



The Instructions

Adam Levin

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Beginning with a chance encounter with the beautiful Eliza June Watermark and ending, four days and 900 pages later, with the Events of November 17, this is the story of Gurion Maccabee, age ten: a lover, a fighter, a scholar, and a truly spectacular talker. Expelled from three Jewish day-schools for acts of violence and messianic tendencies, Gurion ends up in the Cage, a special lockdown program for the most hopeless cases of Aptakistic Junior High. Separated from his scholarly followers, Gurion becomes a leader of a very different sort, with righteous aims building to a revolution of troubling intensity.

The Instructions is an absolutely singular work of fiction by an important new talent. Combining the crackling voice of Philip Roth with the encyclopedic mind of David Foster Wallace, Adam Levin has shaped a world driven equally by moral fervor and slapstick comedy—a novel that is muscular and exuberant, troubling and empathetic, monumental, breakneck, romantic, and unforgettable.

The Instructions Details

Date : Published 2010 by mcsweeney's rectangulars

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Author : Adam Levin

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From Reader Review The Instructions for online ebook

Ren says

Let me be succinct (a quality which totally escapes Adam Levin): this is not a great book. Those reviewers who are writing "I'm 2 chapters in and it's amazing!" should heed warning - it dazzles in the beginning and fades out like a muffled fart. I damn my own literary hubris for blindly believing that The Instructions would ultimately reveal itself as the messiah of contemporary fiction. Instead, I am embarrassed to admit that I have spent nearly two months pushing through this constipated, babbling ramble, always hoping that I was just on the edge of 'getting it'. There are mere moments of humor and wit that shine through like sullied gems, only to have a 1,000 pages of plotless turd heaped on top. The characters are only half-realized caricatures - all dialogue and no action. This is especially disappointing when it comes to Gurion, the main character, narrator and 'author' of The Instructions - so much of Gurion's inner dialogue devolves into nonsensical doublespeak and semantic debates, which ultimately makes him wholly unlikeable as a protagonist. I found the footnotes (one of my favorite things about DFW's *Infinite Jest*) to be a stylistic filler, much like the arbitrary maps and diagrams that peppered the pages. I hated that I found myself skimming over portions of the text, but the alternative - reading every floundering sentence on the page - was unbearable. Not enough can be said for the simple gravity of well-placed prose, but in The Instructions it is totally lacking.

I can't recommend this self-important treatise to anyone but my most masochistic enemies.

Greg says

Updated 11/5. I still have no review. But Adam Levin signed my copy last night and I love what he wrote, so I'm sharing.

I recommend reading this book. I haven't had an almost* back to back awesomeness reading experience like *JR* and this since 1999 when I read *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Infinite Jest* in the same month.

*I'm saying almost because I'm aware that I read four books, and nine days passed between finishing *JR* and starting this book.

karen says

fortunately, all the literary lynch mobs are occupied settling that mark twain business, so i can slip in here and give this book four stars instead of five with minimal outcry. this book is excellent. at times, it is perfect. this is the highest four a four can be before becoming a five - put down that torch, straggler!

and after finishing it, i feel somewhat stunned, drained, like wandering blinkingly outside after a movie marathon. i need a moment. but what i can say now, with certainty, is that it is a remarkable book, and a pleasure to read, despite its daunting length. it reads much more quickly than it would seem, and i will probably read it again.

having said that, my quibbles are minor and have to do mostly with consistency and follow-through. i'm sure

it is really really hard to write a book of this length, and when you have spent nine years on it, it is hard to part with any of the elements of it, even when you have someone as astute and gentle as oriana on your side to guide you. so i am totally sympathetic to and in awe of this book's existing at all.

and i know my gentile status makes me miss out on certain resonances - reverberations of religious significance that even a faux-jew like greg would feel stirrings in his soul over, because this is the jewiest of all books ever. i have picked up some stuff in my way through life, but i am no israelite; gurion would have looked right past me, leaving me to defend myself with my saxophone.

and that's all i am really willing to say. i approve of the caution most reviewers have shown regarding this book - no one wants to commit to a book of this size if they know what happens. this is why i will probably never read *anna karenina*, because everyone (except ariel) knows what happens there (except she knows now because i totally ruined her life), and i want everyone to read this book.

but if you must know, it is a potential-messiah story told in the first person that attempts to answer the question - gurion maccabee: ten-year-old messiah, or just an articulate thug?

and because greg shared his and mine is different:

nostalgebraist says

I've been wanting to review this for a while, but I feel like anything I would write would just be the verbal equivalent of those five stars up there, plus an exhortation to keep reading even if the narrator's voice and the pimply middle school stuff put you off.

I've realized, though, that what I really want to do is write a retrospective analysis of the book. This will require spoilers. I know that there's this notion out there that if a book is sufficiently good or literary or whatever, spoilers don't matter, but that's BS. A good author will arrange every aspect of the reader's experience with care, and that includes the way in which plot details come to light. So, here's a warning: the spoiler cut below is for real -- if you haven't read the book and plan to, don't click it.

(view spoiler)

Jonfaith says

Perhaps it is winter, but I've found myself brooding on the roulette of contemporary literature: for every Zone or Wolf Hall, well, there's always Franzen's Freedom. A honest albeit flawed effort like The Imperfectionists can convey you only so far. I noted elsewhere that this is the season of Balzac for me personally. Thus qualified, I am so glad I picked up this book today at the library.

Having finished the novel ten minutes ago. There is a hazard in any ranking system; and yet, despite some puzzling distractions in the last 100 pages including a submersion into brutality, I have to regard the tome as nothing short of amazing. I like to lose myself in messianism. It appears so much simpler to possess such clarity.

Cait Poytress says

A song so appropriate it was referenced in the book: You And Whose Army

I don't think that I will ever be able to properly review this book. I'm definitely unable to muster up enough energy to try doing so now. I'm a strange mix of exhausted and exhilarated - maybe exhausted because of my exhilaration? 200+ pages of Damage Proper will do that to you. All I know is that I'm exhausted and exhilarated and bleary eyed and heartbroken. And I love this book. No it is not a perfect book, not by a long shot, but I love it despite its imperfections. Everything good here is so damn good that it made any and all flaws trivial in comparison, even the abruptness of the ending, which would probably be my biggest complaint if I felt inclined to complain about the book. But I don't, so I won't. The characters though? They were the best freaking part. See, my chest got all tight just thinking about them again...

ETA: I should also add that the first 300 or so pages took me a month to read due to very limited reading time. The next 700+ pages took me about 4 days. Once I was able to settle in to the story, I found it read insanely fast. I would blink my eyes and somehow another 100 pages had flown by. If anything is going to deter you from reading this, don't let it be its size.

Hadrian says

I'm ashamed and embarrassed to admit it, but this is the second book in three years which I did not finish. Or could not.

Let me indulge in a bit of a heartfelt monologue of what I'm passionate about, but not hopefully not in an impish boast. Reading isn't a chore for me, it really isn't. Even if it's assigned reading for class or an impossibly thick pomo thing with multilingual historical references or a thousand page history of some obscure topic. On the contrary. I enjoy those. I savor those sorts of things. I seek them out. I feel bad if my reading *isn't* tough enough.

So what made me stop reading The Instructions?

The choice of subject material is not uninteresting, and is in fact, wildly original. The idea of a Messianic Jewish Che rising up in adolescent rebellion against his *Schloss* of a school is a delicious idea. I was first drawn in with his monologues, his scriptures, his war plans, and the dialogue with his father about faith and mysticism and the Sefirot. These early bits were fascinating.

But there's a long stretch between our narrator and his Masada. I was unwilling or unable to make the long journey.

After the first two hundred pages, however, the book become slowly more painful to read, and the time stretched relativistic, as if the mass of the book had become a black hole and it was distorting gravity and space-time and it was affecting my consciousness. Neither the kids nor their dialogue grabbed my attention. I dimly recalled the annoying petulant bratty man-children of Jonathan Safran Foer.

The second problem is that the book is over a thousand pages wrong, it does not contain a thousand pages of material.

This book is compared to DFW's because of its sheer size. However, DFW wrote something of interest or of thought or of sheer beauty of language on every page, and his efficiency of words is unparalleled — a strange thing to write for an author whose reputation was for the verbose.

Even though something was indeed printed on those pages, nothing had crossed the barrier between page and brain. Not description, not action, not dialogue, just space, where nothing was impressed onto my memory.

Now this is only my opinion, unburdened with anything like an objective fact or assertion. It only reflects my subjective isolate experience. Many other people could enjoy this by finding some connection I have missed. If there is something there, please tell me. It is easy to criticize and make book reviews, far easier than to write. If people are dissuaded from the task of writing big encyclopedic novels based on the opinions of mere critics, may Adonai save us.

Christopher says

(pictured above: Che Guevara, analogue of Gurion Maccabee, antihero of *The Instructions*)

Gurion ben-Judah Maccabee is an incredibly verbose and intellectually gifted ten-year old potential messiah. He aspires to write capital-S Scripture on par with the Torah he so dearly loves. This large book is his Scripture, the *Book of Gurion*, his *Instructions*.

This is a metafictional delight. In the fashion of *Lolita*, *The Instructions* begins with the disclaimer that in reading this book, the reader is taking no part in support of its fictional author, Gurion Maccabee, who has done some truly awful things and will receive no financial gain from the publishing and purchase of *The Instructions*. (This also serves to warn the reader not to get too chummy with Gurion.)

Gurion is an immediately likable character. He's got Holden Caulfield's frankness and critical eye, Hal Incandenza's* succinctness (or lack thereof), and the eloquence of, well... Torah. And he's not the only great character in his Scriptures. The cast resembles that of Infinite Jest's Enfield Tennis Academy. To name a few... Eliza June Watermark, the redheaded beauty and object of Gurion's affections. Call-Me-Sandy, the insecure and probably overwhelmed social worker. The Janitor, who is not actually a janitor but a student with early budding OCD. Ronico "pee so pungent" Asparagus. Benji Nakamook. Etc.

Flashback to November, 2006: Gurion has been expelled from three schools: The Solomon Schechter School of Chicago, Northside Hebrew Day School, and Martin Luther King Middle School. The reason(s)? In brief, the manufacture and distribution of weapons and messianic tendencies. And now he has been placed indefinitely in the CAGE program for troubled youth.

But is Gurion troubled in the sense that he needs to be locked up, safely away from the normal student population? After all, he only manufactured and distributed weapons (homemade "pennyguns") after an attack on his synagogue so that his fellow Israelites could protect themselves. And he doesn't really think he's the messiah, just that he could be.

And here is a good place to return to the photo above. Che Guevara, if you've ever read his book or seen its adapted movie *The Motorcycle Diaries*, comes across as a sympathetic and likable character. He was compassionate, smart, energetic, and he traveled around South America because he had an adventurous spirit, and he saw people in great need and wanted to help them. And I'm still very unclear about how it all happened, but he became a cold-blooded killer and now is a symbol of revolution for revolution's sake.

Likewise, Gurion falls into a similar pit. The perfect storm of ability and circumstance come together and a boy who could have become the messiah becomes something else entirely.

The Instructions is an incredible character study of a brilliant young mind gone awry.

Although I don't like for this to be a focus of my reviews, I'm obligated by its length to talk about its length. It is a long book - 1,030 pages - but it reads very quickly. This is only one of the many reasons it's compared to *Infinite Jest*, but it's much easier to read. If I were talking about music instead of literature, I'd say that *The Instructions* is more poppy than *Infinite Jest*, like listening closely to Radiohead's *No Surprises* compared to trying to hear and understand every bloop and bleep in *Kid A*.**

...Which is not to say that *The Instructions* is not deep, because it is. There's so much to investigate, especially if you're not familiar with Torah and extrabiblical material. Gurion's last name, after all, is Maccabee, the titular family of *The Book of Maccabees* in which a revolution is staged against Jerusalem's Hellenistic colonialists. There are myriad references to contemporary literature as well, including Philip Roth, Cormac McCarthy, and Don DeLillo.***

This is a highly recommended festival of words and is probably my favorite book I've read this year. And if you want to read the perfect triptych of young and troubled but absurdly gifted youngsters, read this, *Infinite Jest*, and *Skippy Dies*.

Comparisons Round-Up/Recommended If You Like...

- Infinite Jest*
- Breaking Bad*****
- broken fingers, teeth, shoulders, etc.
- the Bible
- Jewish history
- intense introspection and analysis paralysis
- Groucho Marx
- great literature

*This will be the first of several references to David Foster Wallace's wonderful *Infinite Jest*, a book which, after I read it earlier this year, has influenced my reading of any book written after the publish date of *Infinite Jest*. They are all influenced by it, mark my words. Also note my use of footnotes, inspired by *Infinite Jest*.

**This is not a great analogy. Forgive me.

***Gurion is a voracious reader not only of religious texts but also great fiction.

****But only if you're the smart, critical type of viewer who recognizes that Walter White is not the good guy.

*****What? There's no referent for this note? Oops.

Oriana says

Third read, Nov '17: My god, I love this book so much it makes me feel kind of crazy.

Nov '10: Karen & I went to see Adam Levin read last night and he was great, not to mention ridiculously cool & nice. He is also the second author I've met who hugged me when he found out I was his copyeditor (Deb Olin Unferth, who is also fantastic, was the first). As if I could have liked him more! Shit you guys, read this fucking book already and make the man rich & famous.

also: for anyone still on the fence about trying this -- especially those with whom I've lost reliability because I so overly effusively love everything -- check out this essay compiled from the Rumpus Book Club discussions. It's very detailed and measured and illuminating, although a bit spoilery.

Oct: Ooh, I just found out that this book is on the shelves now, so I feel like it's okay to expand my review a smidge.

First I will say again: holy moly, this is fucking stupendous. Totally unlike anything I've ever read before. It's the story of Gurion Maccabee, a ten-year-old Hebrew scholar and brilliant, brilliant boy, whom many of his friends (and also some grownups) believe is the messiah. It's absolutely steeped in Jewish philosophy, which believe me, I would have considered a huge turnoff if someone'd told me that that was what I was getting into, but it is just fascinating the way it's done here. (*n.b.*: I'm not anti-Semitic or anything; I'm a Jew by birth myself, but I just don't tend to gravitate toward religiously expounding books.)

Anyway, Gurion's dad is a fallen Chasid and his mom is an Ethiopian Jew who was a sniper or secret agent or something in Israel, and dad has taught Gurion to be an intense scholar and mom has taught him to be a serious fighter. The parents are thrilling characters, sexy and brilliant and terrifically fun. But most of the story actually takes place at Gurion's school, a last-resort school for fuck-up kids, because he's been kicked out of three other schools in a row for inciting and participating in serious violence. The whole book is written sort of as his scripture, as he rallies and trains his troops, then foments and carries out the Gurionic War against those who would keep down the Israelites with draconian rules and unjust punishments. The kids in the school, and especially Gurion's inner circle, are just amazingly complexly realized characters, so full and fascinating and devastating and fucking *real*. His girlfriend Eliza June and his best friends Benji (a gentile and a thug and in his own way even more brilliant than Gurion) and Eli (a beautiful and terribly sad transfer student and scholar who is it turns out so strong)... oh god, they are just so goddamn good.

I may have mentioned that the book is over a thousand pages, so obvs I've told you basically nothing at all so

far. But each character is a wonder. The dialogue is phenomenal. The theology, rather than being a pedantic distraction, is thrilling. The scope is massive. I don't even know.

Obvs it's impossible to describe truly unique works of literature, and obvs I've done a bad job. But I am sad to say that I also think the promo copy does the book a bit of a disservice by name-dropping DFW and Philip Roth. I mean, it's like they went, "Uh, the book is really long and weird...compare to DFW! And it's super-Jewy...compare to Philip Roth!" Not to say that there isn't maybe a little something to the comparisons—it *is* long and weird and super-Jewy—but that just seems lazy to me. Adam Levin is his very own brand of insanely awesome, is all I mean.

Anyway, fuck. I'm getting shivers just thinking about this book. I can't wait to read it again.

June: Holy shit, you guys, this one is going to blow your fucking minds. Brilliant, sprawling, edifying, invigorating, devastating, dreamlike, utterly unique, just totally spellbindingly spectacular.... It's over a thousand pages and still too short. I don't even know what to say.

Krok Zero says

Epigraph as authorial hand-tipping:

It is a curious enigma that so great a mind would question the most obvious realities and object even to things scientifically demonstrated... while believing absolutely in his own fantastic explanations of the same phenomena.

Were it not for this epigraph, which comes from Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, the reader might, in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, believe that Adam Levin tacitly approves of the violent actions of his ten-year-old scholar/terrorist/possible-messiah Gurion. It's not a spoiler to say that there are violent actions or that he is a terrorist, because this information is pretty much revealed before the book even starts, in a message from the "publisher" as part of the book's framing device. We read the first 800+ pages knowing that some shit is gonna go down, we read the last 200 pages of nonstop shit-going-down, and then the book is over, and we are left to ponder the moral implications on our own, because Levin and Gurion have cut and run, so to speak; instead of allowing the reader to continue living in this world after the shit has gone down, to observe the shit's effects on the book's many characters and to carry their moral questioning to the point it has seemingly been building toward, Levin and Gurion porkypig the reader: That's all, folks.

You can't read a book this long without the book becoming part of you. It's doubtful I will ever think of the word "damage" or "arrangement" the same way again. Despite the exaggerated reality of a world in which a ten-year-old can write a thousand-page scripture and lead actual armies in violent revolt, the characters are pretty vivid and knowable (with at least one problematic exception) and it's not hard to form attachments. So the attachment I formed to Levin's world partly accounts for my disappointment with the ending. I really hate to sound like one of those rubes who complained about *The Sopranos* ending being too ambiguous, or one of those dim fanboys who couldn't handle the ending of *Lost* failing to answer all their burning questions. I can handle ambiguity, really I can. But when Levin ends it where he does, he effectively cuts the book off from its themes, so that the book just isn't enough about what it's supposed to be about. Or at least, that is my near-immediate reaction upon finishing; I reserve the right to decide that I'm wrong.

From where I sit, the book is principally about two things: (1) the rabbit-hole of (over)analytical thinking about both oneself and the world in terms of morality, faith, and practicality -- what Douglas Wolk's

Bookforum review describes as being "talmudically obsessed with worrying out every possible interpretation of everything" -- and (2) violence, violence, violence -- the mechanics, the ethics, the causes, the justifications, the consequences, and so on. For whatever reason (mainly an aesthetic one, I suspect), Levin avoids the word *violence* like the plague and replaces it with the word *damage*. Damage takes many forms, and nearly every scene in the book is somehow related to some form of damage. (One of my favorite digressions in the book is a brilliant monologue by one of the school security guards that's basically a long, impassioned moral defense of bullying and bullies.) When the book ends where it does, Levin forces us to reconsider these themes in light of the shit that has gone down, without actually further developing them himself. What does Gurion, with all his endless analytical hand-wringing over fucking *everything*, have to say about the events that came to define his life? We don't know, except in little hints. Maybe this is totally fine and I'm having a naive, unsophisticated reaction. Maybe I'm just pissed at the disappearance of Bam Slokum from the narrative, a fascinating character who was built up as the villain of the piece and given a handful of stunning monologues before Levin discarded him and left his purpose in the novel unresolved. The book is over a thousand pages long, but it seems unfinished.

I had other problems, too. The aforementioned obsession with interpretive analysis is a pleasure to read for a while, but after several hundred pages it becomes extremely tiresome. The love interest, June, is a vaguely defined character, and I never found her relationship with Gurion convincing. I've mentioned before that I have trouble following action sequences in prose fiction, and this book's big violent set piece just made my eyes glaze over -- though that's maybe more my fault than Levin's. (Also, from the department of petty, meaningless complaints: some of the Chicago geography is questionable, even though Levin lives here.)

But this review has been mostly griping, and you can see I've given it four stars, so...yeah, *The Instructions* is not optional. It's as ambitious as it is huge, written in as inventive and precisely calibrated a first-person voice as I've ever read, often very funny, full of individual scenes of holyshit perfection, weighty without getting weighed down, and almost maddeningly thought-provoking. My disappointments with it are purely a result of its successes, if that makes sense. I look forward to seeing what Levin can do on a less massive scale, and I seriously regret missing his appearance at my local library (also Joel's local library) back in October. Still, I know where he teaches, so I suppose I could always go downtown and stalk him. I just hope he doesn't try to damage me.

El says

Before anyone starts cooking up the tar and feathers, let me just begin by saying I was probably doomed from the beginning *knowing* I was stepping into McSweeney-land here. I'm not going to spend time in my review defending my stance on that, other than I have preconceived notions about a lot of things that have relations with McSweeney-land - most apt to this review would be the word "clever". I would say since the early aughts there has been this whole "I'm-cleverer-than-you" movement in literature and it got old fast, in my opinion.

The Instructions feels that way to me. It's too... gimmicky.

That being said, it's a clever (this time I mean it in the "good way") story idea and it's not a horrible story in itself. Troubled, ten-year-old Gurion Maccabee from Chicago might be the messiah. He doesn't know for sure if he is, but as a natural-born leader, he certainly takes advantage of the possibility that it could very well be true.

While I'm never afraid of a big book, there are times when I don't feel a big book needs to be as big as it is. I understand the purpose here behind the length (it's meant to be scripture), but felt it was *too* purposeful that it

actually lost some of its meaning. It could still have been a big book! It just needed to be trimmed down... a bit.

I've seen some reviews from people who fell in love with all the characters, but I had trouble doing that myself. Gurion is certainly fascinating, but through his perspective I never really achieved complete understanding or visualization of his peers. There would be episodic glimpses into their character, but then they'd be yanked away again, to the extent that I wouldn't be able to point them out in a line-up if I had to.

But this is a first novel! Holy shit, right? Over a thousand pages of a first novel, and that's nothing to sneeze at. And good for him for finding a home for it at McSweeney-land, though it would be hard to imagine that it *couldn't* have found a place there - this book is right up the McSweeney-alley.

I finished this book last night, and to be fair I've been going back and forth between 3 and 4 stars in my head ever since. I think had Levin not tried to be as clever as he did here, it would have achieved a higher rating from me. But I feel he *did* try too hard to have it fit the McSweeney bill, that it dripped from almost every page. That's a turn off for me. But again, I already have issues with that sort of thing. Some are really into it, and good for them - then this book will be the best choice EVER for them to read. For me, however, I'm sticking with the 3 star rating because it's a big book that just wanted to be bigger than it needed to be.

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

I'll keep this short. Immediately after finishing this brick I picked up Arno Schmidt's *Calculations* in which he sketches out a number of formal possibilities for prose. And I see quickly how Levin missed an opportunity to do something interesting with his material, formally. And one sees quickly the distance between the middle of the road and the elevated, rigorous pursuit of literary arts.

An unfortunate juxtaposition on my part ; it may be the exact politico=thriller you're looking for though.

Sentimental Surrealist says

Wayside School Stages a Coup D'Etat, complete with questions of Jewish identity, a pile of metafictional aspects, social commentary, a surprising amount of heart behind all the violence, and special guest Philip Roth. Not as proverbially perfect as some of my five stars but an undeniably me-approved novel.

Mark says

If this book is 1030 pages, which it very much is, then it should be worth the journey, but if it isn't then it's because the main character is wholly unlikable, but if Gurion is unlikable then his actions should make sense, but if they do make sense the novel would be worth the time, but if they don't make sense then it isn't. If Levin had any sense of self-editing his prose wouldn't be ponderous for pages on end as Gurion goes down endless spirals into his own head, which are meant to be taken as scripture the likes of which were to infer will stand alongside the Torah, or not, but if it isn't ponderous to read the thoughts of ten-year old who thinks he may or may not be the Messiah then it wouldn't seem ponderous at all, but the book is ponderous for this very reason, and ponderous = suck. Upon seeing an equation sign mid-text seems like an interesting play on conventions. Seeing it crop up again and again may be fun, but if it seems boring and just a dumb

way to break up the text then it would seem trite, but if it is neither trite nor interesting but just something to tolerate, does it then have an impact at all? A book should be fun to read shouldn't it? If it is supposed to be fun or pleasurable or redeeming then pages on pages on end of characters speaking in circles wouldn't be fun to read, but maybe it is fun to read if the characters say things that are of interest, but maybe it isn't fun to read if they say things that are not interesting, and maybe if all the characters leave almost no impact then no matter what they say will seem boring, and whether or not that is case, who's to say, but certainly the words they speak don't seem believable given the age bracket we're suppose to believe the kids are bracketed within, though granting a certain artistic license is allowable. Or maybe it is fun to pretend they are all hyper intelligent and feeling beings that most, those in the Cage, just happen to be misunderstood rather than unfit for society, but are still people. But if any of this is true or not, it certainly can be a test in patience to read the bulk of this book of which is maybe or maybe not done in this style.

I just stabbed myself in the thigh with a pen. There is blood starting to seep around the entry point of the pen. The pen was a fountain pen and I think the tip is broken in my leg. I'm going to pull the pen out. "Tch" = ow, that hurt more than I expected. There's a lot of blood to account for.

Mark Walsh

Review of The Instructions by Adam Levin

04.01.2011

There are admittedly some well done portions of narrative within the main text that generally come from outside sources. These are a breath of fresh air since for the most part they very clearly and directly move the action along at a nice clip. Please understand that I do not need a book shoved down my gullet for me to enjoy the text. The problem is after reading that first paragraph is to understand that pages upon pages are just like that. Sure, I'll readily admit it sounds much better coming from Levin than it does from my very meager writing skills, but the general idea is the same. Levin then punctuates all that ponderous prose with violence -from Gurion's constant attempts to break his own fingers, Benji's self-harm, and the final 200 pages of which is a laughable riot of blood and death of which, had I known that was the collision course I was on when I picked up this book I probably never would have done so. These are declarative sentences with lots of verbs since it is that very sentence structure that makes the reader move quickly. It is a very cheap trick.

And here's the climax to my review* I hated this book. Simply as that.

Or maybe I didn't hate the book, or I hated the book but I still finished it because I felt obligated, or there were moments where I really enjoyed it, or no moments of enjoyment but I thought the ending was going to pay off so I kept reading. Or, hate, hate, hate, hate.

*Sadly I'm quite serious. The climax in this book isn't hard to pick out. Any decent reader will recognize it as such. Yet still, Levin in his efforts to be post-modern (to a painful degree as this whole text attests to) literally references the climax as the climax in the narrative.

MJ Nicholls says

This is my holy shit, this-book-is-the-second-coming, *The Recognitions* of our time, better than the other 1000-page bricks being written in cloying precocious childese, sort of like *The Brief Life of Oscar Wao* crossed with references to every postmodern luvvie of the 20th C, sort of like Palahniuk's style in *Pygmy* or, dare it be said, *A Clockwork Orange*, heavier-than-a-box-of-satsumas, publishing event of the millennium, better than Joshua Cohen's *Witz* even in the first thirty-two pages gushing gasping review of Adam Levin's *The Instructions*: I'm not reading this shit for 1030 pages. Are you fucking kidding me? Later.

Jimmy says

I'm a little overwhelmed. After finishing this, I just can't see it as clearly as while I was in the middle of reading it. Because after finishing it, all I can focus on is the ending, but the book is so much more than that. Yes it is a unified work and it is saying big things, but I love the small things he does as much as the big things. The book is as much about these small things = slapslap, chinning, Harpo Progression, hyperscoot, I'm-Ticking, 'Tch' = there is an obsession with, or an understanding of, gestural communication but also significance of gestural motions outside of the goal of communication alone. There's also a particular vocabulary = trickle, snat, emotionalize, Slokum Dies Friday, darkers, the robots, Desormiate, chomsky, pennygun, Arrangement, damage, Ulpan = a grandiose kind of language-making in which everything is internalized, nicknamed, externalized, passed-on, becomes myth-like. People's names too = Main Man, Janitor, Asparagus, Brooklyn, Call-Me-Sandy. The book creates an internal logic, an environment where everything in it makes its own particular sense, and is driven by a most unique voice, a voice that gets in your head and even made me dream things in that same voice, a voice of one who is constantly thinking and re-thinking, obsessed with logic in the big things (including scriptural and moral ideas, example = lying to God, and how God is complicit in your lying, etc.) as well as the smallest of small, seemingly irrelevant things (= why simple slapslap was inferior to normal slapslap...) logic which becomes illogical because it has so much faith in its own logic, that logic is possible, that the world can be logic-ed out. Those are the little things. And I loved those little things, the particular world of the book that was so real (Levin GETS it = this is just like childhood, in a certain way) and often funny, alive, entertaining, engaging, and intellectual. The humor is very odd, sometimes I don't even know why it is funny as in this passage that totally cracked me up:

Maybe take away the Shovers' semi-private-club status? But then they'd meet at recess, wholly private, with impunity. Ban scarves in the classroom? What about cold kids? - p241

The book is as much about these little things as the big themes that will get over-focused on. The character's, too, were so real, though they all spoke Gurion-speak: even the ones not like him at all have a particular him-ness (maybe because he's narrating). At the same time, the characters are easily distinguishable, and have very strong distinct personalities of their own. Interesting paradox.

I liked eggs soft-boiled, but in the morning couldn't prep them, not if I wanted to put them in my stomach. Those insect-like screams emitted by the shell when you pried its fragments from that film they clung to--the mastication of wet chicken sounded musical by comparison. p.773

What of the big things? What is the book saying? I have no idea. Something about terrorism? Something about God/belief? Was it about verbosity/iniquity? About verbose boys who are too smart for their own good? About the institutional aspect of education? Modern technology? The modern world's tolerance for divergent thought, or true uniqueness? I don't know but I know by the end I knew it was about something but maybe also about multiple things or maybe about something in a way that it wasn't totally about it, otherwise it would be a shallow one-dimensional work anyway. By the end, I wasn't even sure what was happening sometimes. The last hundred pages totally devastated me, and I shall put a SPOILER warning here (though if you pay attention to the very beginning, none of this will really be a surprise, but who will remember the beginning after 1000+ pages? The shocking-ness of the ending is that everything was built up so carefully and logically that it doesn't seem like violence (though talked about and even performed in small doses, but TRUE violence, TRUE irrevocable violence of the death-sort seemed beyond the scope of possible outcomes, however much foreshadowed, until it comes) seemed unimaginable at least to me, as I was able to imagine the rest of the story so fully: not unimaginable as in unbelievable, but believable, totally believable, yet completely shocking and really really fucken sad. The Gurionic War passage, the 100+ pages or so of it

near the end anyway, was such a dizzying array of action, and of action that made me want to turn away from it, because I had so invested in these characters and I could see now the inevitable damage and I did not want to see it happen I did not want to know that it was going to happen even though I knew and I knew that I knew. What use was it?

Then, also, the book is so detail oriented that I feel like I can dissect every bit of it for meaning, almost, yes, like scripture. What is the meaning of Gurion's own words never having "quote" marks around it... except near the end when he speaks to the soldiers = "There is damage," I said to the thousand soldiers. What does that mean, or was that just a slip up where he forgot to not quote? I refuse to believe that this would escape him. What does it mean that the whole book is written by future-Gurion, who remembers these events... So the book leaves you hanging at the end, not knowing what version of Gurion comes out of this experience, we only know past-Gurion and past-Gurion as described (or mis-represented?) in the head of future-Gurion, but we know also (or more accurately, we can imply also) that future-Gurion is relatively unchanged, still belief-heavy in that he finished this huge book, in that he believed in it that much and did not allow the tragedy of the events to cause in him doubt, depression, etc. (like it would have if I were Gurion but then again I would not be Gurion nor would I ever want to be), or if he did allow that (he did mention something about suicide in the very ambiguous Coda), that he was somehow able to overcome it. But how was he able to overcome it, what were his thoughts on all these events? What was the meaning of the miracle? Does it vindicate anything? What about in "Commentary on Commentaries" chapter where he hints at things about Main Man being somehow more involved than he ended up being at the end:

So even though, on reflection, Main Man's weird utterances seem to have been obliquely prophetic--and maybe they were--there was no good reason to believe they were prophetic at the time.

And what to say now? How to end this review? It would be unfair to not mention the book's flaws. The 'damage' at the end, though obligatory, became dull to read after a while. I can only take so much straight action and so much of this book was an alternation between action and thought whereas the last 200 pages or so were almost entirely action in a way that seemed... a bit meaningless. What does it matter what happened, as much as it matters that it happened and that we know something happened, and are able to reflect on the end result of what happened. The specifics seem superfluous = who was standing where, doing what to whom etc. This is a gripe on my part, even though I know it is probably necessary to have that action described in detail, to keep consistency with the character of Gurion feeling overly important about these events. Also, little things with characters, like how Eliyahu seemed to suddenly change personalities, becoming more susceptible to violence, even inviting it, perhaps I missed what brought this on. Also, the ending which affected me deeply, but I'm not sure what to think about it at all, and feel a vague sense of disappointment at the same time. Also, the voice which is captivating in its endless logical digressions became slightly tiresome at around page 635. There are probably more, but really it does not matter. The book has flaws but the book is a triumph also. It is a dizzying experience and I don't know what to think about it, and that makes me want to think about it all the more.

Edward says

In Gurion Maccabee, Adam Levin has created one of the most likable and compelling voices in recent fiction. His obsessively analytical and verbose stream of consciousness creates a world rich in idiosyncratic detail, which despite being in many ways absurd, manages to feel entirely relatable. The writing is original and refreshing. It's very accessible – a breeze to read despite its length, and fun as hell. Sure, it gets silly and unbelievable at times – maybe most of the time - but tell me, was Gravity's Rainbow believable? How about Infinite Jest?

The lightness of the narration belies some pretty dark and heavy themes. The novel explores the relationships and ambiguous boundaries between what we call genius, charisma, greatness, fanaticism, terrorism and righteousness. These are tensions that have existed in leaders like Caesar, Christ, Napoleon, but also those like Hitler, Manson and Koresh. The line that defines how posterity will regard these charismatic leaders is not always a clear or a moral one. Usually, it is a case of rationalising competing moral positions, with a lot of political and historical realities thrown into the calculus. In *The Instructions*, Gurion's charismatic pull is powerfully felt, and through the escalation of the "wars", the reader is forced to examine their own allegiances, and perhaps participate in these same kinds of rationalisation processes. The moral issues that are implied here are fascinating, but to my disappointment the book too often takes the easy way out on these questions. Levin seems reluctant to directly confront the implications of these darker themes, opting instead for the fantastical and fun. While this affected my feelings towards the book after having finished it, it did not detract from the pleasure while reading it - I can't overstate how much fun this book is.

I can understand why this book would not resonate with everyone, but I found it just hit all the right notes. *The Instructions* was (unexpectedly) one of the standout books of the year for me.

BlackOxford says

The Talmud in a Weird World.

According to some Kabbalists, there is at least one Messiah in every generation. He of course may refuse to recognise his calling or, in any case, is likely to be rejected when he announces himself to the world. Nonetheless the Messiah is essential for the attainment of justice: "...it is good to do justice because God will kill you and your family whether you do justice or not."

So what if, just what if, a young Chicagoland boy feels himself called, responds to that call with caution but also with persistence, and creates a following of other young Jewish kids? He might know the odds are against him but so what:

"If ever you are asked if Adonai can create a boulder too heavy for Him to lift, you will answer the fool who asked you: 'Fool, we are two of seven billion such boulders, you and I.' And when the fool insists that Adonai cannot then properly be called almighty, you will not argue, for the fool will be correct. Instead you will answer: 'He is Adonai nevertheless. We are superior to the Angels not because we control ourselves, but because Adonai does not control us.'"

Then what if that young boy chooses to resist the admonitions and restrictions of unsympathetic adults as well as the low level threats of school yard anti-Semites? What might happen? Well, a surprisingly thrilling saga of human rebellion and retribution. And an even more surprising confrontation with the Almighty himself: "Our thoughts to You are what You are to us. Noisy but hidden...Even if you can read our faces you can do so only in the way we read Your scripture." In other words "You may interpret us as human beings but don't claim, for heaven's sake that you can understand much less judge us."

It's hard not to be on the side of the putative Messiah, against Adonai as well as the bigots and bureaucrats, despite the disruption and even death that he initiates. At over 1000 pages, Levin has to be good to keep the reader. And that he does. Amazing for a first novel.

Aubrey says

I know this much is true.

Or I think this. Suspect this. Realize this.

I know that this is the childhood of *Infinite Jest* before it was exposed to its titular component. I know that nothing is sacred, least of all childhood, which suffers on its sanctified pedestal. I know ideology and theology and coprology and the razors they stretch tight around the skin. I know how the blades slip into the throat in childhood, and how the ability to spit them at another screams itself out in adulthood. I know that ability, to harness your damage to your own purposes, to be the true determination of being an adult.

I know that if you act like a child, you will be treated as a child. I know that if you are a child, and act like an adult, you will be disregarded as a child. I know that if you are a child, you will be hit as an adult. I know that if you are a child, you will be molested as an adult. I know that if you are a child, you will be beaten as an adult. I know that if you are a child, you will be raped as an adult. I know that if you are a child, you will be blamed for the actions of the father as an adult, you will be blamed for the beliefs of the mother as an adult, and you will be condemned for your skin and your creed and your being. As an adult.

I know that if you are a child, and commit atrocities like an adult, you will be feared beyond belief.

I know that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. I know that the road to hell is the path of least resistance. I know that the road to life is the path of most conviction, the path of least analysis, the path of tropes and logos and prejudices shortchanged into social slogans that lubricate your lifestyle and damage everything in its wake.

I know that WE DAMAGE WE is tennis.

I know that life is beautiful and love is beautiful. I know that a sound mind in a sound body is beautiful. I know that knowledge is beautiful, and that conviction is beautiful, and that reasoning is beautiful. I know that appreciation of and willingness towards these qualities is beautiful.

I know that misguided praise of all this is as equally damaging as condemnation.

I know that a child is not empty. I know that an adult is not full. I know that no one can truly say where one ends and the other begins, and anyone who uses age as reasoning confuses the length of life experience with humanity. Anyone who uses cooperation with an ideological system, which grinds and grinds and grinds, as reasoning confuses mirroring the crowd with humanity. Anyone who uses might as reasoning does not know humanity. In other words, fuck them. They know nothing.

I know that we try, and we try, and we try. I know that we bleed, I know that we fall, I know that we suffer. I know that we are objectified. I know that we objectify. I know that we make others suffer, we make others fall, we make others bleed. I know that we try, and we try, and we try.

I do not know the ending. No one does. Perhaps it will all be for something. Perhaps not. Does it matter, truly? Does closure really matter that much to you?

Who am I kidding. Of course it does. We would not be having this conversation otherwise.

Paul Bryant says

Abandoned for now and maybe forever because of sentences like this :

EXAMPLE THE FIRST

Context - our 10 year old hero is engaged in stealing a Coke from the Coke machine in the teachers' common room in school in order to impress a girl called June. He has already tried and failed to smash the clock in the gym hall as a tribute to his new love :

It occurred to me that maybe the Coke I was getting for June, if a strong poem were taped to it, would come closer to approximating a smash-faced gym-clock than would a Coke without a strong poem taped to it. Granted, I couldn't make a strong poem, but there was no doubt in my mind that a weak poem was a closer approximation to a strong poem than was no poem, and therefore a Coke with a weak poem taped to it was a closer approximation of a smash-faced gym clock than a poemless Coke, so I wrote a weak poem in my head, in the doorway. P76

EXAMPLE THE SECOND

Once the sound-code failed, we tried a time-code, i.e. we agreed that at certain times we's revolve to face each other. Benji and I, for example, agreed that we would revolve at every eleventh, seventeenth, thirtyfirst, and fifty-third minute of the hour, whereas Vincie and i would revolve at th second, twenty-seventh, and forty-fifth minute, and Benji and Vincie at the fifth, thirty-ninth, and fifty-eighth minute. p201

So I guess this is supposed to be hilarious stuff. Or just not hilarious but stuff you would anyway want to read.

So, you takes your Murphy and Molloy by Samuel Becket and your Skippy Dies by Paul Murray which is a stand-in for any recent school story because I haven't read any others recently, and you throw them in a Hasidic blender and out comes this kind of prose.

And finally...

(view spoiler)