

Occupant #3

Kevin Moccia

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*In the surrealistic dystopian novel **Occupant #3**, a man enters a hellish viral experiment in the hopes of securing a massive payout.*

In Kevin Moccia's science fiction novel *Occupant #3*, a needy veteran becomes part of a nightmarish biomedical experiment.

Clarence survived war, but he's struggling to keep his farm afloat. Then word reaches him that a pharmaceutical company has opened its volunteer list for an ongoing experiment. There, in a sixty-story-tall sphere, microchipped volunteers attempt to survive ninety days against a havoc-wreaking virus.

Once he's part of the experiment, Clarence is helped by a coterie of abandoned children who live inside the sphere. Though he hopes to keep them out of danger, they end up helping him more: they usher Clarence through their unusual world, where time is erratic, the buildings are constructed of surreal materials (including Clarence's discarded mail, magazines, and plastic trash collected from the sea), and animals wage war against the infected humans.

However, after deciding to participate in the experiment, Clarence becomes a passive hero. In his place, the children and vicious animals assume a focal position. The children know nothing beyond the sphere; they represent a new offshoot of humanity. The animals seem sentient: they both worship and wage war on the humans. But these intriguing qualities are undermined by the characters' unusual communication methods: the human beings speak in circular, repetitive, and almost nonsensical sentences, and the animals exhibit a skewed understanding of the wider world.

Further, the story's postapocalyptic setting is developed in vague and contradictory terms. Clarence and others reference pop culture, historical figures, and current events that are familiar alongside some novel events and people. The tribe's hiding place is both exaggerated and tactile, made up of the contents of a single mailbox. Fantastical animals and tribal divisions abound; still, Clarence and the children are able to travel the breadth of the sphere alone. Their bizarre encounters include a giant pond full of discarded surgical masks and massive carp, but these harrowing images serve imprecise aims.

The book's tension is continual because its goals are clear: Clarence has to survive ninety days in the sphere if he is to receive the money that he needs to keep his farm running. Driven by the desire to provide for his family, he remains sympathetic to the end, even though his actions are limited.

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JOHN M. MURRAY (July 14, 2023)

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