



Martin and John

Dale Peck , Jim Lewis (Introduction)

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In *Martin and John*, Dale Peck weaves together two sets of stories to create a haunting, heartrending portrait of an artist in our time. The first is told episodically by John, a hustler in New York, who falls in love with Martin, a man dying of AIDS. Interwoven with these stories is a second set, in which characters named Martin and John appear, but living different lives. The resulting novel is a work of stunning originality that is "inspired and brilliant" (*The Nation*).

Martin and John Details

Date : Published August 8th 2006 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux (first published 1993)

ISBN : 9780374530303

Author : Dale Peck , Jim Lewis (Introduction)

Format : Paperback 248 pages

Genre : Fiction, Lgbt, Gay, Glbt, Queer, Gay Fiction, Contemporary, Romance

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From Reader Review Martin and John for online ebook

Matthew Gallaway says

There are many startling and amazing qualities to this book; it's structurally complicated and engaging without being 'difficult,' the language is lyrical even when Peck describes acts of horrible violence and suffering, and it's a book that will haunt you for a long time after you've finished. It's hard to believe (at least for me, particularly when I think of myself at the same age) that a novel of such insight and illumination into death and love (and sex) could have been written by a 25-year old; Peck was clearly wise beyond his years.

Skip says

It's true, the literature that came out of the epidemic — Our Holocaust, as one older gay jewish friend described the dark years of the 1980s and 90s to me the other day — is so singularly unmatched in depth, intensity and emotional dimension. It's hard to find writing which captures so well the suffering and also the surviving of so many, as the AIDS literature from that era.

Dale Peck and this first novel is firmly in that league.

It's a classic I could read over and over again, and continue to walk away with something fresh. Something I hadn't seen before.

"Martin and John" offers — to borrow Peck's words — more than understanding. Empathy.

Simon says

i saw peck being interviewed on the cbc when i was 17. i think i fell in love with him a little bit. I found a copy of his book, and realised that this was probably one of the greatest, harshest, and most heroic things I had ever read. His novel was produced in the middle of the birth of the "AIDS novel", but his work went beyond that. I lost my copy of this wonderful book, and yearn for it still.

It was, and still is, the book that makes me want to be a writer.

Nicolas Chinardet says

John, Henry, Beatrice, Susan, Johnson, Harry and the eponymous Martin are the recurrent names of the characters in this book which its blurb describes as a novel.

This is how I began to read it but a few chapters in (around page 60), things start to shift and each chapter becomes more like a short story related to the other through the echoes created by the reuse of certain details and circumstances and of those names in different permutations.

The book becomes a sort of amorphous kaleidoscope where the realities described continually shift while still moving along some vaguely chronologically consistent narrative line.

Eventually it transpires that some of the material has to be autobiographical (those recurring circumstances presumably).

I found it difficult to get into the book but things definitely improved as the narrative moved on and as, I think, the elements described converged more closely with the author's experience.

I ended up almost liking this book which feels like an interesting experiment in style, though I'm not certain what this presentation brings to the reader that a more straight forward narration couldn't achieve.

Elena Potek says

This was an incredible piece of fiction. The writing style is unorthodox and asks of the reader far more than most books do. I loved his prose and writing style, and there were passages that truly did take my breath away.

Chris says

Edmund White summarizes this quasi-novel best in his first-edition dustjacket blurb: "These are elegant, nightmarish variations on two compressed, mordant themes: love in the time of AIDS and the eternally fragile politics of domestic desire." I quote White here because with this novel, twenty-five year old Dale Peck proved he is White's equal in the first rank of gay writers.

A characteristic of both writers is their complexity, indeed difficulty, but this does not distract from the reading. In "Martin and John," Peck presents a series of stories using the same character names, but not the same characters, each illuminating the main narration which is told in italics. I at first struggled to connect these stories and failed, then I realized their linkage is not in plot, but in variation. Each separately tells of "homophobia, violence, incest, and the anguish of dying an early death" and rising above all that, gay desire. Considered in total, the effect is overwhelming. "Martin and John" will be added to my short list of books to re-read.

Dale Peck went on to build quite a different reputation than this novel portended as a literary critic. Still, I'm curious how his talent evolved in his subsequent novels.

Shannon says

Edit: So I checked out another book by this author (The Law of Enclosures, looks good) because I was so smitten with this book.... and on the front cover, it mentions Peck's debut novel as being called *Fucking Martin*. Which is a much different title than *Martin and John*. I'm guessing for anti-profanity related reasons, the title was changed. Cuz you don't often see fuck in the title of books, eh? Why not? I'd still read it.. and I think it adds a whole new dimension to the book. Looking at it through the perspective of John's experiences fucking Martin...though it's so much more than a book about fucking, of course. Maybe that's why it was changed. I dunno. I think *Martin and John* is a nice title too, but *Fucking Martin* also has its charm, right? Fucking censorship. Unless there's another reason it was changed, I'm just kind of assuming. And pondering. And blabbering on about it. Hmmkay.

Beautiful and powerful. I am in awe of the author, he has such a strong voice and such awesome insights into people's relationships with one another. It's violent and sad and lovely and heartbreaking. I will have to read this again to fully absorb it.

Will says

As a critic, Peck famously (and legitimately) accused a dozen or so well-known writers of being pretentious boors. In this "lyrical" (overwrought) and "nonlinear" (opaque) wreck, the cognitive dissonance is in full view every paragraph. Take this sentence from the penultimate chapter, "Fucking Martin":

"Nostalgia traps us—the food, the music, everything, chosen according to past times."

Oh does it? How enlightening! Then immediately after:

"'My friend who likes hummus,' Susan has called me—what about that is sexy?"

Sigh.

Allan says

A short read which was at the same time both very challenging and worthwhile. Made up of a series of short stories, each featuring characters named Martin and John, some of which are linked, some not, with an interlinking narrative thread which is explained and tied together in the final chapter. Contains very graphic violent sex scenes and domestic abuse at times, while at others the deep love between the two characters is portrayed in a variety of ways.

Not sure where I heard of this novel, but I'd definitely consider it to be a worthwhile though niche read.

Neil says

I'm sure this is a very clever, subversive and interesting book. But I just didn't really *get* it. Yes, John, Martin, Bea, Henry and Susan all appeared in different stories as different characters, but what was the real truth (if any?) and what was the point.

Some very disturbing scenes including a gun and a partner caring for an ill lover, but as a whole this was not for me.

I'm sure if someone to explain each nuance to me I'd get more out of it, but on a first reading I finished the book very confused.

Adam says

I'll admit, this was quite a confusing story, until I started looking at other people's reviews when I was about halfway through and realized this is two stories each about a gay couple named Martin and John. I am in love with the last chapter, Dale Peck knows how to catch emotions and release on paper such a strong love the two Martins and Johns share.

For me, this will be one of those books I will have to read again to catch the true brilliant pieces I know I missed the first time.

Timothy Juhl says

Peck's first novel, published when he was 25, was startling in both concept and content. Written during the worst days of the AIDS crisis, Peck's anger and sense of loss fuse into a series of short stories, each one featuring characters named Martin and John, and the effect is pure genius and I'm surprised it has never been attempted by other writers. There are moments so unnerving in this book, I am still haunted by their images to this day.

Sana says

This was probably the most *confusing* book I've read. I didn't understand **what the fuck** was going on through the book. I had no clue what happened to who. Everything was all jumbled up and the storyline was like scattered all over the place. **Like can you please fucking tell me what the fuck is going on?** I got so mad while reading the book because the author mentioned one thing and then some other shit happened.

The scenes just started out and I really couldn't tell which parts connected. I really did not know whose mother was dead and who had the depressed father. Can you fucking explain whose mother died? Whose father is depressed? And can you please tell me whose fucking POV it is? Thank you very fucking much.

I would have liked this book if the story and POV's were more clear, but it was all so damn confusing.

Oh God this book pissed me off.

James says

This novel amazed me when I read it in 1995. My response was visceral. When I read it again last week, I appreciated the innovative structure more than I did the first time, better understanding how the repetition of the names emphasizes the characters' disconnection. It's not a gimmick to force a thread through a collection of stories. Martins and Johns fuck and bleed and shit themselves; they do what they can, but some things are beyond their control. I want to tell this Martin and John what happens to that Martin and John, so they can learn from one another and know they're not the only ones.

?Laura says

This is a very difficult book for me to review. My impressions were all over the place as I was reading it. I can't say I quite "enjoyed" it but I can certainly say I appreciated it. The prevailing tone of this book is quite somber and sordid, though there are some glimpses of beauty, and the sex is often a bit graphic for my admittedly middle-aged taste. The writing, however, is stellar from start to finish. I was having trouble grasping how all of the stories fit together, but in the final chapter it all gelled and made sense and was really very brilliant. On its literary merits this book probably deserves 5 stars, but I am settling on 4 stars as the most accurate reflection of my personal reading experience.
