



Public Opinion

Nathan Pettijohn

Cordurouy

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Replete with sex, drugs, and violence, Public Opinion is an addictively uncomfortable novel that follows the exploits of a powerful hacker.

In Nathan Pettijohn's thriller *Public Opinion*, an information technology professional becomes intimately familiar with Hollywood's seedier side.

Melvin, who has come up with efficient means of influencing the public's opinion online, is appreciated in celebrity circles. He can either cover facts up, or use the internet to push targeted agendas. Nonetheless, Melvin considers himself to be a "grey hat" hacker—someone who hacks without malicious intent.

While investigating a ransomware attack that he's manipulated in his own favor, Melvin is introduced to Titus, a narcissistic director whose controversial new movie celebrates depravity. Melvin agrees to ruin the reputation of a different abusive director, even as he enters into a passionate relationship with Ruby, who stars in adult films. As he juggles his tempestuous affair with sundry acts of technological blackmail, he worries that his access to greed, drugs, and sex has compromised his morals irreparably.

Balancing humor with darkness, the novel descends with Melvin into a deepening circle of Hollywood celebrities who are devoid of moral fiber. It uses intriguing asides to detail Melvin's methods of manipulating the public: he farms online personas and blackmails people, among other techniques. In conversation, he is clever, delivering snappy one-liners and observing instances of depravity in a keen, captivating manner.

Following from the Christmas party where Melvin agrees to take on a ransomware case into his immersions into drug-fueled parties and industry scandals, the book's tension mounts, aided by Melvin's increasingly questionable, and often harrowing, decisions. He is dogged in his growing pursuit of power and money, leading to shocking narrative turns. He encounters no one with redeeming qualities, and his own redeeming qualities fade as a result. His descent into darkness is mirrored in his relationship with Ruby, which becomes a microcosm of his own story, and which serves to foreshadow other troubling events.

While there are offensive elements to Melvin's story, they are all setting- and theme-appropriate: the world that Melvin operates in is one that thrives on difficulties. His decisions, and their implications, evoke the scandals of real-world social media manipulators, too, leading to a conclusion that is both poetic and heartbreaking.

Salacious and unsettling, the contemporary thriller *Public Opinion* wades through the exploits of Hollywood elites to consider the serious impacts of social media on modern life.

JOHN M. MURRAY (July 6, 2022)

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