.

What about you? Any readalikes?

MADDY: Yeah, I do.

I do want to jump on the Douglas Adams thing you mentioned earlier because obviously *Hitchhiker's Guide* was on my list. Pargin has said that his two greatest influences are Douglas Adams and Stephen King, which I think both blend pretty nicely in *John Dies at the End*.

But I really love the *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*, especially the show, which features Elijah Wood. It just combines very human aspects, but it does get a little bit more of that horror murder mystery still-on-earth kind of stuff.

And then for another book with dogs that have powers beyond our comprehension, I would recommend *The Hike*, by Drew Magary. It gets a little bit creepier, a little bit more absurdist, less straight humor, but it's a lot of fun. It's about a guy who goes to a conference, and it's set in a conference center hotel area in the woods. And he decides to just like go on an afternoon walk.

And it never ends. And he meets a lot of people and weird things. I highly recommend it. It's one of my favorite books in this kind of subgenre.

And I would also say *Alice Isn't Dead*, by Joseph Fink. From the people who did *Welcome to Nightvale*. This is a separate podcast that they did later. And then they did a novelization of it. I highly recommend it. I also love the podcast. And I've heard the audiobook is a lot of fun.

Grady Hendrix is kind of up there with Jason Pargin as reigning crowns of humor horror. So especially *Horrorstör* and *My Best Friend's Exorcism*.

But other books, and we'll put all of these on a Bibliocommons list and you can find it in the show notes, some of our other picks as well that you can check out from the library.

But yeah, that is humor horror.

Thank you, Bryce, for joining me.

BRYCE: Thank so much for having me, Maddy.

MADDY: Final best line visual from *John Dies at the End*?

BRYCE: Oh, I love the first villain. Part of the reason why I love him is because he has something of a naughty name. When we talk about books having that or a lot of horror comedy having a naughty name, a lot of horror comedy stopping at that first stage, this is a good example of that. And a lot of horror would just have some demon show up and he has a profanity name. And that's it. That's the joke. That's the end of it.

But the thing is, Pargin's name is actually fairly sophisticated. It's referring back to a semi-obscure story from the Bible. And the thing that I love about it is that he doesn't blink. He doesn't tip his hand. He just rolls with it.

And you either get the reference or you won't. That's one of my favorite things about Jason Pargin as a writer, is this faith that he has in his audience, that you will get it. That you are smart enough, that you are quick enough, that you'll make the connections. And I think that this is just a great early example of it where the demon, which apparently I can't say, he just explains his name. And then he says why that's his name. And it's the same as his name.

Look up the story of Legion, folks. It will make a lot more sense then. But it is such a wonderful little play on that. It just kind of shows his attitude so well. It's really hard to be funny, period. But it's even harder to write a dumb joke that is actually a smart joke, and a smart joke that is actually a dumb joke. And Pargin is just the master of both of those for me.

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MADDY: Thank you for listening to this very humorous episode of APL Volumes.

You can find a list of all the books, shows, and movies we discussed in the show notes, and copies of them are available to borrow through the Austin Public Library. If you want even more recommendations check out our personal pick service and get a personalized list from our expert librarians.

Thanks to my guest Bryce Wilson. If you see him out on the floor here at the Central Library, say hi and nerd out about Jason Pargin.

APL Volumes is recorded and produced in the Library's Innovation Lab, a part of the APL Innovate Digital Maker Space. The Austin Public Library is currently putting together a very cool digital maker space, which will offer not only recording equipment and hardware, but all kinds of audiovisual software for 3D modeling, graphic design, animation and much more. We are really excited to bring it to the public, so keep an eye out for it in the future.

Many thanks to the APL Innovate team for their guidance and input on this podcast.

A big thank you to Peter Hofstad, APL senior publication information specialist; to Michael Wheat, one of APL's graphic designers, for our fantastic logo, and to Stephen Plail, my adult service coworker and a member of the APL Innovate team, for our theme song and for being the recording wizard.

This podcast is all library, all the time. Our next episode will be on the paranormal subgenre. We're reading *The Only Good Indians* by Stephen Graham Jones.

Thanks for listening and for supporting your local public library.

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