

In Extremis

Matt Duggan

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A writer from New York mocks and satirizes himself and other Los Angeles residents in the midst of a forest fire in the satirical novel In Extremis.

In Matt Duggan's incisive novel *In Extremis*, a transplant writer from New York makes his way in Los Angeles.

In the 1990s, Jack enters a cocaine smuggling scheme involving his good friend, Billy. Billy seems to get away without consequences, leaving Jack with six thousand dollars—enough financial stability to research Nietzsche and write his novel in comfort. But Jack loses the money soon after and decides to take up acting to make a living.

After learning Billy has been murdered, Jack has a seizure and is incapacitated, even as a wildfire rages outside. Once he is rescued, he and an EMT seek refuge in a neighboring pool. As they wait, Jack talks, working his life story into the shape of a novel.

Jack's narration moves at lightning speed. Matching the ecological and geographic instability of the city, which is located on a fault line and is in a state of seasonal wildfires, his personal epic is filled with similar surges, featuring both rapid upticks and downturns of luck. The result is a chaotic, screwball story whose hero has to remain alert against the ruthlessness and unpredictable glitz and glamour of Los Angeles.

Jack's story is further populated by a revolving cast of secondary characters. After Billy falls out of the story, he is replaced by a Hare Krishna, Banjo, and by Daniel, who is claustrophobic. The secondary characters are developed as caricatures of their lifestyles, though, such as a free-spirited life on drugs and self-aggrandizing mooching. While their antics are comedic, they too disappear. The book's true constant is Jack's unsteady luck in his pursuit of fame.

Indeed, Jack fascinates as the storyteller of his own life. He is glib and sarcastic; he mocks and satirizes himself and others, dissecting their ridiculous motivations and personalities. And despite his posture of intellectual superiority, his Nietzsche fascination, and his novel writing, he proves to be hypocritical in subtle ways: he is just as obsessed with fame, wealth, and carving out existential meaning as are those whom he puts down for also seeking stardom in Los Angeles. Still, his attempts to provide close and truthful insights into his inner thoughts makes him sympathetic, suggesting potential hidden depth not only in him, but in those he caricatures. In time, they are revealed to be more like him than different.

A newcomer seeks wealth and fortune in the breakneck, ever-changing landscape of Los Angeles in the fiery novel *In Extremis*.

ISABELLA ZHOU (May 6, 2024)

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