



The Basic Eight

Daniel Handler

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Flannery Culp wants you to know the whole story of her spectacularly awful senior year. Tyrants, perverts, tragic crushes, gossip, cruel jokes, and the hallucinatory effects of absinthe -- Flannery and the seven other friends in the Basic Eight have suffered through it all. But now, on tabloid television, they're calling Flannery a murderer, which is a total lie. It's true that high school can be so stressful sometimes. And it's true that sometimes a girl just *has* to kill someone. But Flannery wants you to know that she's not a murderer at all -- she's a murderess.

The Basic Eight Details

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From Reader Review The Basic Eight for online ebook

mark monday says

The "Basic Eight" are a group of teenage friends. Flannery Culp is our neurotic narrator. The novel is about love and murder and friendship in high school. This review of THE BASIC EIGHT features my very own Basic Eight (minus two or three) from Los Alamitos, Orange County. Photos circa 1988.

KEY WORDS:

REALISTIC ? PRIVILEGE ? SARCASM ? SAN FRANCISCO
UNREALISTIC ? PRETENSION ? FRIENDSHIP ? GREG

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Jeff:

On a technical level the novel is somewhat impressive, given that it is a first novel from a novice author. I enjoyed the dark, intelligent humor because I gravitate towards darkness and intelligence when it comes to my entertainment. I particularly enjoyed the character of Natasha. She's the sort of chick I also gravitate towards. Overall the novel felt somewhat realistic to me because I engaged in many 'Basic Eight' activities during high school such as talks about The Arts while listening to classical music over a sophisticated dinner. Unfortunately, I was a +1 to that group of adjunct friends; my own Basic Eight mainly indulged in binge drinking on our parents' various boats. Sigh.

I grew up to be a Website Developer. I make more money than you can even imagine.

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Kathy:

OH MY GOD THIS BOOK MADE ME LAUGH!!! SO FUNNY! IT WAS FUNNY BUT WITH A SAD AND SORTA DESPERATE CORE TO IT, JUST LIKE ME! HAHAAHAHAHA! I'M NOT SURE I UNDERSTOOD EVERYTHING BUT I LIKED WHAT I UNDERSTOOD! HA! OK I'M JUST KIDDING, I UNDERSTOOD EVERYTHING BUT SOMETIMES I PRETEND NOT TO UNDERSTAND THINGS BECAUSE, WELL, I DON'T KNOW WHY! JUST BECAUSE! ANYWAY, GOOD BOOK!

I GREW UP TO BE A SCHOOLTEACHER! AND A MOTHER! TO A WHOLE LOTTA RUGRATS! PLUS I FELL OFF OF A WATERFALL AND SURVIVED!

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Mike:

Wow, reading this book was like reading my life story, well, not my whole life story and not the whole book either. Just the part about the gay kid, that really spoke to me, I understood where he was coming from and I admired his courage in coming to terms with it so young. But honestly, a lot of the book annoyed me, it wasn't "laugh-out loud" funny, it was more of the sarcastic sort of humor that Marcy & Mark like so much and I think that kind of humor gets boring after a while, just the same sarcastic tone of voice over and over again, constant sarcasm which is really just being mean disguised as being funny. So I loved the gay character and I loved some of the girls, they were fierce... but I can't say I loved the book too much.

So after graduating I went on various Christian missions around the world until I came to terms with being gay. Getting it on with another closeted Christian missionary can be an eye-opening experience. Now I'm married, to a man. Life is good!

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Kelly:

I have to admit that I didn't understand many of the references in this book. Also the author mixed up Oprah and Dr. Phil and that didn't make sense. And one other thing really confused and bothered me: this is set in San Francisco? And a schoolteacher – in San Francisco – had his house burned down because he was gay? Okaaaaay. Well that would never happen. I love fantasy but I don't love things that are set in the actual real world that don't bother to get their facts straight. Facts are important.

I grew up to be a Senior Accountant for Pacific Gas & Electric.

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Craig:

The girls in this book sucked! So neurotic. Why complicate your life with so much bullshit? Sometimes I just wanted to slap them all, they were so fucking pretentious. FUCK THAT ATTITUDE. Why couldn't they just get drunk and relax, have a regular high school experience, why be such snobs, what's the fun in that? BORING. A boring book about boring, angsty teenagers who don't realize that they live lives of complete privilege. And goddamnit, they should be enjoying that privilege! Kids like that should be having a good time and getting drunk on boats, not hosting boring dinner parties and whining to each other all the time about their boring lives. STUPID. Only a liberal with too much time on their hands would write something like this.

I grew up to be a high school Vice Principal.

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Marcy:

I agree with Craig: these were some whiny, pretentious types who loved talking about themselves. Real twits - the sort of people that Jeff & Bill & Mark snuck off to hang out with because I guess they were just too cool for getting drunk on boats with the rest of us every weekend. What kind of teenager wants to talk about classical music, what kind of teenager prefers theatre to sports? The lame kind. But I will give it this: it has the sarcastic, nihilistic humor down pat. I loved that. I also enjoyed how it took sexual harassment seriously and I really, really enjoyed the comeuppance that one teacher experienced. I hope that scumbag stays in a coma for the rest of his life. I also didn't mind that Adam State was beaten to death with a crochet mallet. Some guys deserve that. He was one of them.

I moved to Alaska and became an Assistant District Attorney. Later, I had a change of heart and became an Assistant Public Advocate. From one side of the courtroom to the other. Funny how life turns out.

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Bill:

Eh. The book was self-indulgent. It was entertaining, but by the end all of the characters annoyed me. Although I did laugh a lot. It didn't make me think, but it did make me laugh. And laughing is good. Right? I dunno. Whatever.

I grew up to be a Physical Therapist. And a Jazz Musician.

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Mark:

I quite liked this one. It was a breeze to read and I liked the mind games it played on the reader – although the tricks it played were predictable, they were amusing tricks all the same. The author perfectly conveys a certain kind of voice – sarcastic, highly intelligent, mordantly funny, angsty, insecure. Flannery Culp is a striking and surprisingly loveable creation. The book started off fun and the fun only increased as the narrative darkened. Overall: smart, lightweight entertainment. One caveat: absinthe = acid? Really? No. I've tried both many times when much younger. Very different effects. Come on, Handler.

Anyway, I grew up to be a Goodreads Troll.

I'm pretty annoyed with a lot of the Goodreads reviews of this book. Some people need to understand that KIDS LIKE THIS DO EXIST. For real, people, they truly do. Just because their lives are foreign to your own personal experience, it does not mean that those lives aren't possible. Your teenage years are not everyone's teenage years. I mean really, duh, get your heads out of your asses. My friend Greg's review was particularly condescending in how it posited that Daniel Handler was probably an outcast in high school – and so the kids in this book live lives that the author *wished* he had been able to live. It is all basically Handler's fantasy of an enjoyable high school experience, one where the outsider has a clique of intellectual friends and is finally able to get back at those who supposedly spurned them... when in reality he was probably just a lonely, friendless little loser. UGH, GREG, UGH! I think that since Greg was apparently a jock in high school, it is hard for him to imagine that people who weren't like him and his friends could ever

have Basic Eight-type times in high school. That they could have even enjoyed high school at all – people who weren't like him and his friends must have been completely miserable, right? Unfortunately that is a common jocko misperception – I remember coming across that attitude in high school. I sneered at the arrogant cluelessness of that attitude while drinking on boats with my own Basic Eight. I also sneeringly recounted the cluelessness of such attitudes over many a sophisticated dinner, in between discussing the theatre and other arts, while listening to classical music, all with my Adjunct Eight, where I was a +1.

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Look at us all together: my Basic Eight, my Adjunct Eight, plus some models and some jocks and a duck. But no cheerleaders! Not allowed.

Teresa says

Before I read this, I thought it might be like the movie *Heathers* (not that I've seen it). But because I enjoy Handler's (and Lemony Snicket's) humor and morbidness and wit and his narrators being pedantic language snobs, I read it. It's his first novel for adults and despite this being about high school kids, it's definitely for adults (and maybe the oldest of teens).

I like the not-subtle-at-all skewering of pop-TV-psychologists, and the narrator's merging of the past of her journal entries with the present as she 'revises' it for publication. In the beginning she tries to explain away, or at least point out as she 'revises,' how she knows something before she should, but eventually she just abandons the whole pretense. Is she a confused teenager; or is this another skewering, this time of tell-all books? To say what else I like (and what other book/movies I thought of) would give too much away.

About halfway through I knew what was coming and then I thought I was wrong and then there it was. Knowing it, though, just means being a careful reader and doesn't take away any of its power.

Something that happened when the narrator was much younger and that gets only part of a paragraph holds the answer to one of the questions (a literal question -- there are 'study questions' (and 'vocabulary') at the end of several of the 'journal' entries). That paragraph is about the only subtle thing in the novel: this is satire after, and above, all.

Callie says

So if I had read this in high school I can guarantee you it would have been my favorite book at the time. It is an incredibly mean spirited high school drama with a sick twist, revolving around a clique of outcast/precocious/uppity/self-involved intellectuals, much like myself (or the self I thought of myself as) in high school. I can see myself at 15, reading *The Basic Eight* outside a coffee shop, listening to the dead milkmen on my walk-man and smoking clove cigarettes... oh so very cool. It's definitely a page turner, I found myself having a hard time putting it down, in more of a guilty pleasure type of way than anything.

I'm willing to bet in less than 2 years, this turns into the next "Mean Girls". I can see Camilla Belle playing the heroine, Flannery Culp; and Evan Rachel Wood playing the mysterious and infamous closeted lesbian, Natasha.

Mark my words, it will happen- or a similar casting anyway.

Fans of Lolita and/or coming of age/high school genre will dig this.

Anna says

This book was a thoroughly enjoyable 4-star read to begin with. Fun characters, dark humor, deliciously written sentences. This kind of thing: "Natasha arrived, bearing cleavage and brie, and immediately fell into a squabble with Gabriel over how to bake it properly. Kate and I sat basking in the pretentiousness of it all."

It's so self-aware it's ALMOST annoying, except that it rings so completely true. Apparently the author drew quite a bit from his own San Francisco high school experience, which makes passages like this all the more hilarious:

"'I'm a homosexual,' he said medically.

'Homosexual?' I said. 'Isn't that what they do to milk?'"

Anyway, all of this would have been pleasant enough, plus something something metafictional whatever, and THEN you get to the very end, which throws a remarkable wrench in the works that forces you to rethink everything about what you've read. Seriously, I went back to the beginning and reread a few chapters just to make sure. I don't want to say any more about it, but trust me. Such a pleasant surprise of a book.

Lucía says

Poorly written, thinly-veiled satire of my high school. A friend claimed that this was brilliant, so I slogged through it.

Greg says

Karen may disagree with this theory, but I came up with it while reading *The Basic Eight* and I'll expound on it here. I was going to write a second part to this review, but it was going to be chock full of spoilers, and I kind of hate spoilers. And some book reports.

This book is part of the *Secret History* tradition of contemporary literature. But, as the cover of this book would seem to allude to for anyone who grew up in the late eighties, it also points towards the movie *Heathers*. This book, Donna Tartt's and the movie all can be summed up by Winona Ryder's line from *Heathers*, "Dear diary, my teen angst has a body count." They are about kids who are smarter and more cultured than their peers who end up killing someone. Add lots of other examples of books into this. Look up Karen's "Like Secret History" shelf for more examples.

The obvious reason why books are continually being compared to *Secret History* is that it's a pretty

successful comparison. Just look at, well this book was pretty hip in the early oughties, or how *Special Topics in Calamity Physics* did, and then there are other books that have done pretty well too but I haven't read them. It's not secret conspiracy (rim shot) that when something makes publishers money there are a gazillion knock-offs busted out in a feeding frenzy of sucking on the tit relatively limited amount of money consumers are willing to shell out on books (relative to say movies). If you disagree with me on this idea just pretend I'm talking crazy and keep on being wide eyed and innocent but don't venture outside alone too often.

I'd argue that this particular sub-sub-genre of fiction is propagated by another reason. This is where Karen doesn't agree with me. I think some writers are anti-social people who have to have suffered some kind of social trauma in their younger days. Now this isn't all writers, but some. I'm guessing that in their teenage years they had ideas of their superiority to the masses of people in their, say, school and while they sat alone somewhere (say the library instead of subjecting themselves to the humiliation of sitting along in a crowded room of 500 people) reading or doing whatever they did. Or maybe they had their small group of friends, but they weren't really in. But they were smart. And in their fantasies they were part of an exclusive clique of very smart outsiders who were so above everyone else, but the violence of repression of course comes through even in fantasies and murder of those who spurned them comes eventually to the forefront. Where else except in a fantasy world such as these would someone be cool for knowing Ancient Greek, or because they listened to 18th century Opera instead of to the incessant droning guitars of cretinous rock music? In a slightly modified manner this archetype is present in *Twilight*. Or say in *Buffy* (although interestingly in *Buffy* the image of the fantastical is destroyed when seeing what the non-supernatural / 'real-world' thinks of The Scooby Gang.

I think there are lots of writers who would like to re-write their teen years to be cooler for what they were really like.

And I think that there are quite a few readers who also find something endearing about this type of narrative. Or maybe they just relate.

Karen for some reason disagrees, but what does a former Prom Queen know about this kind of stuff anyway?

Rebecca McNutt says

This book had me thinking back to the film *Heathers* (1988). Comedic, darkly surreal and utterly unforgettable, *The Basic Eight* is as lovable as it is morbid.

Heather *Awkward Queen and Unicorn Twin* says

A friend recommended this book to me, and while I usually trust and agree with her literary opinions, I hated this book so much. It was so pretentious (the narrator constantly corrected her sentences ending in a preposition. for example. Just write it the right—*correct*—way in the first place!). I think it tried to be funny, but it was hard to tell, and it wasn't funny anyway. There were digs at the reader's intelligence and ejaculations of "Dear reader!" (that only works in like, classic novels). The Satanic thing, as well as the absinthe thing, was talked about throughout the entire book, yet ended up being really downplayed. The characters meant to represent real life people had annoying and stupid names like "Winnie Moprah." Lastly,

are there really high school students wearing suits to school and throwing dinner parties? Ugh. I just couldn't find anything to enjoy about this book.

Kat says

SHIT

Clare says

How do I love "The Basic Eight"? Let me count the ways. I love the delicious untrustworthiness of the narrator. I love the cheerfully horrifying violence. I love the snarky questions for the reader at the end of each chapter, textbook-style, that don't just remake the points but cleverly further the plot. I love the dizzying revelations at the end and I love the physical descriptions of the clothes, the disastrous party, the drunkenness. I think I'll go read it again right now.

Randee says

This book, I see, is being compared to 'The Secret History' by Donna Tartt and 'Special Topics in Calamity Physics.' I disagree strongly. Both Ms. Tartt, especially Ms. Tartt, and Marisha Pessl are not only better writers, but they both are far superior in execution of a story.

Not that 'The Basic Eight' lacks merit. I found it to be an interesting read. My complaints are two-fold. I thought the execution was rather clumsy. I think if this had been a bit more streamlined, it would improve and elevate the story. My much bigger problem is the dialogue. It rings false. I think Mr. Handler did not channel a female teenager very believably. I was conscious throughout the entire story of this weakness, pulling me out of the story in fits and starts. This is a problem. As the novel progressed, instead of navigating through a maze of tangled relationships and situations, I found myself feeling the plot became more and more unbelievable and outlandish. This made the ending lack the punch I am sure the author intended.

Erin says

Well, damn, this book is *smart*. I'm not talking about the ending (I don't actually think all the mechanics work out perfectly) so much as Flannery herself, in all her glorious unreliable narrator-ness. The book is her diary, which she's editing for publication from prison - the treatment of time is beautifully messy and fun. You've got (1) traditional diary-style storytelling, (2) annotations at the original time of writing (i.e. Flannery giving her friend her journal instead of telling her a story and then stopping and saying, wait, I'm only writing this now, that won't work), (3) annotations during the editing process, (4) entire anecdotes added in and acknowledged as dramatized (i.e. a scene in which her friend gives her a ride and they argue briefly about their group's new nickname - The Basic Eight - and then Flannery gets out of the car and tells you that she walked to school that day, but she knows a conversation like that happened at some point, and this seemed like as good a place as any to include it), (5) conversations repeated word-for-word, between different characters (actually my favorite part of the book - Flan talks to Adam, and then repeats the

conversation with Gabriel, this time taking Adam's role - it's identical, down to the descriptions of expressions and such), (6) open acknowledgement of all of it! She wants you to know she's unreliable! She wants you to see the seams where things were pieced together, and not care, because it's her story, damn it! And it's SO GOOD.

Dennis says

It's obvious that this is a first novel. If you've read any of the Lemony Snicket books, you'll see where they came from. Despite its gimmicky plot, horribly precocious teenagers, and its overall grimness, I found myself entranced and enchanted about this book. The Basic Eight are who I wished I was in high school (hell, I wish I were like any of them now), and they're painted with an alternately endearing and maddening world-weary hopelessness but with just enough innocence to be likable.

Laura says

seriously what the actual fuck

Xueting says

OH MY GOD

So many people have compared this to Donna Tartt's *THE SECRET HISTORY*, and definitely there are lots of similarities. In *THE BASIC EIGHT*, an exclusive group of friends who are super rich and pretty pretentiously into high culture enter their senior year of high school. There are crushes, drinking, drugs and teachers involved, and yes finally a murder (not a spoiler).

I love the whole unreliable-narrator-editing-her-own-diary-after-the-crime format and mode. It's been done a lot, but not in this fresh and funny way, which probably can only be done by a teenager. What I love about this more than *THE SECRET HISTORY* is that the characters in *THE BASIC EIGHT* feel so real, like they're really speaking from the pages to me. When I wasn't reading I was thinking about them like they were in this world, what they could be doing now and all that. I don't know people like them personally and sometimes they talk and behave in ways quite dramatic I can't really see people talking and behaving, but their personalities were so much more fleshed out than those students huddling over their Greek books in *THE SECRET HISTORY*. Handler's dialogue is not only so witty and funny, but so sharply real. At so many points in the story I truly felt like I was reading a girl's story, not written by a man. This is crazy strange to me because I love the author's *A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS* books, and his writing here is SO wickedly different! I mean, there are clear traces of his style and plotting ideas that go into *ASOUE* too, but gosh the voices are very different, kudos to Daniel Handler, that's some great talent!

Anyway, the characters feel real to me mostly because they're the true kind of pretentious in the way that they're aware of their acts and mock themselves. They love how the high culture life of opera, classical music, lawn furniture and wearing suits to school looks, and they want it. While some of them have some of it, they know they're not perfectly prim people and don't try to be - they still listen to annoying indie-pop bands, they're not really that smart with Flan failing so many classes, even admitting she doesn't know every

American poet and willing to learn. While THE SECRET HISTORY gang feel like the cold perfectly white marble Greek statues the book's cover reminds me of, THE BASIC EIGHT gang are colourful messed-up teenagers.

Some things I didn't like so much were the blurry understanding of some characters like V____, JRM and Lily - they're pretty vague to me, like they could do anything anytime. And the drama leading up to the climax was a little far-fetched and confusing. But I guess that all makes the first-person diary POV genuine. I'm lucky that I didn't guess the big twist until, like, one page before the revelation. Lots of people did not enjoy it because they knew it early, but Flan did drop quite a few clues when I think about it, so maybe she didn't mind people guessing it way beforehand. Anyway I still didn't find it OMG-shocking, the ending was pretty abrupt. I closed the book with a sense of awe and loved it not really because of the twist, but because of how everything tied in together - the writing, style, characters, plot - in a really complete kind of way that shows the author's efforts and mastery.
