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The last rock-and-roll novel: a dark valentine to small-town music scenes everywhere

An epidemic of violence is sweeping the country: musicians are being murdered onstage in the middle of their sets by members of their audience. Are these random copycat killings, or is something more sinister at work? Has music itself become corrupted in a culture where everything is available, everybody is a "creative," and attention spans have dwindled to nothing?

With its cast of ambitious bands, yearning fans, and enigmatic killers, *Destroy All Monsters* tells a haunted and romantic story of overdue endings and unlikely beginnings that will resonate with anybody who's ever loved rock and roll.

Like a classic vinyl single, *Destroy All Monsters* has two sides, which can be read in either order. At the heart of Side A, "My Dark Ages," is Xenie, a young woman who is repulsed by the violence of the epidemic but who still finds herself drawn deeper into the mystery. Side B, "Kill City," follows an alternate history, featuring familiar characters in surprising roles, and burrows deeper into the methods and motivations of the murderers.

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From Reader Review Destroy All Monsters: The Last Rock Novel for online ebook

Paolo Latini says

A metaphor for the times we are living in, where an excess of information destroys all the contents and makes noise from all the signals. To this supporting metaphor are added other elements, taken from ancient and sylvan imagery and build a disquieting but realistic fresco.

<https://americanorum.wordpress.com/20...>

iane says

High-profile literary fiction authors usually do a faulty job when they decide to write about rock music, especially when they try to dig into the underground. It's very hard to capture the wildly varied intentions and inner worlds of people who create strange sounds with little hope, or even desire, of becoming popular. When I read Jennifer Egan's *Visit from the Goon Squad*, after a few years of hearing hype everywhere and deeply wanting it to live up, I found myself so disappointed with its hollow and estranging portraits of punk that it felt like an insult, and that so many influential literary figures champion it like religion startles me even more. Or take Jon Franzen's *Freedom*: even though one of its main plotlines is about a rock 'n' roll dude, aside from some straining attempts at hip references the book uses rock tropes as window dressing rather than depth, so that it's weirdly hard to imagine what his music is, or how anyone could get excited about it. (As a counterexample, I do like Dana Spiotta's *Stone Arabia* for its willingness to go deep with specific personalities rather than aim for grand and ungrounded pronouncements.)

Right off the bat, Jeff Jackson's new novel rises above with its saturated atmosphere of oppressive dread and half-delusional idealism. It feels cryptic, in places borderline Lynchian, and it feels true. Being an active underground musician can seem like playing constant defense in a lost and losing batallion: acquaintances treat your taste with bewilderment and contempt, corporations like Spotify take your meager earnings, your favorite venues operate under cover from the authorities and disappear (or even burn down) just as they begin to flourish, people in your scenes get priced out of town, physical and mental health in these communities is often tenuous, &c&c. Yet undergrounds all over the world persist and yield beautiful acts of humanity, even if all they're running on is pure foolish fantasy. That contradiction is fundamental to this book, and as an unconnected ring of jaded fans begins murdering bands onstage, the unraveling of that fantasy is its engine.

Jackson hints that these independent killers have all reached the same conclusion: music is overabundant and losing its cultural meaning, and their duty is to thin the herd so that music matters again. The bands they target are mostly mediocre at best. They want to eliminate the noise. It's an allegory for modern times, when high tech is flattening art with the goal of making it interchangeable "content," background music for a "Boozy Brunch" or "Chill Vibes" (apparently the titles of two popular Spotify playlists?). The killers' premise is a big fallacy; unless you're Maroon 5 or something, in general mediocre music dies very quickly and with little outside help. But the motivation, the belief that violence is a force that gives life meaning, seeps into all the characters' lives, whether through the playacted violence of punk or the way each character becomes infected by the violent tragedies they witness. The more they try to fight their way out of the gory cycle, the more they seem to imitate it.

I love the way this book is divided into a Side A and a Side B, and how you have to flip it to read the other half. At the beginning the musician Shaun says, “I’m always trying to write A-sides....But when I’m listening, I prefer the B-sides. They’re the tunes where the bands bury their secrets.” I had to remember that when I finished Side A. At first the ending of that side disappointed me because its growing nihilism felt too pat, itself empty of meaning. But Side B, which occupies a strange parallel universe, then feels like a reconstitution, as the characters appear in different bodies and try to let their grief renew them. The ending of Side A began to make more sense.

I also love the atmosphere. It reads like a dark, experimental punk record might sound: swift, tense, full of vivid colors and bizarre visions, shot through with desperation and unreason. It sounds like a record that should exist but doesn’t yet. Where many stories include a journey into the underworld, Jeff Jackson’s characters spend the entire book traveling through many different underworlds and purgatories, always seeking the surface and maybe never reaching it. The settings, often abandoned or decrepit, vibrate with power: a huge cluster of practice spaces called “the Bunker,” a forest with a mysterious campground, a trashed basement, a rock club full of unexpected safety precautions, a beat-up cemetery surrounded by hunters shooting deer. In a rare blurb Don DeLillo calls this “an ancient folk tale,” and the atavistic pull of this book—the ceremony-like shows, the moments of reincarnation, the noticeably muted appearances of modern technology, the constant presence of intense red and violet colors, the charged treks through mysterious places—makes it feel like a person could read it with excitement and wonder far into the future, just like we can listen to punk or blues recordings from 50–100 years in the past and still feel like we’re being visited by the cries of unknowable spirits.

The crusty copyeditor in me got a little annoyed every time Jackson described music “building to a crescendo,” as the formal meaning of “crescendo” is the build to a climax, not the actual climax. But that petty distinction is mostly irrelevant now anyway, and if that’s the biggest issue I have, then I must have enjoyed this a lot. Which I did. I feel like there’s still much for me to find here. When I’m playing a noise show or listening to something especially strange, I keep thinking that one of the most wonderful emotions to experience with music is confusion: often it can mean you’re on the threshold of something that’ll deepen your life, even if in a small way. I still feel pleasant confusion after a first read, a beckoning sense of unresolved mystery, and that’s an encouraging sign.

Michelle Hogmire says

Argh, what a frustrating read! The premise of this book--an epidemic of audience members murdering bands at local music shows--is genius and timely, but the execution (pun intended) is not for me. There's been a weird trend in recent literary fiction (Christine Mangan's *Tangerine* being another popular example) of simultaneous extreme underwriting at a macro plot level and extreme overwriting at a micro sentence level. *Destroy All Monsters* reads less like a novel than like a collection of contained present tense scenes, with little to no real character development; we get "this character lost a family member" or "these characters, who used to be friends, had a falling out," but those are situations that everyone has experienced: actual character development comes in specific details and individualized quirks. Meanwhile, in terms of the lines, we get a lot of sorta overwrought clunkers like "The instrument looks uncanny, like some ancient object used in forgotten rituals to coax the rotation of seasons, the harvesting of crops, the cessation of plagues." I must admit, though, that this book gave me a ton of things to think about--perhaps as someone prone to overwriting who's currently (and anxiously) working on a present tense novel, I doth protest too much. (Pub Date Oct 16, 2018)

Meike says

When the massacre at the "Eagles of Death Metal" concert at the Bataclan happened, 90 music fans died and over 200 were wounded - I knew that could easily have been me, as it takes me less than two hours by train to reach that venue and I was contemplating to go see that very performance. This incident was part of a whole series of Islamist terror attacks which happened on that Friday in November 2015 in Paris.

Meanwhile, it feels like mass shootings have become an epidemic in the United States where guns are easily available and politicians are dubiously hesitant to talk about domestic terrorism when these crimes are committed by white people (and most of them are).

In "Destroy All Monsters", the US faces a mass shooting epidemic in which the targets are musicians and their audience, and the motives of the perpetrators remain unclear. Our protagonists Xenie, Shaun and Florian are musicians and/or music fans and when one of the mass shootings finally happens in their town, they are all affected by it differently.

Jackson finds smart ways to connect the topic with the narrative structure: As the story goes on, the whole text feels more and more fragmented, as if the story was blowing up into the readers face, leaving behind bits and pieces of scattered narrative material. And there's a structural connection to music: The book is composed of a novel as an A-side and a short story as a B-side, the latter telling a part of the story with the protagonists in slightly different roles ("*B-sides. They're the tunes where the bands bury their secrets.*").

There is also a whole web of references and ideas connected to rifles which culminates in a seriously scary hunting scene in a forest that becomes a meditation on the nature of human cruelty - if the reader is afraid to get hit by a bullet, a segment is extremely well done.

While the characters we meet all have complex psychological problems (mental health being an issue in many mass shootings), the idea expressed by Xenie that at the bottom of the shootings might be some kind of purge, intended to free the world of mediocre musicians and to be a measure against the commodification of music, points to totalitarian ideology - Islamist extremism, fascism, white supremacy, you name it, all of these belief systems also aim to get rid of an imagined enemy in order to "*purify*" society.

That Xenie sympathizes with this idea could be an interesting part of the story, but remains underexplored. The same is true for the parts discussing the human fascination with control and violence and the question of a possible connection between the state of modern rock music and violence: "*Perhaps they (the shooters) represent the true essence of the audience. He simply refers to them as fans.*" - this could mean all kinds of things, but when dealing with such a topic, this degree of ambiguity can make a reader very uncomfortable.

On top of that, the occult plays an important role, as well as song birds and suicide - there is just a little too much going on, with the consequence that the story loses focus: The reader is offered ideas, but what follows from them?

A daring and provocative novel, and overall an ambiguous experience. But maybe Vernon Subutex, 1 (which I LOVE) ruined me for that kind of book! :-)

Jeff Jackson says

I wrote this, so take the rating with the usual skepticism. It's a book about music, small-town art scenes, violent plagues, voices from the beyond, and how far you'll go to do right by your friends. Like a cassette or classic vinyl single, the book has both a Side A and Side B - read one side, then flip it over and upside-down and read the other.

It received advanced praise from Don DeLillo, Janet Fitch, Ben Marcus, Dana Spiotta, and Dennis Cooper. Michael Silverblatt of KCRW's Bookworm called it "an ancient epic in modern times." The New York Times, LA Times, Washington Post, and NPR wrote extremely positive reviews. Pitchfork picked as one of the "Best Music Books of 2018."

"A wild roar of a novel. Writing about music is tricky. Ninety-nine percent of the time hearing the actual song or going to the actual concert is far more revealing than any paragraph describing it. But Jackson pulls off this near-impossible feat, pulling the reader past the velvet ropes into the black-box theaters and sweaty, sticky-floored stadiums." -Marisha Pessl, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

"If you are new to Jeff Jackson's fiction then welcome. Be excited. Be ready to fall in love. Be just a little bit afraid." -Laura van den Berg

"Jeff Jackson's *Destroy All Monsters* is not only my favorite book of the year, it is my favorite rock novel ever." -David Gutowski, Largehearted Boy

"A masterful work by someone I'd dare to call one of the greatest living authors." -Vol. One Brooklyn

"At some point, I began to think of it as an ancient folk tale. It's fine work, with a scattered narrative set within a tight frame. Fast-moving throughout – fragile characters who suggest a bleak inner world made in their own collective image. Birds and deer very impressive." -Don DeLillo

"Delightful in its use of playful forms—including, appropriately, an A and B side—this taut, atmospheric rock and roll thriller touches a raw nerve with its subject matter. Add the artist's struggle authentic power and the carrot of fame—*Destroy All Monsters* is rock enough for anyone." -Janet Fitch

"Jeff Jackson is one of contemporary American fiction's most sterling and gifted new masters. With *Destroy All Monsters*, he has raised the high bar his work already set. It's a novel that impresses on many levels, with its beautifully hypnagogic story and writing that is a wonder to behold." -Dennis Cooper

"*Destroy All Monsters* has a distinct pulse--a kind of heart beat--that comes out of the rhythm of the prose, the inventiveness of the form, and the willingness of Jeff Jackson to engage the mysterious alchemy of violence, performance, and authenticity. This accomplished, uncanny novel is simultaneously seductive and unsettling." -Dana Spiotta

"Jeff Jackson's new novel surges with new-century anxiety and paranoia as it documents a fraught new state of vulnerability in which maybe everything is coming to an end. In other words, it's a clear-eyed, stone cold vision of what's to come." -Ben Marcus

Kyra Leseberg (Roots & Reads) says

Musicians in small town music scenes are no longer safe at their shows. Violence erupts at random shows across the country when audience members pull weapons and murder the band members on stage.

"Everybody was slow to call it an epidemic. They didn't want to believe these deaths were connected."

Like a vinyl record, **Destroy All Monsters** has two sides: *Side A* is a novel following musicians Shaun and Florian through the downfall of the music scene in the town of Arcadia due to violence. We read about the shock and fear as the epidemic hits too close to home and grieve with Shaun's girlfriend Xenie in the aftermath.

"The first killings were terrifying, but as they gained momentum my reaction started to change. I saw it. There was a pattern. An idea behind what the killers were doing. I could feel their thoughts buzzing. I could almost trace the shadow cast by their actions."

After the Arcadia tragedy, Florian takes the stage with his band in an attempt to shed the constant fear and bring the community together but suffers a breakdown in the process.

"The killers wanted music to matter again, she says. They wanted to purify it. It's like they were thinning the herd, putting wounded animals out their misery."

Side B is a short story following an alternate history with the same characters with several surprises and focuses more on the methods of the murderers.

As a whole, **Destroy All Monsters** explores the ways in which violence (in this case, mass shootings) effects individuals and communities and the futile search for answers. I enjoyed the descriptions of small town music scenes and the passion of the community.

Unfortunately, I found a lot of complex ideas/theories that were mentioned and decisions made by certain characters remained unexplored and because of that, the story fell flat for me. I didn't connect with any of the characters because I couldn't fully understand their motivations as they didn't have enough opportunity to fully develop.

Thanks to FSG and NetGalley for providing an ARC in exchange for my honest review. **Destroy All Monsters: The Last Rock Novel** is scheduled for release on October 16, 2018.

James says

As a fan of Jeff Jackson's previous two books (2013's *Mira Corpora* and 2016's *Novi Sad*), I was greatly looking forward to his new novel, and *Destroy All Monsters* doesn't disappoint. The book's high-concept premise (essentially, an epidemic involving young people murdering musicians during their live shows) is certainly audacious, and Jackson manages the tricky feat of capturing the feel of the milieu that he's depicting here. I've sometimes felt that trying to describe music in a book can be a fool's errand (perhaps equivalent to trying to describe a painting to a blind person using only words), yet somehow he accomplishes it here; I especially enjoyed how, in one scene, the music is described as a "...machine that spits out

iridescent arcs of broken glass." I also find it interesting how he's written a rock novel that (aside from quoting the lyrics to "Ring of Fire" and mentioning Johnny Ace) name drops almost no real-life bands, choosing instead to focus on imaginary groups, some of whom have quite imaginative names (in particular I found the name "Jerusalem Crickets" quite fetching). A less secure author, perhaps desperate to appear knowledgeable about the subject they're writing about (and obsessed with scoring some kind of indie credibility), would probably have taken the opposite tact and bombarded the reader with a bevy of references. And while the book could be seen as a sort of mirror for our own dark ages, stitched together from random guitar riffs, drones, screams, and tarot cards, I'm more impressed with the atmospheric prose style itself. A random sentence that caught my fancy: "A city bus drives by, empty of passengers, lit up like an operating room." Or my absolute favorite, "His strangulated face resembles a punctuation mark in a foreign alphabet."

The action of the book mostly unfolds in a "conservative industrial city" known as Arcadia. In Greek mythology, of course, Arcadia was the demesne of Pan, the only Greek god who suffers an actual demise. Seeing as how Pan was considered the god of Music (among other attributes), and how this book concerns itself with the death of music itself, this all seems very thematically appropriate. Although their motivations are murky, the killers seem to have an almost Trappist yearning for silence, but nature seems to make a very mockery of their desires. The novel is very obsessed with the aural, even outside of its depictions of rock and roll music: on these pages birds sing, insects pulsate and hum, leaves whisper, trees exhale... and in a certain macabre light, the actions of the killers results in sounds that could be construed as musical: the staccato rhythm of gunshots, the dying screams of their victims... on page 139, a character's fingertips "...linger along the wooden banister, touching the knots and indentations as if they're notations in a score she once knew." The cumulative impression is that of sound immutably woven into the warp and weft of the world itself.

Perhaps Plutarch was wrong and the Great God Pan is not dead after all...

Lori says

Review to come

Nathanimal says

Some gripping scenes in this book. Where the cover and title suggested, to me, something more along the lines of black-humored punk, this novel actually spends its time on the emotions surrounding abandonment, death, being left out, not measuring up—you know, the real stuff. I liked the obverse telling of the story on side-B, trading the negative and positive spaces of the novel while also giving it all a stir.

Therese says

With an actual "A side" and "B side" embedded in its structure, this novel is sort of the literary equivalent of a vinyl punk single: disturbing, painful, raw, spare, blood-soaked, death-obsessed, the sex linked to despair; deceptively simple, sometimes to the point of monotony; coldly, resolutely uninterested in your comfort or pleasure; unwilling to make concessions to mainstream conventions. And I expect its echoes will be ringing around in my head a long time after reading it. Like some of Jackson's earlier novels, it's a story of

underground scene kids, lost, abandoned, disillusioned, and in rebellion. The story is hard to make sense of in places, but I wonder whether that might be part of the point: that the violence is nonsensical and has no underlying coherence to it.

Nate D says

Spare, obliterated, perfectly formed as something etched into a mirror or a monument. The words are so finely chosen that they read like poetry while remaining utterly transparent to the images they convey, a series of signs each fully imbued with its own power, symbolist without needing to be symbolic, archetype seeking no outside referent. It's all right here: rock and death, intertwined from the first. There's an extreme formal grace as well, a slow unfolding of shapes that leave a space around the lines for the weight of all those elaborations chopped from the text as unnecessary to its primal motion. What's left, distilled, vibrates with ghosts.

Side A stutters in the final groove. Flip the disc. Continue to the b-side. Which as we know is the space allowed to be more cryptic. Where, as we know, *the bands bury their secrets*.

Each side of a record is a different world, but mere millimeters separate the grooves. Through that thin vinyl, details creep through, penetrating each of the otherwise parallel surfaces. And what is a record, but a series of concentric lines? A spiral, a bullseye. If the twinned spirals of this novel meet, its at the center, in the void couple pages in the middle of the book, a space of of blank possibility.

Once the B-side has unspooled through its mysterious noisescape and resolved, much as it can, what is left? Like any good 7", there's nothing but to flip the record. The A-side awaits, changed by the experience of side B.

The sides are not exactly versions of eachother, not exactly compliments or halves of a single whole. They are imperfect echoes and the depth of the imperfections is bottomless. There, they reach the infinite that the primal scuzzy force of rock and roll has always sought. Tape hiss, amp hum, static garble. It's not for nothing that a quote about EVP serves as an epigraph here. In the white noise of guitar feedback surging around searching chords, we are offered a fleeting brush with the beyond.

Janet says

This atmospheric rock and roll thriller touches a raw nerve with its subject matter, an epidemic of mass shootings targeting (mostly mediocre) rock bands. The author couldn't have possibly anticipated the environment into which his novel would be published, but it was eerily prescient, and its surrealism seemed all the more real to me--underscoring that we're living in a surreal world now.

The novel follows an underground music scene in a small rust-belt town of Arcadia as an epidemic of cold-blooded killings is going around like a virus, and whether 'the show must go on' or not is part of the puzzle.

Rock and roll is the sound, the actual music, but it also creates an aesthetic world, and serves as a refuge and a community, the performances a way to lift us out of the tedium and banality of everyday life. But what happens when the music begins to all sound alike, when the meaning, the creativity and true musicianship has disappeared and all that's left is the communion of the show? It's the end of rock and roll, at least as seen by the perpetrators of the millions. **DESTROY ALL MONSTERS** questions the balance between the artist's struggle for authentic power and the carrot of fame.

But this is not any straight-ahead thriller. Jeff Jackson, known for such experimental fictions as his first novel *Mira Corpora*, creates with his fiction a haunted, claustrophobic, shapeshifting, multilayered reality perfectly capturing the mythic quality of an underground music scene. And like a vinyl record, there's an A and a B side--you read it in one direction and then flip it over, where a counternarrative is offered, not *Rashomon* style--one version of the book's events contradicting the other, but offering another angle. Genders flip, we get the point of view of the killers rather than the victims.

A book that's both thoughtful and fast-paced, beautifully observed and yet raw and gritty, it's in no danger for being shot for mediocrity.

June Amelia Rose says

I love this book for reasons I can't describe. An epidemic of bands being shot while performing breaks out across the united states, and the characters cope with the loss in a wide cast of ways. I love any book that deals explicitly with rock music and punk culture. One of the most telling things I got out of this book, despite its macabre and violent subject matter towards musicians, is that reading it made me want to pick up my guitar and play in a band again. That's the mark of a good book.

Kelby Losack says

In-depth review coming soon.

Kris says

Great NYT review -- so excited to read this novel! <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/16/books/review/destroy-all-monsters.html>...
