



Spark

John Twelve Hawks

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Edgy, hard-core, and wildly imaginative, this new thriller from New York Times bestselling author John Twelve Hawks (*The Traveler*, *The Dark River*, *The Golden City*) features an assassin-narrator unlike anyone we've seen before, set in a present-day dystopia.

Jacob Underwood is a contract employee of the Special Services Section, a shadow department in the faceless multinational corporation DBG. Jacob is not a businessman...he is a hired assassin...and his job is to neutralize problems deemed unacceptable by the corporation. Jacob is not like other employees, nor is he like other people. Suffering from Cotard's syndrome-a real condition that causes people to believe they are dead-Jacob perceives himself as nothing but a Shell with no emotion and no sense of right or wrong. Emily Buchanan is a bright young second-year associate for DBG, and she has disappeared without a trace. Suspecting she may have stolen valuable information and a fortune from the company, Miss Holquist-Jacob's handler at DBG-assigns him the task of tracking her down and neutralizing her. Jacob's condition allows him to carry out assignments with ruthless, logical precision-devoid of guilt, fear, or dishonor. But as his new assignment draws him inside a labyrinthine network of dark dealings, Jacob finds himself up against something he is completely incapable of understanding. Spark is an ingenious and chilling vision of modern-day humanity under constant, invasive surveillance and a pulse-pounding game of cat and mouse.

Spark Details

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Author : John Twelve Hawks

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From Reader Review Spark for online ebook

Reading Fool says

I received this book for free through Goodreads First Reads.

I do not read much science fiction and I did not have any expectations about this novel. But from the first page I was sucked in and I finished the book in two days. John Twelve Hawks presents such an interesting concept about freedom and choice. The main character is Jacob Underwood, a hired assassin who does not have any emotions because he suffers from Cotard's Syndrome: he believes he is dead. This was a fast-paced story with a weaving plot. The illustrations in the book are simple and well done. I enjoyed this book a great deal.

Rissa says

2.5??

Kate says

Excellent (slightly dystopian and futuristic) thriller featuring an intriguing leading figure who believes he is already dead. Surprisingly touching in places for a novel with such a high deathcount.

Graeme Shimmin says

Logline

In a dystopian future, an assassin with no emotions is asked to locate a missing woman. When his emotions start returning, he has to decide whether to carry out his orders to kill the woman or break with his employers and protect her... and the secret she has uncovered.

Plot Summary

In the near future, androids known as nubots have replaced most human workers, causing mass unemployment. The anti-nubot underground, known as the neo-ludites, carried out a terrorist attack known as 'The Day of Rage', since when the world has become a police state where a surveillance system known as EYE monitors everyone.

Jacob Underwood is an assassin 'solving problems decisively' for a multinational bank. He has undergone what he calls Transformation, and has no attachment to the world, feeling only a few minor emotions such as boredom, curiosity and agitation. He describes the essence of a person as their 'spark' and their body as a 'shell'. Most people's spark is closely connected to their shell, but because of his Transformation his are not connected.

Underwood's controller, Miss Holquist, assigns him to find a missing worker from the bank, Emily

Buchanan. Underwood discovers Emily has information about illegal transactions by an Indian bank. He travels to India, where the bank president asks him to assassinate his son-in-law, who has stolen bank funds.

In a couple of flashbacks, the reader learns that Underwood was involved in a fatal motorbike accident but was revived, leaving him in a coma with terrible head injuries. When he recovered consciousness, he felt 'transformed', with no emotional response to his friends, mother or girlfriend (this is known as Cotard's Syndrome). At first he could not function, until a researcher taught him some rules that enabled him to survive in human society. He was then recruited and trained as an assassin by the bank.

In Paris, Underwood carries out the assassination, but against orders he spares the son-in-law's wife and child. Back in New York, Holquist is suspicious but Underwood manages to convince her he made a mistake. She orders him to return to locating Emily, as information is still missing.

Underwood traces Emily through her contacts with the neo-ludite underground. When Underwood finds Emily, Holquist orders him to kill her...

(The full plot synopsis is omitted to avoid spoilers. It's on my website at [Spark by John Twelve Hawks: Novel Review](#)).

Analysis

Although a hybrid, *Spark* mostly has a 'mystery' plot. Emily Buchanan is missing and Underwood tries to find her and discover what is behind the disappearance. The twist comes though when he finds Emily, and learns the truth. At that point he has to make a decision about whose side to support: Emily's or Holquist's.

Underwood is a great character. He's in the tradition of many emotionless assassins, but as his lack of emotion is a product of his Cotard's Syndrome, not him being a sociopath, the reader has more sympathy for him, and as his emotional responses start to return the reader's empathy engages.

John Twelve Hawks makes Underwood a relatively sympathetic character, by making him care for dogs, who he regards as at the top of the pyramid of life. The author is also careful to make sure Underwood isn't shown performing any completely unsympathetic actions of the sort an emotionless assassin might be expected to commit. For example, relatively early in the novel, Underwood doesn't kill the defenceless woman and child.

And, for a man with no emotions, Underwood often seems quite emotional, feeling 'agitated', 'uncomfortable' and 'soothed' for example.

Cogito Ergo Sum

One of the themes of *Spark* is what it means to be 'alive'. The philosophical statement "I think therefore I am" is discussed several times in the novel. There are several discussions of robots, mechanical automata, artificial intelligence, and the role of instinct and routine in people's lives.

The authorities monitor people and pick up when their behaviour deviates from 'normal', reducing everyone to predictable cogs in the machine. Only a few rebels in the neo-ludite underground resist.

The underground have various responses, including acting based on random numbers, hiding the IDs that the authorities use to track them, and producing artistic and artisan work that is incapable of being done by machines.

The theme is explored in depth and the reader is not left in much doubt about where the author's sympathies lie.

My Verdict

The best thriller I've read this year.

Details

Click the link to read the full synopsis and notes on the reality of Cotard's Syndrome and the diagrams in the novel: <http://graemeshimmin.com/spark-novel-...>

Evan Hammerman says

If you thought our world of The Fourth Realm Trilogy was paranoid with The Vast Machine, the world of Spark is paranoia on steroids. Surveillance is even more omnipresent and omnipotent than in the earlier books. The Vast Machine is even vaster.

The protagonist is a hit man who has Cotard's Syndrome, so he thinks he's dead. A good trait for a hired killer. His employer adds to the feeling of paranoia.

The book goes on with the present story, with flashbacks explaining how the "hero" got that way.

While reading this hi-tech look-over-your-shoulder thriller, just remember that a lot of what J 12 H predicted in The Traveler nine years ago hS come to pass. That should increase your paranoia even more.

Definitely a must-read.

Rane says

Part psychological thriller, part dystopian fantasy, Spark: A Novel is an exciting, fast-paced book set in a future where the government controls every aspect of life and corporate greed has created an underground economy that operates on its own set of rules. Jacob Underwood is a man with a rare psychological condition that makes him the perfect "enforcer" in this new economy. Underwood is an emotionless and methodical assassin, until something goes wrong on one of his jobs and his world begins to unravel around him.

John Twelve Hawks creates a rich and believable universe for Underwood to play in. Hawks avoids flowery and bloated descriptions in favor of a writing style that is as precise and methodical as his lead character. Each word is perfectly chosen to create maximum impact. Every element of world-building and exposition serves to not only shape the environment, but also to provide subtle insight into Underwood's character. The result is a story that moves quickly and effortlessly from the first page to the last.

Underwood isn't really a good guy or a bad guy, he's neither hero nor antihero, he just exists. We can't exactly root for him, but we can't really root against him, either. The assassins misdeeds are many, yet Hawks manages to make him sympathetic.

At times the violence is a bit graphic, but it never reaches the level of senseless gore. There are a few disturbing images, including some animal cruelty, but it passes quickly and serves a purpose to the plot. Beyond these bits of violence, the book is surprisingly tame. There's no gratuitous sex or language--there's simply no room for it.

Spark: A Novel is an absolute must-read for anyone who enjoys thrillers or mysteries. Despite a bit of

graphic violence, it should be appropriate for teenagers and above.

Disclaimer: I received a free copy of this book from Amazon Vine in exchange for an honest review.

E.J. Fisch says

I was really torn between and 3 and 4 star rating for this - realistically, it was somewhere in between.

I thought the overall premise of this book was really interesting. Call me morbid, but I'm a sucker for cold-blooded assassin characters. The idea that there was an actual scientific explanation behind Jacob's condition was especially interesting, and I liked the descriptions of how he functioned in the world. Definitely different than anything I've read before. I've recently become a fan of the whole "what-is-it-that-makes-us-human" argument and enjoyed the *decision vs. choice* subplot regarding humans and machines - I hadn't expected to find that sort of thing in this book, and I thought it was well done.

There were, however, some cons that I just couldn't get around. Part of that is due to my personal tastes - I prefer spy thrillers with government conspiracies, CIA cover-ups, etc. rather than corrupt banks and money trails and blackmail. But I did feel like some of the plot points were kind of contrived, the dialogue was flat, and the characters were pretty one-dimensional. Jacob wasn't nearly as badass as I had hoped/expected he'd be. I mean yes, it would be difficult to write a character who thinks he's dead and is therefore incapable of feeling emotions, but even so, I felt like more could have been done with him. I didn't feel like the other characters really made valuable contributions to the story; obviously they were *needed* for the story, but they might as well have been made of cardboard.

Overall, the first half or so of the book deserved a solid 4-star rating, while the second half was probably 3-stars. I was curious enough about how it would end that I stuck it out.

Amy says

Once I started this book, I couldn't put it down. From the very beginning this book grabs you with its originality, it's perfectly paced action and most of all with the questions you need answers to.

Jacob is a contract killer for a seriously creepy group of people. He is particularly good at his job because he is dead. He is unable to feel fear, remorse, or much of anything really. He is a Spark inside a Shell. He wasn't always dead. He used to be a normal guy with a job and friends and a girlfriend. Now that he's dead, he doesn't like to eat, especially dead things. He doesn't like to be touched. Without his list of rules he would forget to shower. The one thing that Jacob likes...dogs.

Emily Buchanan works for the Brooks Danford Group, the same bank that has Jacob on contract. When she disappears, Jacob is hired to track her down and figure out why. When Jacob learns that she has information damaging to one of the bank's powerful clients, he is ordered to kill her.

The world that Jacob and Emily live in changed after an event called the Day of Rage, during which 9 bombs destroyed 9 schools all over the world, killing countless children. Since that event, people are monitored constantly, by cameras and by their Freedom Cards, an ID that lets those in charge know where everyone is all the time. Also, people are losing their jobs to nubots, human-looking and sounding robots. Only the people that are in positions of power or people who control technology have any sort of job security.

This book is so imaginative and well-written and I can't recommend it enough. I rarely read a book I find so completely enthralling and perfect.

Skip says

I won this book as a Goodreads giveaway, but that had no effect on my review.

Jacob Underwood works for the Special Services Section of a large NY investment bank. His job is to take care of problems unconventionally: he is a contract killer. Jacob was recruited by Ms. Holquist, following a near fatal motorcycle accident, in which he was transformed into an unfeeling, unemotional shell that thinks he's dead (called Cotard's syndrome.) He lives in a society where "Big Brother" watches everyone to detect abnormal behavioral patterns. After a mundane job or two, he is asked to investigate the mysterious disappearance of a banking analyst, who was given some secret information by a guy from India she met at a conference and told to release it if she does not hear from him. As Jacob investigates, he begins to question his instructions, and draws the attention of a rival when he does not follow orders, starting with his refusal to (view spoiler) I liked Hawk's creativity and the development of Jacob's character. Not quite 4 stars, but I rounded up.

Mike (the Paladin) says

John Twelve Hawks, the mystery man of literature. I read his first trilogy and liked the first book. Sadly the next 2 books of that series (after a promising and interesting start) bogged down in Eastern Cosmology.

Here we are again starting out with an eye to the loss of privacy. The story is told through a protagonist who has an unusual delusion. he believes himself to be dead.

The story is interesting as we learn a little about unnamed protagonists. he shows certain symptoms of high-functioning autism...oh ans he kills people.

The character as odd as he is, works. There is one thing that tends to bug me and that's the way the character fails to carry through in certain situations. He's this ultimate super assassin...but tends to get blind sided, more than once.

What's up with that?

Anyway...good read...interesting if it turns out to be the beginning of a new series.

Guess I'll wait and see how it goes. Recommended, so far.

Nicole {Sorry, I'm Booked} says

I love Hawks' writing and this book was no different. I really, really liked this book.

Written in first person, Jacob's voice and point of view is like nothing I've read before. Jacob, along with the world he lives in, is clearly written with just the right amount of description. I felt like I was a ghost following Jacob around. Which is funny considering that Jacob believes himself to be dead. Or at least a

being that does not entirely exist.

This book is a great metaphor for how we live now and where we might end up. Maybe.

While it wasn't gripping for me every page or even every chapter, that didn't take anything away from the whole of the novel or reading experience for me.

Longer review on the blog: <https://sorryiambooked.wordpress.com/...>

Liz Barnsley says

This is a clever book, because it manages to be a fast paced action thriller, with dystopian themes, but right at the heart of it is a pure character piece.

Jacob Underwood is definitely one of the more fascinating characters you will find in fiction – emotionless and unfeeling it is hard to judge him for the things he does, which are lets face it, pretty horrific, because despite his actions he is eminently likeable. He doesnt make excuses or justify, he simply is...but as the book progresses there is a spark of life somewhere in there just waiting to emerge...

The flow of it is very intense...I dare you to put it down once you pick it up...but still, the characters are key all the way. Seen through Jacob's eyes throughout, referred to by him as the "human units", his outlook on life will often strike you as very sensible, sometimes funny but realistically speaking quite dangerous for those around him. As the story goes on and we find out how he got to be the way he is it is endlessly compelling and terribly addictive.

The "backdrop" if you like, about his latest task, to find and neutralise upon instruction one Emily Buchanan, a young lady who has in her possession some very dangerous information, is the perfect plot within which Jacob can function, evolve and draw you into his world...and he will certainly do that. There is plenty of action, some dark themes explored well, and a strange kind of life affirming humanity to the whole thing considering you are travelling the road alongside a character who believes he is dead..

The author has created a wonderful mythology here, using some standard dystopian themes, but then putting front and centre a character from which everything else flows...I absolutely loved it, certainly one of my reads of the year, and I can only hope that there will be more from Jacob. Whilst this particular adventure is satisfactorily complete it is obvious that as far as our main protagonist is concerned, the surface has barely been scratched...

Highly Recommended: Most especially for fans of character driven genre novels with heart.

Happy Reading Folks!

Karen & Gerard says

This is about a Jacob Underwood who suffers from Cotard's Syndrome - an actual condition that makes you believe you are dead even though you aren't. He is a hired assassin who does his job very well since he has no feelings or concept of right or wrong. Things do change though, and when that happens, this good book becomes great! The good writing made me want to keep turning pages which led to a very good ending!

(Gerard's review)

Lobstergirl says

Some of the premises of this futuristic dystopian thriller seemed mildly promising. It is set several years after the "Day of Rage," a group of terror attacks in which bombs were set off at Eton, the Dalton School in Manhattan, and elite schools in several other countries. We're never told how many victims died, but it's a day with obvious overtones of 9/11, and it results in the creation of a total surveillance society. Congress passes a series of laws with Orwellian names such as The Need to Know Act, which states that "an ordinary citizen did not need to know much of anything." The Good News for Americans Act "placed restrictions on anonymous bloggers and web sites." Congress is debating the Faith of Our Fathers Act, which will place restrictions on any religion that doesn't use the Bible as a primary text. Crowd pleasers, all. In the United States, thousands have been jailed in Good Citizen Camps for various misdeeds against the surveillance state. Globally, there are sex riots in China due to the lack of women, and Russia has a czar. Many Americans have microchips under their skin which identify them wherever they go; if they don't have a subcutaneous chip, they are required to carry an ID card on their person which accomplishes the same thing. Many human workers have been replaced with very lifelike robots. Essentially, these are mostly things that are either virtually in place in our own lives, or we feel like are in danger of happening soon.

Unfortunately, aside from all the surveilling in the novel, and the robots, this dystopic backdrop is merely wallpaper for a not terribly compelling story. For example, we never see inside the citizen camps. We don't see the political system up close. We're introduced to a 30-something male protagonist who suffers from Cotard's syndrome, which the book jacket explains is real: people who have it think they're dead. Jacob came down with it after a motorcycle accident caused a severe brain injury. He now has autism-like symptoms. He hates being touched, has no understanding of social or human interactions, and has to refer to a guidebook to understand what people's facial expressions mean. He constantly refers to his "Spark," which is the thing that creates his thoughts. You can think of it as something brain-like, or soul-like, except that Jacob doesn't believe in souls. His Spark reverberates inside his Shell, or body. We are provided with lots of diagrams of Sparks, Shells, and other things. This fits in with his autism-esque need to explain things visually, but it also feels lazy, like a substitute for writing. In fact the writing here is nothing special. It's bland. The novel chugs along, but about two-thirds of the way through I lost interest, at the point where a group of do-gooder characters belonging to an underground political resistance movement were introduced. Aside from their admirable political and charitable qualities, we learn that these are good people because they smile, grin, enjoy each other's company, and make delicious hot chocolate. Jacob, employed as a contract assassin, the perfect job for him because he has no feelings, is tasked with killing one of these fine people, but the hot chocolate and other small details are giving him second thoughts.

Jessica at Book Sake says

This is the book I have been most looking forward to over the year. I absolutely love John Twelve Hawk's Fourth Realm Trilogy. The Traveler rates upon my top 10 favorite books and it's in a genre I don't read enough of because I don't usually enjoy it so much.

Spark has a different feel than The Fourth Realm Trilogy. Yes, the paranoia with technology and being tracked by everything we do is still there and very present in the story. This lacks the heart and warmth that Hawk's other books had, which is what helped to draw me into such a cold world and story. This story is just

cold, with no feelings attached. The main character thinks of himself as dead and is unemotional about (almost) everything, so there aren't any redeeming qualities that made me want to root for him. I just didn't care what happened to anyone in the story at all.

I think the book is intelligently written and Hawks is great about building the world his characters live in, even if it isn't too different than our own. I just wanted so much more from this book and felt let down as I finished it and that was that.

Book Received: For free from publisher in exchange for an honest review

Reviewer: Jessica for Book Sake
