



The Destructives

Matthew De Abaitua

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Theodore Drown is a destructive. A recovering addict to weirdcore, he's keeping his head down lecturing at the university of the moon. Twenty years after the appearance of the first artificial intelligence, and humanity is stuck. The AIs or, as they preferred to be called, emergences have left Earth and reside beyond the orbit of Mercury in a Stapledon Sphere known as the university of the sun. The emergences were our future but they chose exile. All except one.

Dr Easy remains, researching a single human life from beginning to end. Theodore's life. One day, Theodore is approached by freelance executive Patricia to investigate an archive of data retrieved from just before the appearance of the first emergence. The secret living in that archive will take him on an adventure through a stunted future of asylum malls, corporate bloodrooms and a secret off-world colony where Theodore must choose between creating a new future for humanity or staying true to his nature, and destroying it.

The Destructives Details

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From Reader Review The Destructives for online ebook

Justin Howe says

Wow. Someone's been reading their Philip K. Dick and M. John Harrison! This books was great fun, especially if you like your SF with data-mining, mutant rooms made from meat, and people running around with zap guns that shoot commercials into their target's heads.

James says

This is a speculative fiction novel about AI as well as the human reaction to AI and the changes that occur. I was first intrigued by the book by Barnes and Noble listing this as possibly the most intriguing book of the year (I still didn't buy it off their terrible website though), and I have to agree with the assessment.

The future imagined here isn't one that is extremely similar to current society with a small twist. The emergence of AI as an emergent behavior of the internet causes widespread changes, to a point where the new world is wildly dissimilar to the old one, though still reminiscent of current day life. There's definitely parodies of current day life splattered here and there, with certain elements evolved further and studied like in a wildlife nature show. It definitely adds to the uniqueness and interesting nature of the story.

The plot itself is Asimov like. Without spoiling anything, there's definite parallels to many central themes in Asimov's works. The combination of a speculative environment with a space opera plot leads to a very interesting read.

Chris Alduino says

Most sci-fi books that incorporate some sort of philosophy and futurism seem to fall into two ruts. One, a straw man category where our protagonist represents the author's held beliefs and the antagonist is obviously wrong and will definitely be overcome in the end. Two, a book that has serious views, but has almost no story. Characters move around pontificating at each other but are generally too frozen by existential dread to actually do anything.

I could not tell you on a first read what De Abaitua when it comes to the subject matter of the book. He does an amazing job of presenting the events of books as natural and logical extensions of the character's motivation without, in my mind, approving or disapproving of any of them. The fact that he's able to incorporate this level of storytelling with the amount of discourse on consciousness, nature, and evolution without any of it feeling boring or bloated is an accomplishment. It reminds me of Gibson running at Neuromancer levels of futurism.

All this is to say, I'm a fan. Picked this up by accident and definitely would recommend.

Andrew says

I read this in my role as freelance proofreader prior to publication. Normally I don't list 'work' books on

Goodreads as I don't consider I'm reading them for pleasure, as such. Also, it would be unprofessional of me to rate a book which I've proofread if I haven't actually enjoyed it, however there are exceptions and this is one of them.

"The Destructives" is the third book in a loose series of linked characters, but you don't need to have read the previous titles (I haven't) in order to enjoy these as they work as standalone stories. Quite simply, this is an extremely well written SF novel which intelligently (and entertainingly) deals with emergent AI's, memory, far-future colonisation, and several other 'big themes' familiar to SF readers. What I found particularly enjoyable was that - for a layman such as myself - the 'science' which underpinned the story, whilst sometimes complicated, was logically and smartly explained. The whole plot felt believable, the pacing was perfect, and it was a seamless read with some interesting moral conundrums. If you like your SF to push the boundaries of science and also be a literate read then I highly recommend this book to you.

Elaine Aldred says

Having squandered his privileged upbringing by indulging in the addictive and extreme drug weirdcore, Theodore Drown is now languishing as a lecturer at the University of the Moon. With him is his constant companion and artificial lifeform, Dr Easy, who has always been there. Theodore's life from beginning to end is Dr Easy's research.

Dr Easy is an emergence and represents the other emergences who have chosen to live beyond the orbit of Mercury in a Stapledon Sphere (otherwise known as a Dyson Sphere, which is a massive structure around a star which absorbs most of its power output). Dr Easy's 'home' is called the University of the Sun. When Theodore is approached by Patricia Maconochie to investigate some recently discovered pre-emergence data in a secret archive hidden from the University of the Sun, Theodore's life takes an unexpected and radical turn.

What Theodore discovers takes him back to Earth and, eventually to a secret off-world colony where corporate wrangling and interference lead to some underhand and unpleasant outcomes. The question is can Theodore, damaged as he is, set humanity back on the right path?

The Destructives is the last of a loose trilogy, which began with *The Red Men* and continued with *If Then*, but the books can all be read as standalones.

Matthew De Abaitua Has the knack of delivering the most complex of concepts and diabolical leaps of imagination in a way that first entices then completely draws the reader in. Certainly this book asks a great deal at the beginning because there is an enormous amount of information to take onboard, given the complexity of Theodore's world. Theodore is an interesting character, but so is Dr Easy, because you're never allowed in his head and must try to divine what he is thinking by his actions (something Theodore is trying to do all the time).

There is unpleasantness, at first rumbling away as an uncomfortable undercurrent, until it finally erupts, as Theodore confronts the main corporate players. This is a thrilling book to read, but at the same time has a strange sense for the reader of entering into a kind of mediation state as the author allows you to take a look around and see what's going on with the scenery Theodore finds himself in. Theodore's world in many ways mirrors our own and what is happening with major corporations, political control and the erosion of the quality of life that might be occurring in subtle ways to the individual, so they might not notice problems until it's too late.

Given the twists and turns of the narrative, the conclusion of the story is not something that can easily be worked out by the reader. It is one of those books where knowing the conclusion makes a re-read even more rewarding the second time around.

The Destructives courtesy of Angry Robot via NetGalley

fonz says

Vaya por delante que me ha parecido la mejor novela de cf que he leído en bastante tiempo y que me ha recordado en tono y concepto a una mezcla del trabajo de escritores que me gustan mucho, desde William Gibson a Peter Watts (aunque no creo que Watts comparta las opiniones sobre el pensamiento consciente que se vierten aquí) pasando por Sterling o Egan, incluso con unas gotas de Simon Ings o M. John Harrison, pero al final creo que el resultado es ligeramente decepcionante.

Y es que empieza demasiado bien, por ejemplo el primer capítulo es fantástico, como te plantea ya el entorno y los personajes principales en un puñado de páginas de forma que evita la inmersión más obtusa, resultando intrigante y casi fascinante. En este primer tramo se logra un estupendo equilibrio entre el conflicto psicológico del protagonista y el análisis de ese mundo, destruido por una Singularidad Chunga y reconstruido por las emergencias (una especie de IAs), como una imitación mala y vacía de nuestro presente, el "reenacting" de una civilización sin meta ni propósito que iba de cabeza hacia un apocalipsis digital que llegó por fin.

Lo malo es que a partir de la visita al manicomio-centro comercial, la novela vira hacia la historia de acción, al estilo de las novelas de William Gibson, cosa creo que se da de ostias con el tono general de la primera mitad, lo que se nota muchísimo en giros muy forzados, como el secuestro de Theodore o su "curación". Además se desvirtúan los temas que se estaban planteando, al final la novela se convierte en un batiburrillo de montones de ideas (muchas interesantísimas como ese concepto obsoleto del ser humano como "usuario" de la tecnología y no como un elemento pasivo, una pieza más de un sistema tecnológico que le mide y cuantifica continuamente, o el meta lenguaje en las reuniones de negocios que tanto me han recordado a una entrevista de trabajo, o las salas de reuniones de carne, monumentos definitivos al ego de los grandes magnates de la industria de la tecnología), en la que el foco va moviéndose de una idea central a otra, de forma que no es demasiado fácil extraer una conclusión clara, una idea fuerza que organice el texto. O zonas del argumento que definitivamente no me han quedado nada claras, como el papel de Meggan y la primera emergencia o definitivamente cuáles eran las motivaciones del magnate Magnusson, cuyos propósitos parecen contradictorios (pasa de querer liberar a la humanidad de las emergencias y acaba colaborando con ellas sin que se nos ofrezca una explicación). Como me ocurre con las últimas novelas de Gibson, me acabo perdiendo en los vericuetos de argumentos innecesariamente retorcidos.

Aunque parece que la novela no me ha gustado, en absoluto, me lo he pasado muy bien leyéndola, pero eso no significa que sea ciego a lo que en mi opinión son defectos muy claros, ya digo que quizá haya pesado demasiado la decepción con una novela que iba para obra maestra y no acaba de rematar. Pero la recomiendo muchísimo igualmente (siguiendo las comparaciones con Gibson, es bastante mejor que "The Peripheral", por ejemplo), De Abaitua escribe muy muy bien, tiene una voz muy personal, muchas ideas muy interesantes, un estupendo sentido del humor y la visión de la cf como herramienta para entender el mundo y como nos relacionamos con él, así que a pesar de todo muy a favor y deseando leer sus dos novelas anteriores.

Peggy N says

Matthew De Abaitua's *The Destructives* blew my mind: another massively original, weirdly plausible world, in which near-future AIs wrestle with memory and meaning in both human and post-human ways, creating an hybrid reality of fiction and physiology that is an uncanny parallel to our current, proto-AI civilization.

This book is chewy food for thought, a stellar adventure in cyber- and outer- (and inner-!) space, with characters that capture the imagination, interlaced with humor and heart that give this book, the third in the trilogy, a gravitas with psychological resonance. This is space opera as wild west: in other words, high-minded and wide-ranging, but also a hell of a lot of fun. I didn't think De Abaitua could improve on *The Red Men*, but then he did with *IF THEN*. And then I thought *IF THEN* set the standard, but now he's set a new one with *The Destructives*! My only other comment is that I hope that his multiversal exploration doesn't end with three, and that more stories are in the pipeline exploring these ideas, minds, people...and, others...

Thomas says

This book had a really strongly built and engaging world.

The characters all possess deep motivations and plans which are often guessed at without relying on chunky exposition. It is made more interesting by the main character's lack of any scheme or major goal, sinister or otherwise.

The ending will leave you with a stupid look on your face, rereading the last chapter a few times trying to make sense of it all. I personally love any sci-fi that leave me in such a state.

Read it, it'll be good for you.

Alex Sarll says

You know all those moany think pieces about those young people with their screens? Imagine that instead of being tiresome clickbait by and for ageing curmudgeons, they were instead the first stage of a brilliant SF novel. Yes, I know that takes an awful lot of imagination, but Abaitua has that much and more. *The Destructives* opens some decades after the Singularity, except that in this defeated, denuded future, it's known as the Seizure. The AIs (though they prefer the term 'emergences', and yes, the distinction will become very important) overwrote humanity's digital archive and killed millions in their birth spasms, before fucking off to build a world of their own inside the orbit of Mercury. All except for one, Dr Easy, a companionable yet oddly chilling figure who has stayed behind to observe protagonist Theodore Drown from birth to death, insisting all the time that he cannot interfere, yet no better at following that prime directive than the crew of the *Enterprise* ever were. Humans have been left with a sort of cargo cult re-enactment of a society which had already become largely meaningless pre-Seizure; many live in 'asylum malls', which are essentially the modern day as described by Roger Scruton (albeit a variant Roger Scruton who, while still loathing the present day, at least understands it). Obviously this serves in large part as a prism through which Abaitua can use the future to comment on now; so too Theodore's slightly more elevated profession as an academic specialising in pre-Seizure culture. Some of the commentary, it must be admitted, verges on the obvious, but other bits are inspired. I especially enjoyed Theodore's explanation, to a baffled corporate client, that back in the old days a 'user' referred to the human, because people had yet to realise the software was using them. And those corporate clients! The idea of the 'meta-meeting' is a wonderful contribution to the study of business bullshit, and one which deserves to spread far beyond this book's readership. As for the boardroom grown from a CEO's own DNA...I'd be slightly surprised if none of our current 'titans' of industry are already working on that.

This opening section is recognisably operating in the same terrain as Abaitua's first novel, near-future marketing satire *The Red Men*, which was a sort of missing link between Will Self (to whom Abaitua has

worked as an amanuensis) and science fiction proper; add a bit more John Brunner to the mix here, to get a suitable sense of what could almost be considered hard social science fiction. It's also a ghost story recast in science fiction clothes, Susan Hill visiting the Moon. It is, in some senses, luring in readers who may not be up for full-on SF straight out of the gate. And who will then find themselves led along until they're way out in the wilds, confronted with that mighty genre shibboleth: a giant squid in space*. Some of the stuff in the book's final section is practically Peter Watts; certainly I learned new things about the biology of marine animals, and its applicability to the possibility of off-Earth human existence, which from a bit of further research appear legit. But I'm not sure that marvellous grump Watts would endorse Abaitua's conclusions on consciousness, nature, or – and what a soppy conclusion this could have been, reached by any other route – the central importance of kindness.

*Given he presented the very fine BBC documentary *SF:UK* many years ago, I think we can assume Abaitua knows *exactly* what he's doing here.

Jerico says

A bit past the 4 star threshold, but not quite perfect, *The Destructives* is one in a series of very loosely connected books. Or so I'm told: I haven't read any of the others yet and I enjoyed this book immensely; it clearly works on its own.

There's a measured elegance to both the writing and the plotting of this book, a very well fleshed out world with that special combination of plausible and penetrating extrapolation from the present. It's another one of those Singularity books, though a fairly fresh take on the concept in planning and execution, and utilizes the tropes as tools rather than the kind of rapturous proselytizing true believers indulge in.

Briefly, the main character is an academic on the moon in a society recovering from the emergence of synthetic intelligences. He had a well off childhood, then was a drug addict (damaging his emotions as a result of his `weirdcore` habit) and retired to the moon to keep his head down. I was a bit worried this was going to devolve into a University Professor story, but the book consistently escapes my expectations.

This is a very well written book, with interesting characters and a world that is thought provoking. The characters are well resolved, though a little flat, a decision I believe was on purpose. I plan on going through the rest of the author's work shortly.

Aiyana says

An intriguing piece of future sci-fi, and not at all what I expected from the title.

In a not-too-distant future, artificial intelligences emerged from our online networks and very nearly destroyed mankind. Then they tried to put things back the way they were. And put a firm moratorium on any future technology which could lead to such an incident recurring. The result is a largely artificial human society with a broken past and a stagnant future.

Theodore Drown studies human culture, past and present. Dr. Easy, an artificial intelligence (or "emergence"), studies Theodore. Theodore's life has been something of a wreck-- drug addiction, lost family, and so on, and Dr. Easy has been there for all of it. But when an unexpected chunk of humanity's past is unearthed, Theodore finds himself learning things he'd rather not share with his constant companion-- things

that might not be safe for him, or anyone, to know.

This book is an excellent mix of human story and hard science fiction. Many of the technologies are tantalizingly plausible, providing a solid backdrop for the more wildly speculative elements. Theodore is not a particularly likeable character, but he's a very human one, and we see events unfold primarily through his eyes as we ourselves might witness them.

And the "meta-meeting" idea is just brilliant.

Quotes:

"Something about the scenario reminded him of a junkie score. The underlying continuum between the rituals of the medical profession and the rituals of drug addiction."

"[He] wondered if his longing for the past was merely a desire for stasis, to dwell in what had been done, as a way of avoiding /this/, the hourly risk of acting in the world and being acted upon" 85

"Highly conscious beings inhabit a fiction. True realism is only available to the earlier stages of consciousness." 166

"What Theodore enjoyed most about [humanity's pre-singularity] culture was the ease in which people accepted the paradox of using mass-produced objects to express their individuality. It must have taken generations... to instil such instinctive compliance, to make the people accept a culture reduced to a single question - who am I - and a million wrong answers." 220

"The patience of a saint is infinitesimal compared to the patience of a scientist." 305

"Desire is reciprocal. Unrequited love is a waste of everybody's time." 332

Jack Teng says

Excellent written. Really enjoyed delving deep in to De Abaitua's world. Too bad it's so hard to get his books in North America!

fromcouchtomoon says

For the #shadowclarke...

Armel Dagorn says

Eff this, I'm giving it five stars. It's fun and ambitious - a whole lot of great ideas in there, and very different settings that all work. I'll have to get my paws on more De Abaitua.

Austin Zook says

My biggest problem with sci-fi novels that deal with Big Ideas is that there's a delicate balancing act that goes into exploring them, keeping narrative and those Big Ideas working in harmony, and a lot of writers can't walk that tightrope. Matthew De Abaitua doesn't walk it -- he dances across it with this fun, fast techno-thriller about humanity after the dawn of AI.

AI happens and wreaks havoc on humanity, then attempts to fix the damage done, but does too good of a job and makes humanity more or less 'static' -- unable to really create or innovate anymore and obsessed with the culture that was destroyed by the birth of AI.

The book follows a recovered drug ('weirdcore') addict named Theodore Drown who has been given his own personal AI (called an 'emergence') to watch over him and chronicle his life, from beginning to end. Whereas most emergences reside on the University of the Sun and act as solar academics, keeping track of mankind, but never intervening in their affairs to avoid further damage to humanity, Theodore's Dr. Easy is allowed to accompany him as he traverses the galaxy and humanizes the emergences through his affection for Theodore and his own wants and needs.

There's a lot of interesting stuff here and it's beautifully written, so even when it becomes so immersed in itself that you lose yourself in the language and terms (which happens on occasion), it's never an unpleasant ride. This is a gorgeous novel with lots of big ideas at play that does a great job characterizing its entire cast, crafting fantastical scenes of weird scientific advancements, and interweaving all those characters and locales with political intrigue brought on by the rules put in place by the emergences when they withdrew from human affairs (called 'Cantor Accords').

This is one of the best sci-fi novels I've ever read and I can't recommend it highly enough to fans of the genre; not everything works, but there's so much going on that the hits outweigh the misses by a wide margin.
