



The Coma

Alex Garland

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After being attacked on the Underground, Carl awakens from a coma to a life that seems strange and unfamiliar. He arrives at his friends' house without knowing how he got there. Nor do they. He seems to be having an affair with his secretary which is exciting, but unlikely. Further unsettled by leaps in logic and time, Carl wonders if he's actually reacting to the outside world, or if he's terribly mistaken. So begins a psychological adventure that stretches the boundaries of consciousness.

The Coma Details

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From Reader Review The Coma for online ebook

Chana says

This is one of those dream stories where reality is vague at best. There is a sense of dread in this book that, at least in part, comes from the very fine woodcuts made by the author's father. I was wondering which came first, the woodcuts or this novel. I suspect the woodcuts. I was waiting for illumination while I read this book and it never arrived, to my disappointment. Maybe others will understand this book, I hope so.

Fabian says

As modern writers go, this one has the career I covet and an incredible repertoire--he has been compared to Graham Greene. Well, this is the WRITER OF MY GENERATION (or Gen x, whatev), and therefore, it's Mr. Greene who should consider himself fortunate. (Forgive the hyperbole...)

For a book that requires no bookmark, this one is a must. Like a riveting film, one of the best ones out there that you probably never got to see in the theater and sweetens the day considerably when you do sit down and invest & hour and a half, this one is worth it. Even the woodcuts added to the drama by the writer's father gives it extra spice.

Alex Garland's "The Coma" is like Paul Auster's "Timbuktu": brief, told in a disembodied POV, a cool concept that you think might fail at any minute, might become pretentious or may end soon in nowheresville, but does NOT. Whereas Auster's work is plagued with obvious pathos, Mr. Garland chooses wisely to stray far and make beauty without the use of sentimentalism: a trait I find very attractive and undoubtedly speaks to the generation. Carl is us and his simple ambitions, whether it is to "find a partner and have kids" or just the physical act of waking up, are likewise ours.

Man, you don't have to describe to me how sad things are spelled out so implicitly when, like the true master that Garland is (Just see my profile, under FAVORITE AUTHORS), using both blankness and darkness, minutiae and profundity, you can bestow me with a portal that sees inside myself.

Trish says

I think this is maybe what happened after someone dared Alex Garland to write a novel of exactly 200 pages featuring chrysanthemums, fresh milk, bandages, a temple, a cab driver, and a nurse. Go! It's not that it's bad, it's just that it isn't much. The narrator is in a coma, and the reader experiences all of his delusions, dreams, fractured memories, and efforts to awaken. The end.

Nate D says

I should really have read this when it came out 12 years back and I was into Garland's The Beach and The Tesseract, as this is much better than either of those. Quick enough to read entirely in a book shop over lunch

break (drawn in by the eerie woodcuts that illustrate it), but the spare elegance conveys quite a lot of philosophic weight to mull over. A haunting suggestion of the loneliness of any single, inescapably solitary consciousness, in any real or imagined reality, assuming the differentiation of the two.

Jaksen says

So-so short novel.

The story of a fellow who falls into a coma after being beaten on a bus. (Or is it the subway? Or are they the same thing? Confession: I haven't ridden a bus since I took a group of students on a field trip in 2009; never ridden public transport; never taken the subway or whatever it's called these days; and only been in a taxi twice, both in 1994. Yes, I am a hermit.)

Anyhow the story's about how he's in this sort of netherworld, sometimes feeling very alert and in tune with his surroundings - and at other times adrift in a dreamy landscape. Eventually he realizes he is in a coma, and...

One wonders if the author really went through all this, if this was his coming to terms with his experience. Or, if he simply used his imagination.

Anyhow, three stars.

Oceana2602 says

The Coma was on the bargain table at Chapters when it caught my eye. Alex Garland, I said to myself. Isn't that the guy who wrote The Beach? Yes, he is.

I read The Beach long before it was made into a movie with the unspeakable Leonardo DiCaprio (which I've never seen), and I was fascinated. I recognized the society Garland creates in The Beach in so many ways, it was scary and uncomfortable and utterly fascinating. I haven't yet have the guts to read The Beach again, but it left a real impression on me, much more than Lord of the Flies, which it has clearly been influenced by, ever did. Anyway, The Coma was written by the same author, so I read the description,

"When Carl awakes from a coma after being attacked on the subway train, life around him feels unfamiliar, even strange."

Garland plays with a very common idea (I don't want to spoil it by saying too much), but he does it expertly and with a feeling for language that fits the confused and dreamlike state of his protagonist perfectly. A short book that I found by chance and enjoyed very much.

Jacki says

I sat down and read this all in one sitting this morning.

Because of the situation (narrator in a coma, struggling to get out), it was pretty well impossible to get a good grip on who the narrator is/what is life is about... but in that it's easy to lose yourself to this novel & imagine yourself in that situation. He's searching for things within his memory that will spark him, shake him free of this coma, and he struggles with his inability to remember the details, the lyrics, these type of things.

I also think it was impressive how the author captured dreams and waking and falling in such clear ways. As he points out, no one ever can describe their dreams to you in ways that you can really feel like you were there. He has succeeded here in doing that, and not only capturing the setting, but the feelings that go along with that.

To be honest, more than the words, I was impressed with the woodcut illustrations that were before every chapter. They were seriously beautiful and really made this book sing.

Nathan says

Garland's first book *The Beach* is truly one of my favorite books. Maybe I happened to read it at the exact right moment in my own existence, but I connected to it on a deep level, and I found it to be not only thrilling, but quite moving.

I managed to miss his second novel, but after the total mess that they made of the theatrical version of *The Beach*, I loved *28 Days Later*, so I was excited the day I picked this book up, and in the first moments I remember finding it darkly compelling. Not too far into though, the concept had run its course, and there was little substance behind it. I found myself really bored, and trudging my way through it only out of my devotion to his previous work, hoping Garland would reveal something really clever at the eleventh hour that made the whole thing worth it.

That moment never came. I closed the last page of the book, and had the worst feeling you can have. That *what's-the-point* feeling that is even worse than hating something. I thought this work was not particularly original or unique, not very well executed, and at only 200 pages (with big type and a lot of pictures) it was way too long.

Kevin Kelsey says

An odd little eerie novella. I really enjoyed it. His descriptions of the dream-state are some of the most accurate I've ever read.

karen says

this book was the perfect length for one queens-manhattan/manhattan-queens subway ride on a sunday shopping spree. sibilant, no?

im more taken with that fact than the actual content of the book. i enjoyed it, but marabou stork nightmares is way, way better.

Maciek says

Alex Garland is the author of *The Beach*, a real tour de force set on a remote island in Thailand. *The Beach* is an awesome debut novel, and one which I read in two sittings in two days - I could barely tear myself away from it, from beginning to end. Garland's second novel, *The Tesseract*, was very different - much more conceptual and experimental, and unfortunately nowhere near as successful (though the blurb states that J.G. Ballard was a big fan). *The Coma* is his shortest novel, and the last one to be published before he abandoned the format in favor for screenwriting.

On the surface, *The Coma* begins normally enough: Carl, the protagonist, is coming home from his office job on the London tube, where he sees a group of men harassing a lone woman. Despite not wanting to get involved at first, Carl experiences a surprising outburst of bravery and stands up to defend her; unfortunately, he is promptly beaten unconscious. Carl wakes up in the coma ward at the local hospital and is discharged home, but soon realizes that things are somehow not right: he arrives at places but cannot remember how he got there, and time seems to work as it pleases. Carl begins to fear that his psychological trauma might be severe, but soon suspects that his situation might be infinitely worse.

The Coma is incredibly short - most of the space is taken by woodcut illustrations made by Garland's father, Nicholas; the text itself is divided into short chapters, which are then divided into even shorter paragraphs, separated by large swathes of empty white space. In many cases this would be a drawback, but I think that in this case such arrangement works perfectly: we read the novel as if moving between glimpses of Carl's memories, and the strange illustrations complement it as many strange and unexplainable images that we might see in our own dreams. The text can be read in one or two sittings, and never feels overly long.

However, it never feels truly satisfying either; because of its theme, *The Coma* is an experiment at trying to convey the various states of human consciousness, but without anything that would make it particularly memorable. The eerie opening tension is dissolved too quickly, and by the end the novel does not leave a lasting impression - ironically, I bet most of those who read it will remember only single images afterwards; this way, the book itself will become a half-remembered dream, which might have been the author's aim all along.

As I mentioned earlier, since publishing *The Beach* Alex Garland has devoted his talent entirely to scriptwriting (penning such films as *28 Days Later*, and *Sunshine*, which are both very good films. In 2015 he has made his directorial debut with *Ex Machina*, which he also wrote and which is really quite brilliant, minimalist science fiction piece about artificial intelligence. It's a great accomplishment for a directorial debut, much like *The Beach* was a great accomplishment for a debuting novelist - even if Alex Garland does not intend to write any more novels, I hope that he will write and direct more films, which seem to be the medium he realizes himself best.

♥Emm♥ says

"When we wake, we die."

That's a lot of trip for such a short novel.

Coma is a really ambitious story, but when it starts to unravel towards the end, it gets a bit confusing, and I will never be sure what the ending meant.

Is it still a good read? Yeah, of course. For the kind of book this is, not answering some of the questions directly and leaving you to make your own conclusions, I think was a better choice.

It does keep you hooked in, even if only to see if Carl wakes up, or if he was ever in a coma at all. It's got an edge of creepiness, but mostly it makes you think, about the amazing (and not-so-amazing) ways in which we collect thought and memories. How with waking and dreaming, our brains twist our perceptions of what is real and what is not.

Sam Quixote says

I remember reading *The Coma* when it first came out some 10 years-ish ago, flying through it in a day and dismissing it as “eh, dream story, got it”. I’m glad I came back and re-read it and thought about it more afterwards as there’s a lot more to it than that (and understanding what I read, rather than chalking it up as another book down, is the whole point of why I write reviews anyway).

Carl is in the office making notes on papers late into the night. His secretary calls to remind him that the last train leaves in 25 minutes so he leaves. On the underground he sees a young woman being hassled by some yoofs. He intervenes and they stomp on his head. Carl is rushed to hospital in a coma. The novella begins with Carl trying to figure out what’s happened and then how he can awaken and return to his life.

Alex Garland wonderfully describes the dream state Carl finds himself in, really bringing that aspect alive for the reader. Carl goes from scene to scene without knowing how he got from one place to another, time seems to speed up, time goes backwards as he revisits favourite memories - it’s a great trip and exactly follows dream logic.

The book, though some 200 pages or so in length, is actually much shorter – a mirage in itself. Take all of the text and cut out the white space, the blank pages, the woodcut drawings, and it’s more like a 60ish page short story. But actually the way the book is laid out with everything spaced out like it is, is all part of the story.

The reader realises, at the same time as Carl, that his memories are extremely limited and he’s suffering from amnesia. The blank pages represent the blanks in his memory and the short chapters - some are just a paragraph - could be a way of measuring time with each chapter perhaps representing a day or an episode that he’s in a coma and conscious but not awake. The longer chapters mean he’s conscious for longer, etc.

Garland’s father, Nicholas, also supplies black and white woodcut drawings which heightens the moody, haunting nature of the story. They’re a fantastic addition to the book and show that Garland was thinking more visually in his writing - an indication of his career path where he would give up prose novels (*The Coma* was his last book) and focus on screenwriting. More recently he’s made the transition to directing with his first film, *Ex Machina*, being released a couple weeks ago.

But the woodcuts also serve as visual clues to the story. Later on, Carl buys a chotchkie of a strange little demon/god figure and it’s the same one as one of the three that we see breaking up the story at certain intervals/parts. I think the chotchkies are there as another indicator to mark time and indicate how many cycles Carl has gone through these memories. The first section of the book, we see one chotchkie; the

second, there are two; the third there are three - Carl has lived through this book we're reading three times. The final time we see the three chotchkies lined up, they're set against a black background. Something's changed. Has Carl woken up - or has he died?

There's also other ways to interpret *The Coma*: it might be an exercise in exploring narrative fiction from the perspective of the character. Carl is a character in a novel, so this story might be about him slowly realising this. All he knows are the facts that the author has supplied him with that we see in the opening passage of the book: he works in an office with papers, he has a secretary, he was brutally assaulted, and he's in a coma. When he thinks about other aspects of his life, he draws a blank. If that could happen to Carl, could it happen to us - are we characters in a story we're not aware of?

It's interesting how Garland looks at language as well - Carl has been in a coma for so long that he begins to forget how to use and the meaning of language. He throws out unconnected words and then muses on why those don't make sense but others do, like the ones he uses to express himself. Or do they? Towards the end, the gibberish begins to make sense to him. Does that mean he's freeing himself from the bonds of the author? Does that mean he's deteriorating - that he's actually dying and his brain is giving up?

I can understand some readers' frustration at the way this novel meanders but if you've read Garland's most famous work, *The Beach*, you'll know his theme of aimless wandering is a favourite of his. *The Coma* is an extension of that theme, delving further into our identities and our search for meaning.

I think the search for answers and aimlessness is especially pertinent to Garland who was making the transition from feted young novelist to high profile screenwriter at this time. *The Coma* is that transition in a book from prose to screenwriting, as well as the answer that he was done with novels and ready to move on to something new.

But there is no real answer to *The Coma*. The ending is that most polarising of finales: open-ended. In a way, that's the best choice to end it - to give the illusion of finality while leaving poor Carl in his spiral of never-ending searching. In that interpretation, this is a very true representation of being in a coma - the same thing going on and on forever until you either wake up or die. Though really a narrative of aimlessness could never have a solid conclusion due to its nature.

In the end, most people can read *The Coma* quickly as it's well written, it's short, and you're going to want to see where it's all going; but don't. Reading a book is not a race. I'm not saying this is a masterpiece - the writing is a bit too spare and not terribly evocative at times - though it is a book that has more substance here you can easily gloss over if you speed read your way through it.

The Coma is a haunting story on the nature of reality and the search for identity. It could also be read as many other things like the purpose of memories in informing our reality, the aim of narrative in our lives and our art, and, more simply, a fine, unusual entertainment for fiction lovers everywhere. Definitely well worth a read.

Chris Dietzel says

I'm a huge fan of the screenplays Garland has written--'Ex Machina' was excellent and 'Sunshine' is one of the most underrated sci fi films I can think of--but this was the first book of his that I've read. It was an easy read with an interesting premise. While it wasn't nearly as captivating as the movies he is associated with, it

was well executed and a fast read. I would definitely read more of his stuff in the future.

Melissa Chung says

First of all this book is strange. Second I loved every moment of it.

This book is about a man named Carl who takes a subway home and while on the tube gets attacked and is now in a coma. The whole book is Carl in his dreamlike coma state. Figuring out where he is and what is going on. He is trying to figure out how to wake up.

The book is broken up into 3 parts and each part he comes closer and farther away from consciousness. Each chapter has an illustration that ties into the chapter. I loved it's simplicity.

This was a very quick read. Large margins and short chapters. I am interested in reading some of Alex Garlands other books. I found this one fascinating!
