



# 334

*Thomas M. Disch*

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If Charles Dickens has written speculative fiction, he might have created a novel as intricate, passionate, and lacerating as Thomas M. Disch's visionary portrait of the underbelly of 21st-century New York City. The residents of the public housing project at 334 East 11th Street live in a world of rationed babies and sanctioned drug addiction. Real food is displayed in museums and hospital attendants moonlight as body-snatchers.

Nimbly hopscotching backward and forward in time, Disch charts the shifting relationships between this world's inheritors: an aging matriarch who falls in love with her young social worker; a widow seeking comfort from the spirit of her dead husband; a privileged preteen choreographing the perfectly gratuitous murder. Poisonously funny, piercingly authentic, *334* is a masterpiece of social realism disguised as science fiction.

### 334 Details

Date : Published April 27th 1999 by Vintage (first published 1972)

ISBN : 9780375705441

Author : Thomas M. Disch

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## From Reader Review 334 for online ebook

### Laura LVD says

Esta "novela", si es que se la puede calificar de novela, es muy atípica. Es una serie de relatos sobre los habitantes de un edificio en una New York del futuro - el 334 del título. La sociedad está en decadencia y la mayoría de los habitantes tienen apenas lo básico, proporcionado por una agencia gubernamental (MODICUM) y hay una élite de ingenieros y programadores. Tampoco se pueden reproducir libremente debido a la escasez de recursos, hay que pasar una serie de tests para ello.

Los dos primeros relatos "La muerte de Sócrates" y "Cuerpos" me gustaron tanto, que pensé seriamente que este libro iba a convertirse en uno de mis favoritos de toda la vida, con esa atmósfera entre Blade Runner y Max Headroom que tienen. Lamentablemente los dos siguientes "La vida cotidiana en los últimos años del Imperio Romano" y "Emancipación" no me gustaron tanto. Me parecieron interesantes (pero no tanto como los primeros) los dos últimos "Angulema" y "334", este último no es un relato sino una colección de viñetas cortísimas sobre los integrantes de una familia del edificio y sus descendientes.

Lo mejor que tiene el libro es cómo los personajes del 334 aparecen relacionados en distintos roles a través de todos los relatos, nacen, mueren, aparecen y desaparecen en la historia en distintos lugares y tiempos. Además tengo que decir que me encantó la forma de escribir de Disch, por lo que este libro no va a ser el único que lea de este autor.

"El fin del mundo. Déjame decirte algo acerca del fin del mundo. Sucedió cincuenta años atrás. O Quizá cien. Y desde entonces, ha sido encantador. Lo digo en serio. Nadie trata de molestarte. Te puedes relajar, ¿sabes? Me gusta el fin del mundo."

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### Shane says

So I bought this book around 16 years ago when I first moved to Florida. At the time I was working on a huge tracking project that had the project code 334. This project is what allowed me to move to Florida and keep my job, because no one else was familiar with the project, so my company had to let me work from home. Anyway, I thought the connection was interesting.

Unfortunately, I finally started reading it (long after project 334 had ended and I changed jobs) and didn't like it at all. When I was younger and had a lot more time I might have given it more of a chance, but instead I got to page 35 before giving up because I just didn't understand anything that was going on. There were also some pretty disgusting scenes that seemed gratuitous.

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### Andrew says

Sometimes you have a book which you just keep reading because you're sure something will - if not actually happen -coalesce from the strands to make it interesting. "334" (and do not be swayed by the false promise of the spaceship cover) is quite simply a tiresome, difficult mess. A cast of barely distinguishable characters fail to live well in a sketchily realised future society. Any potential is wrecked by the scattershot rendering of disengaging prose. If anything happens it's told in such a way that nothing is felt to happen. More a collection of vignettes than a novel I would consider this unpublishable if it wasn't in my hand. No doubt many will disagree...

## Jay says

Stumbling across Disch's "The Brave Little Toaster Goes to Mars" (which I plan to read) triggered the dormant synapse that I had read "334" a long time ago, in a galaxy far away (i.e, Washington, D.C., 1978). I had just finished "A Canticle for Liebowitz" and was looking for something a little edgier and immediate. "334" is not exactly what I would call "science fiction". There were flashes of brilliance and humor in the loosely-connected chapters of the book, written almost as free-standing short stories. Frankly, however, "334" was a struggle for me. I found the characters difficult to care about. The real protagonist in this novel is the future society in which the characters' quotidian lives are "lived". Would that our violent and dysfunctional 2015 resemble the banal world envisioned by "334". Think Paul Auster meets Julio Cortazar, but Disch was neither.

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## Pete Young says

This is the novel (or more correctly, set of linked stories) which for many showed how Disch was often too clever by half for the rest of us. The novella 'Angouleme' included here was the subject of a book-length critical essay by Samuel R. Delany, who argued that despite the absence of scientific themes its speculative setting made it inherently science fiction. A snapshot of the 21st century lives of the people who live in 334 East 11th St, New York, it ranges from being at turns darkly comic and farcical to sharply realistic and unfailingly sympathetic. The science fiction is there in places but played down to the everyday while the social realism is played up, to the point that 334 takes the reader into immersive layers of intricacy, and with a Dickensian eye for detail that shrugs off the fact that this is all meant to be about 'the future'. Neither was it ever meant to be a fun read in the way that *Camp Concentration* could be, and if Disch's last posts on his Live Journal *Endzone* were indicative of the direction his thoughts were heading in his last weeks, he'd been there already in fiction with 334's closing sentences. Someone – and really I can only mean Terry Gilliam – could probably make a very decent film of this.

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## Chip says

Another very dark and sick speculative fiction. You name it, this book has it - murder, suicide, incest, prostitution, necrophilia, exotic sex, racism, etc. There isn't much of storyline except that each story takes place in or around the grim apartment complex 334 and has many members of common family. It uses a poor technique seen quite a lot in the 60s and 70s of extrapolating situations to the dire end. To add to the confusion, the second half of the book jumps non-linearly through time.

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## Paul Bryant says

Disch coulda been a contender. From 1965 to around 1972 he was on fire, the living breathing cursing drugged up gay personification of New Wave SF, which was a whole thing where JG Ballard's *the only alien planet is Earth* and exploring *Inner Space* not *Outer Space* was the thing to do. New Wave SF became a feature of the counterculture, and I'd like to explain all that but I'm exhausted thinking about it. There was a

lot going on in those years. Not just John & Yoko. And in SF there was a big fight, and who doesn't like a good literary punch-up? The New Wave SF types were taking Borges, Joyce, Calvino, Angela Carter, and the Mothers of Invention, and acid, and adding that to the brattish pulpy extreme-vision origins of SF which was despised, I mean *despised* by haughty litterateurs, and coming up with stuff like John Sladek's *Stand on Zanzibar*, Brian Aldiss's *Barefoot in the Head* and *Report on Probability A*, Michael Moorcock's Jerry Cornelius stuff, it was all really far out and experimental and all. The American version of this was Thomas Disch and Samuel Delany and Harlan Ellison, whose *Dangerous Visions* anthology is almost a one-stop shop for this stuff.

After several hot sf novels and many littler sf stories Disch appears to have discovered that there isn't any money in sf, which I think anyone could have told him & so swerved into horror. I read one of his large horror novels, *The M.D.*, and it was awful. Now I read this 1972 novel, and it's sad. Because he was a great writer, had a skittery, amused, angular, jagged, unexpected style, a wicked turn of phrase, but because this was New Wave the idea of mollycoddling the reader with a strong narrative was anathema so what we get here is a futurised version of *Life : A User's Guide* by George Perec. I think Thomas Disch had a great novel in him but didn't get round to writing it.

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### **Erik says**

Brilliantly written book about the imagined future in New York circa 2020. The writer has a feel for the place and the first several stories are great, especially the woman who uses drugs to dream of being an ancient Roman matron and even has a therapist to help her live the fantasy, the invasion of the barbarians overlaid onto modern New York. The coherence starts to fray at the edges when we get to 334 itself. I never understood all of the interrelations among the characters. Probably a second read would clear it up.

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### **Manny says**

Like most of Thomas Disch, this book is criminally underrated. It's a series of episodes centering around the same set of characters, living in a dystopian near-future New York City; it's hard to know whether to call it a loosely-structured novel, or a tightly integrated collection of short stories. The most natural comparison point is a movie like *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia* or *Crash*, with multiple intersecting story-lines and a big ensemble cast.

My favorite sequence must be *Angouleme*, where a bunch of bored, very smart pre-teens decide to murder an old man, just for the hell of it. They even give him the code-name "Alyona Ivanovna". It doesn't quite work out the way they expect. Another one I found particularly memorable is about a woman who falls in love with her social worker, after he reads her a passage from a novel featuring a sex scene on a sofa with a defective leg. They're sitting on a sofa with a defective leg at the time; surely that can't be a coincidence? I'll leave it to you to guess whether it is or not, but once again, things don't work out as planned.

In fact, it's rare for anyone in this collection to feel that they have the remotest degree of control over their destinies. I doubt that Michael Bay has ever considered filming it, and it's not the sort of book that's likely to leave you smiling. Except over the quality of the writing, which is, as usual with Disch, quite excellent. Hasn't that critical reappraisal got into gear yet?

## **Bart Everson says**

Like *Nova*, this is a good novel by an author capable of greatness. I admire Disch, and was saddened when he took his life last year. I have a collection of his stories, entitled *Fun with Your New Head* that is amongst my very favorite books.

*334* is called a novel, but it fits that descriptor loosely. It reads more like a collection of interrelated stories. (And indeed my friend Frank described it as a classic example of a "fix up" novel, since some of the stories were published separately first.) I'd describe it as five short stories followed by a fugue-like novelette.

It's bleak stuff, or at least it seems to be so intended. Disch envisions a very near future which is not so much a dystopia as a triumph of mediocrity. I found one sentence on page 102 that seemed to encapsulate the spirit of the whole book:

Smells filmed every surface like cheap skin cream.

Of course it's hard to sustain interest over the length of a novel in characters who are thoroughly unsympathetic. My objection is that the most oppressive force in the book would seem to be the author himself. His loathing for humanity somewhat overwhelms the characters themselves. I imagined that after the final page, once the author was done, things would have to get better for most of them. In other words, I didn't find his vision thoroughly convincing.

The tales in *Fun with Your New Head* are bleak too, but with a darker, more horrific edge. Both books are suffused with despair, but I found *334* subtler, more realistic, and a bit of a snooze. The problem with a thoroughly realistic bleakness is that it's not very much fun.

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## **Allan Dyen-Shapiro says**

How is it that I'd never heard of this guy? Within the last few months, I read his three most critically acclaimed novels, and each is better than the last. *334* is actually a series of vignettes, all centered on a particular government housing project in NYC whose address is 334. Disch uses science fiction in order to accomplish satire, to stretch to the level of ridiculous. However, he's talking about the daily lives of most Americans. His subjects are average people--no remarkable types here. And he continues with a thesis developed elsewhere, that regardless of how absurd a situation is, one must buy in to some extent, because it is the only way to exist. And when one can't buy in, one kills oneself (as Disch did in 2008).

So, this novel starts out with a country dominated by standardized tests--and this was published in 1974! Except in Disch's world, you need a high score in order to be allowed to breed.

Then he shows us a world in which hospital orderlies steal bodies, as nobody really cares about most of them anyway, as patients die and sell them to outfits that offer necrophilia services. But what happens when one was insured for a proper cremation by unknown relatives and they must get the body back?

My favorite episode centered on a drug he made up that allowed users to take part in forming their own

hallucinations. So a college graduate who'd majored in history--completely unemployable--lives simultaneously in the present and in the 300-400 AD or so range. And her psychiatrist treats both of her personalities!

This author is completely fascinating, utterly hysterical, and truly thought provoking.

Strongly recommended!

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## Glenn Russell says

“The end of the world. Let me tell you about the end of the world. It happened fifty years ago. Maybe a hundred. And since then it's been lovely. I mean it. Nobody tries to bother you. You can relax. You know what? I like the end of the world.”

? Thomas M. Disch, 334

Thomas M. Disch's 1974 novel, a mix of science fiction and Zola-like social realism, eyeballs 334 East 11th Street, New York City, home to a teeming mass of miserable, poverty-stricken occupants of a 21st century multistory apartment beehive - Thomas Hobbs's philosophy of life as nasty, brutish, and short on a continual supply of amphetamines. Sorry to report, much of Disch's disturbing futuristic world has become harsh reality for huge chunks of our current-day population.

Forty-eight chapters, five long and forty-three short, feature interlinking snapshots of a dozen or so men and women bound by their common plight of sordidness and desperation. To share a glimpse of what a reader is in for, below are commentary on two of the chapters: first, a longer one, a tale about college student Birdie Ludd in battle with the forces of darkness; and the second, a shorter tale, a vivid sketch of an outing at a most unusual art exhibit:

### THE DEATH OF SOCRATES

Birdie Ludd has finally made it out of high school (P.S. 141) into one of New York City's colleges only to sit in class listening to a professor on a TV yack nonstop about the life of Dante and how nearly everyone according to the Italian author's *Inferno* will be tormented in hell, most certainly all the Jews.

When a Jewish girl in the class says that doesn't seem fair, the professor's assistant simply replies there will be a test on the covered material. As Birdie is quick to recognize, none of what he is being force fed has any relevance to his everyday life and since teaching is done by television, there is absolutely no possibility of dialogue or a lively interchange of ideas; rather, he is required to simply swallow and regurgitate what he is given.

Summoned to the front office, a Mr. Mack informs Birdie his score on the mandatory state test of “twenty-seven” was a mistake and Birdie is now being reclassified as a “twenty-four,” which means he will not be allowed to father any children. Poor Birdie! He complains it isn't his fault his father has diabetes. But we learn there are more factors to consider, things like Birdie lacking any exceptional service for the country or the economy.

Additionally, we read how Birdie losses points because of his father's unemployment pattern but gains a few points “by being a Negro.” Goodness, sound like Disch's futuristic world has the deck stacked against

blacks. What else is new? Perhaps not so coincidentally, Philip K. Dick's novel *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said*, also published in the 1970s, maps out genetic engineering geared to eliminate the US black population.

Birdie pens an essay for class entitled *Problems of Creativeness*, that ends "Another criteria of Creativeness was made by Socrates, so cruelly put to death by his own people, and I quote, "To know nothing is the first condition of all knowledge." From the wisdom of that great Greek Philosopher may we not draw our own conclusions concerning these problems. Creativeness is the ability to see relationships where none exist."

Read carefully, this essay reveals a highly imaginative, creative, intelligent mind buried under bad English and disastrous inner city public education. Thus the title of Disch's tale, *The Death of Socrates*, bestows a double meaning. As they say, a mind is a terrible thing to waste – and observing the social forces crushing Birdie Lund's brilliant mind makes for one sad, profound story.

Although Birdie is squashed and squeezed by cramped urban seediness, our young man has the capacity to perceive beauty radiating, glowing on the inside, even in dumb vending machines and blind, downtrodden faces. And, as to be expected, he has to continually fight through mass media and pop culture saturation – singing the words of commercials and viewing the movement of autos and ships as if moments from movies and television shows.

One of the saddest endings I've ever encountered: Highly intellectual, sensitive, aesthetically attuned Birdie Lund feels trapped no matter which way he turns. As a last resort, he sees but one option open to him. Here are Disch's concluding words: "The same afternoon, without even bothering to get drunk, he went to Times Square and enlisted in the U.S. Marines to go and defend democracy in Burma. Eight other guys were sworn in at the same time. They raised their right arms and took one step forward and rattled off the Pledge of Allegiance or whatever. Then the sergeant came up and slipped the black Marine Crops mask over Birdie's sullen face. His new ID number was stenciled across the forehead in big white letters: USMC 100-7011-D07. And that was it, they were gorillas."

A & P (2021)

Lottie is at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, at an exhibit where there are rows and stacks and pyramids of cans, boxes, meats, dairy, candy, cigarettes, bread, fruits, vegetables – all with individual brand names. Juan is so delighted just to be with her here at the museum. For Lottie, this is a time of perfection, one she wishes she could hold forever: "The real magic, which couldn't be laid hold of, was simply that Juan was happy and interested and willing to spend perhaps the whole day with her. The trouble was that when you tried this hard to stop the flow it ran through your fingers and you were left squeezing air."

Juan picks up a carrot that has the look and feel of being real but, of course, as part of the art exhibit, the carrot is not real. Visitors were given instructions as they entered the exhibit on what they would see and how to appreciate the art. The food and containers and cans are all fake, no matter how "real" they look – the Met's tape said so, thus it must be true. But Juan insists, at the top of his lungs, that the carrot is real. One of the guards strides toward Juan and both he and Lottie are thrown out.

We can all recognize how this unusual art exhibit takes Andy Warhol's Brillo Boxes and Campbell Soup Cans and expands the concept quantitatively. Arthur C. Danto has written extensively on how Warhol's creations herald in the "death of art" in the sense that objects of art are no longer separate from everyday objects, no longer special pieces like landscape oil paintings or marble sculptures; rather, the art world defines what is and what is not art. Traveling uptown from his downtown cockroach infested 334 mega-apartment, Juan doesn't buy into the art world's artificial distinction. Damn, it's a carrot! A subtle Thomas M. Disch comment on the would-be state of the visual arts in the years following Warhol and the "death of art."

Again, these are but two of forty-eight chapters. I hope I have whetted your appetite to sample more of Disch's novel. Special thanks to Goodreads friend Manny Rayner for alerting me to this forgotten classic.

"He knew without having to talk to the rest that the murder would never take place. The idea had never meant for them what it had meant for him. One pill and they were actors again, content to be images in a mirror."

- Thomas M. Disch, *334*

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### **Ben says**

Really unconvincing, really wasn't enjoying it, couldn't bring myself to finish it because I just didn't care.

I think maybe I'm getting burned out on New Wave SF in general.

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### **DRM says**

This confirms my belief that Disch is the best writer no one has ever heard of. The first half of this are somewhat interconnected short stories in the not too distant future which range from entertaining (*Bodies*), disorienting (*Everyday Life*), strangely sweet (*Emancipation*), chilling (*Death of Socrates*), and phenomenal (*Angouleme*). The second half are vignettes about a family living in a lower income housing project of a not too distant dystopian future New York. Its skilled kaleidoscopic presentation of this society's daily minutiae is sort of like a sci fi version of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* complete with frequent narrator changes. At times it can be very challenging with little explanation provided as to how this society came to be, but that's part of the reason why its so appealing: Disch allows the readers to make their own interpretations of all the raw data provided within *334*'s pages.

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### **Michele says**

I nearly gave up on this book about 30 pages in, but I stuck with it and am glad. Disch is an impressive writer, with poetic turns of phrase and artfully unusual constructions. I grew to like the characters, despite their flaws, though I wanted more of Alexa and the very interesting idea of time-travel-as-therapy. The storyline is intricate, and near the end I had to refer back earlier sections because of the twists and turns and intersections (the diagram of the last third of the book was great!). By the end I felt that my brain had been turned inside out, and looking at the book I had the sense that I was holding not a linear representation of a tale with a beginning, middle, and end, but a tiny four-dimensional model of a chunk of space-time, which is a pretty neat trick.

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### **Marian Allen says**

I stopped reading this book. I know that the gentleman who loaned it to my grandson who loaned it, unread, to me would say I stopped because I'm a prude. There may be a grain of truth in that. At the time *334* was

written, it was cutting edge to be as blunt as possible about sex, and the mere fact of putting it ... er ... in your face, as it were, was an artistic statement. Disch uses his characters' thoughts and experiences with sex to good effect--telling us about the characters and society in ways different than any other ways would do. I just prefer other ways.

Guess that does make me kind of a prude, after all!

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### **Jessica Donohoe says**

I'd give it 4 stars, generally, but just 3 for Disch. He keeps my expectations very, very high.

Kept.

They're still up there. It's just, you know, he is to. Up there. In the ether.

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### **Ralph Palm says**

Very interesting, incredibly complicated. The first part is little different than a collection of short stories, but they each hint and themes and characters developed later. There's a \*chart\* to help the reader follow the narrative leaps in the second half, across 3 characters, different years (out of sequence), and narrative type ('another point-of-view', fantasy, reality, and monolog). There's a total of 43 different vinettes in this section, and amazingly they seem to add up to a story. It's a fun read if you like novels like puzzles.

Another plus: technically a science fiction novel, it wears its exposition so lightly it's hard to even tell most of the time. For example, there is a drug depicted in the novel that gives certain characters an elaborately detailed fantasy life--a sort of pharmacological virtual reality. While several passages occur in these alternate realities, the SF mechanism through which they occur isn't explained until about halfway through.

I think I would have to read it a few more times to pick up on all the connections and interactions. For example, a seemingly throwaway character from one of the early stories (Martinez) turns out to be the estranged husband of one of the main characters (Juan). It's only later that you realize it's the same person (=Juan Martinez).

I haven't read a book that's both challenging and entertaining in a long time. It's usually one or the other, for me. I didn't rank it 5/5 only because I wouldn't recommend it for everyone: I could easily see how the narrative tricks might seem like tedious affectations, and there's a lot of profanity and disturbing imagery. But if you don't mind that stuff, then I heartily recommend it.

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### **Bob Rust says**

The Near Future is set in a degraded Manhattan; the stories, whose linkings are so subtle and elaborate that it is possible and probably desirable to read the book as a novel, pivot about the apartment building whose address (334 East 11th Street) is the title of the book. 334 comprises a social portrait of City life in about 2025 CE in a New York where existence has become even more difficult, intense and straitened than it is now and where the authorities treat humans no better than Disch's Aliens do; but the essence of the book lies

in the patterns of survival achieved by its numerous characters whose aspirations and successes and failures in this darkened urban world do not step over the bounds of what we may expect will become normal experience.

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## **Olethros says**

-Distopía depresiva y descorazonadora donde las haya.-

Género. Ciencia-Ficción.

Lo que nos cuenta. En un futuro cercano, en el 334 Este Calle Undécima de Manhattan hay un edificio que forma parte de los proyectos federales MODICUM, con sólo un 30% más de habitantes que el número óptimo planificado y en el que viven o con el que tienen relación diferentes personajes cuyas vidas, a veces sólo pinceladas de las mismas, vamos conociendo. Novela compuesta por diferentes relatos y novelas cortas relacionados entre sí, escritos entre 1967 y 1973 pero unidos para dar forma a este volumen en 1974.

¿Quiere saber más de este libro, sin spoilers? Visite:

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