



Pandora's Box

Alan Davis

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Alan Davis's *Pandora's Box* is a fantastical bildungsroman that elevates identity formation into a mythic quest weighted with eternal import, superhuman challenges, and godlike impacts.

A pancultural cast of twelve gods convene in another realm, ready to test the world's balance against the heart of a single man. He must enter Pandora's Box and face the temptations of darkness, from lustful demons to self-doubt, and not be swayed. Many have tried and failed, yet a young man named Darth approaches the gate anyway, not knowing if he'll succeed and return or be trapped for all eternity.

Beginning in his childhood, *Pandora's Box* traces Darth's physical, social, and spiritual development through his early adulthood. A beta male raised in a house of alphas, Darth loves his family but observes it like an outsider, only becoming close with his grandparents. From these early experiences, a lifelong pattern is set. Darth is withdrawn and doesn't "pick things up intuitively ... He could almost always rely on sucking in a very comical way." Although presented as the hero, Darth notably departs from the stereotypical hero's ready capability and easy swagger.

Darth's reserve makes him a passive protagonist. His defining characteristic is his persistent lack of definition. The hollowness of Darth's inner world makes him hardworking, high achieving, and helpful, but it also means that "he honestly couldn't identify with one identity. It seemed the more he tried to help others the more he was being burdened down." While he works hard to please others, desperate and determined to figure out what will make them see value in him, his inner world is underdeveloped enough that his interactions seem like contrivances to advance the plot rather than character development.

When Darth seeks to fill himself, his journey leads him on a quest of self-improvement that catches the interest of the gods themselves. They manifest as teachers, educators, and guides as Darth learns about religion, spiritual practice, psychology, art, ethics, morality, romantic love, physical acumen, and self-actualization. Because Darth is socially awkward, he's often a weak guide to this world. Other characters carry interactions, frequently through monologues that serve to impart knowledge through long, instructive lectures synopsisizing known works, from Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan of the Apes* to the New Testament. Because of the structural imbalance between Darth and the supporting characters, resulting insights seem wooden and naïve, even when they're meditations on beautiful and enduring human truths.

A teaching tale based on personal experience, *Pandora's Box* is a sprawling novel that works to cover humanity's major physical and spiritual developments in the span of Darth's journey. Interested in human culture and personal development alike, Davis fictionalizes what is biographical and veneers the personal with the mythological to create a window into the difficult questions every person must face.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (December 13, 2018)

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