

Many Are Invited

Dennis Cuesta

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Many Are Invited is a fascinating psychological novel in which a man meddles in his married friends' lives with disastrous consequences.

In Dennis Cuesta's beguiling and suspenseful novel *Many Are Invited*, a man fuels a tragedy at a housewarming party at the dawn of the new millennium.

In the present, Steve is plagued by an unspecified trauma that took place more than twenty years ago. Urged by his therapist to write about it, he recounts what happened, reaching back to the 1990s when he worked in IT services for a phone company. Against the backdrop of California's internet boom and the impending Y2K crisis, Steve details his workplace encounters, including with John, who became something of a friend.

After John moved on to a better job, the men met in neutral spaces; those encounters reveal the tenuous nature of their connection. They shared a competitive streak, but their friendship was based on too little substance beyond this. Neither man knew the range of the other's thoughts, and they only kept meeting because of loose social reasons.

Such exposures act as a precursor to the men's fraying trusts, which twist the novel in new directions. John becomes engaged to Mary, and Steve's envy seeps in. His fleeting attraction to Mary leads to added risks, while Mary's gorgeous roommate, Lauren, complicates the group's interactions further with her needling discontent.

Steve's narration is marked by his dark fixations. He accepts John's running joke of labeling attractive women as "Swedes," resulting in several awkward brushes with younger coworkers. He is calculating by nature and admits to unsettling feelings of apathy toward John. Though his flaws are intriguing, his reliability comes into question. And then Lauren's behavior takes a turn toward the vindictive, adding tension.

Steve's disclosures about John's December 1999 party are slow to emerge. He shares them in conversations with others, discussing the layers of John and Mary's marriage, as well as their simmering hidden rivalries. The couple held grave secrets from each other—a fact that Steve used to his advantage as he shuttled between them, feeding into their hazardous misunderstandings and arranging a pivotal reveal. Still, Steve's hindsight is limited by his vices, and he meanders his way toward divulging truths without examining his choices in depth. The concluding scenes rush to explain the reasons for Steve's later isolation.

Part confession and part expiation of a man's mental burdens, *Many Are Invited* is a fascinating psychological novel about the disastrous consequences of meddling in the lives of others.

KAREN RIGBY (August 12, 2022)

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