

Behind the Locked Door

David Herstle Jones

Think in the Morning (Dec 31, 2019)

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Blurring the line between fantasy and reality, Behind the Locked Door is a novel about living life to the fullest, no matter how much time you have left.

The fight over a supposed cancer cure brings both insight and sorrow in David Herstle Jones's novel *Behind the Locked Door*.

After a devastating cancer diagnosis, Eric, an up-and-coming lawyer, travels to Mexico to try an illegal and probably ineffective miracle cure. But the clinic treating Eric hides dangers of its own: it is a money laundering front for ruthless drug dealers, and the doctors have almost run out of their wonder treatment, forcing them to use a less effective substitute. As the battle over the cure heats up, Eric discovers a new outlook on life—and new reasons for living.

The novel uses elements of fantasy to grapple with its difficult subjects, including the brutality of terminal illness and of America's imperfect healthcare system, as well as the benefits and limits of faith—religious and otherwise—in the healing process. Eric struggles with all of this, feeling like a plaything for unfeeling doctors and the universe as a whole.

The plot moves slowly, meandering through raw scenes of fear and mourning. These are interspersed with fantastical visions brought on by Eric's illness. The narration is sometimes distant, relating dramatic events with little emotion, but it also sometimes seethes with desperation. Eric vacillates between confidence and anger throughout the story. His fragile happiness and unconquerable doubts are conveyed through the straightforward yet hypnotic prose and stark similes. The dialogue flows well but sometimes slips into redundant speeches or contradictory statements.

Even characters who don't seem to be connected share unexpected bonds, leading to interesting revelations. There are several secondary characters whose subplots are underdeveloped or unresolved. Much characterization is relayed through exposition.

Rich details highlight the contrasts of Eric's time in 1970s Mexico. The hut of the healer Itandehui is dark and atmospheric—a fitting location for life-altering revelations. The city of Tijuana is rejuvenating but often dangerous, with beachside restaurants and intense sporting events adding variety to Eric's draining routine of shots, supplements, and waiting.

Several complementary themes may be drawn from the story. The power of nature and the dangers of deviating too far from it are writ large throughout. Multiple characters, including Eric, experience different fates depending on whether they take this lesson to heart. The ending is frequently hinted at; it furthers the notion that reality is constructed by individuals, rather than being an immutable thing. Here: everyone dies, but their stories don't have to.

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EILEEN GONZALEZ (April 10, 2020)

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