

NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST

"A DAZZLING PERFORMANCE."
—*The New York Times Book Review*

BIG IF

A NOVEL

MARK COSTELLO



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The Secret Service agents guarding the vice president steel their nerves to a multitude of dangers every day. When he runs for the top spot on the Democratic ticket, however, their personal lives may just be the biggest obstacle to keeping him safe.

Wry, muscular Vi Asplund is the daughter of an atheist insurance adjuster who took the young Vi and her brother, Jens, to the grisly accident scenes he covered. This tolerance for the macabre follows Vi into her career as an agent, and into Jens's development as the software designer for a gorey video game. Chief-of-detail Gretchen Williams fights to keep the team in order, while Agent Tashmo, a veteran presidential guard, reflects on the glory days of the Reagan administration.

As the primary approaches, these intense men and women balance their own lives with that of the vice president. An astounding novel of survival and absurdity, *Big If* casts a sharp eye on America today.

Big If Details

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From Reader Review Big If for online ebook

K2 ----- says

It took me a long time to finish this book which isn't a good sign. Although I felt I gained some insights into what it is to be an agent working in the Secret Service I kept thinking that something was going to pull it all together and for me it just never did.

I found myself distracted and I'd put the book down and do something else.

Perhaps the reading suffered from so many interruptions but I was on an airplane for a longer flight and I still didn't finish it. Not a good sign.

I couldn't relate or empathize with any of the characters and wasn't frankly that interested. I should have put it down but was convinced it would come together by the end. It did not. Perhaps I was looking for something I shouldn't have but I would not recommend it OR pass it onto a friend and that is a bad sign. Alas, I have a few days left to read a better book to close out 2014.

Jack Waters says

Mark Costello's hard-boiled political story tale as prescient and present today as it must have when it was published in 2002. I also think he was robbed of the National Book Award, a mere finalist to Julia Glass's "Three Junes."

Costello tosses the reader into the lives of Secret Service agents & video game designers, as familial obligations and obfuscations take the toll during the high-stakes of a presidential election.

It's about protection and invention with paranoia fueling the weaving plot lines. Reality proves difficult for those entrusted with forging anticipatory calibrations of possibilities, the What Ifs that alter the flow of life at each switch-point. What happens when human choice gets in the way of expectations?

The unnamed vice president being protected is a blackhole or vacuum of society's compulsion toward power lust, stamped history, fleeting quests of fame, et cetera. Costello doesn't need to deploy his name, for he's never really a person, just a perspective.

ps: I can hardly fathom the 1989 literary powerhouse Cambridge apartment that housed M. & D. with so much pulsing talent on the precipice.

Elizabeth says

The summary to this novel would make it seem dry & uninteresting, but I didn't find it to be so. Costello excels on taking specified fields (Beltway politics, programming a MMORPG) & making them relateable.

Even though Vi is the main focus of the novel, I was much more interested in Jens' story & the ethics of creating an alternate reality while trying to make money or predict human behavior. The story is good, but seems to get away from the writer, giving some of the other subplots more prominence than they should probably get. In the end, Costello does tie everything up well, but I wish some of the other sections had had a bit more substance.

Andrew says

A couple of intriguing premises, one involving a sort-of behind-the-scenes scenario at a computer game company and the other an inside look at a team of US Secret Service agents, compose a story which, despite having some well-drawn characters and some really sharp ideas floating through it, never quite seems to come together, and manages to sort of fizzle out in spite of itself.

I don't know; writers in the last couple of decades seem to have either skipped that part of English Lit where they talk about the climax of the story, or rejected the concept as some sort of "old white men" thing, which is why so many books come to a "how-do-we-end-this-thing?" moment, before they sort of hit a wall at the end marked either "Life Goes On", "All's Well That Ends Well", or the dreaded "Carpe Diem" (the most egregious example I can think of of this last one being *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*).

B.I. probably would have worked a lot better had it simply focused on the Secret Service agents, whose story has its definite moments, and made the Lloyd Felker character's story the center of the novel, instead of the sort-of footnote that it ends up being.

P.S.: If you're a fan of Don DeLillo, this does remind me of his work, which I have mixed feelings about (depending on the book), and this one may well be right up your alley.

Brendan says

Big If might contain the most astute cultural observations ever committed to the pages of an assassination novel. OK, that's a joke, because when you hear "assassination novel", you're probably expecting a by-the-numbers, plot-driven tale of brilliant but flawed gunmen, hard-boiled government agents, smuggled rifles and escape routes.

By choosing to mostly ignore plot and focus instead on his characters, Costello gets away with both exploding assumptions and taking us all on a messy, beautiful journey through the lives of every key player involved in a plot against a presidential candidate.

The mundane and tragic drama behind secret service agents, Internet moguls, real estate agents, housewives, children, spouses, and lovers all unfold during the thick of primary season, in New Hampshire, where the landscape is torn up by GOTV vans and phone surveys every four years. Costello uses the anxiety around presidential primaries as a fitting metaphor for American obsessions with power, violence, status, and work, and he leavens his ominous, thoughtful story with plenty of off-key humor.

I'd consider this book a "must read", during primary season, or any season for that matter.

Punk says

Fiction. Though this book will tell you it's about the United States Secret Service, it's really just about some people who happen to work for the USSS and a couple more people who happen to know those people. It's about people. One of those people books where nothing much happens. You meet all these people, you get their flashbacks, you learn about their problems, and then the book is about that. Will Gretchen ever connect with her son in any meaningful way? Will Peta ever get Lauren Czoll to make an offer on a house? Will Jens get fired from his computer programming job because he refuses to write the code for Monster Todd? Will Jens' sister Vi whatever it is that Jens' sister Vi whatever?

It's a slow book with a meandering path and a lot of characters. I liked the writing; it's basic, but clever, and Costello would frequently surprise me with a wonderful bit of detail. But I spent the majority of it wondering what the hell year it was. The book was published in 2002 and maybe back then it was clear that the VP running for president was Al Gore, but ten years down the line, that's not clear at all. What's clear is that there's a weird gap between the Reagan administration and the present time in the narrative, like time stood still for Bush senior and Clinton and only started up again during the 1999 primaries. I had to piece together evidence, a concert shirt from 1998, a mention of the school shooting in Springfield, until then I didn't even know what decade it was, was convinced this was taking place immediately following Reagan's term. Timelessness is not an option when you're dealing with history.

Three stars. Follows a lot of different characters who are nevertheless connected in some way. Slice of Life with some Secret Service Excitement, but mostly what I liked about this was the writing.

Angelina Souren says

Reads well. Unusual book.

Holly says

Set over a matter of days before a presidential election, Costello explores the past and present of brother and sister Violet and Jens Asplund, Jens' wife Peta, Vi's coworkers Gretchen and Tashmo. Vi, Gretchen and Tashmo are Secret Service bodyguards protecting the current VP running in the presidential race; Jens is a software designer for a violent teenager's computer game, and Peta is a successful real estate agent.

Costello does a great job playing these different characters' lives off each other. The mind tosses the comparisons and contrasts and similarities in a way that feels completely nature and realistic - we know people like this, we've had the same struggles, but Costello portrays they're edgy jobs w/ compassion.

Really good - where did this guy come from?!; what a novel ought to be: compelling characters, interesting and believable connections, excellent descriptions of locations from bar to neighborhood. My only complaint (and I felt this more than once) was the very slight hint Costello gives of believing his reader isn't quite paying attention - he reminds the reader (annoyingly) of things he's already more elegantly exposed previously, just to make sure we don't miss the relevance of what he's describing next. Completely

unnecessary - a book this well written doesn't need to worry that the reader's lost interest.

Kelley says

It was ok but it just kind of meandered and then ended.

Sherry says

Good writing, the kind that makes me read a couple of lines or a paragraph to someone else. I like the details about subjects: guarding a V.P., threat-assessment, writing code for online games, appraising insurance claims, selling real estate, getting out the vote. While I was reading, I was very interested, and I may think back on some aspects, but right now, two days after finishing, I have no desire to re-read nor to recommend it to anyone else. I wonder if that will change.

Ted Burke says

Mark Costello's novel *Big If* is a superb and unforgiving comedy of American life involving a low-level Secret Service agent who must get reacquainted with her estranged computer-genius brother when she takes a respite from the paranoid turns and twists of her nerve-rattling job. This is a book of richly skewed characters doing their best to make sense of their lives, or at least have their lives take on a fleeting semblance of normality. The quests, individual and collective, aren't what anyone would expect--this novel takes a hard left turn from the Anne Tyler/Paulo Coelho fictions that insert everyday mysticism into the complications of city life--and the results are habits, tics, behaviors and alienation from self that comes close to home, in the heart of the nest: the bedroom, the dining room, the kitchen, the places one lives the most and gains small satisfactions or walls themselves to unreachable Siberias of the psyche. In many ways, this is one of the best novels to investigate what is one might do in the absence of God, or even a convenient social construction of The Public Good. All points of reference in *Big If* are minimized and negotiated from relevance. Costello's prose is alive with the things of our life, and is superb at demonstrating the clash between happiness material items promise and the world that denies such rewards. He is the master of setting forth a metaphor and letting it travel through a storyline just beneath the surface, operating silently, mostly invisibly, always effectively.

Their father, in the first portion of the book, is a moderate Republican insurance investigator of scholarly reading habits who happens to be a principled atheist. You cannot have both insurance, the practice of placing a monetary remuneration on unavoidable disaster, and assurance, which has religion promising protection from evil and disaster. The children, in turn, assume careers that seem to typify the dualism their father opposed, son Jens becoming a programmer for the *Big If* on line game for which he writes "monster behavior code" that attempts to outsmart human players and have them meet a hypothetical destruction. Daughter Vi, conversely, becomes a Secret Service agent, schooled in the theory encoded in *The Certainties*, a set of writings that lays out the details, nuances and psychology of extreme protection. These are world views in collision, and Costello's prose is quick with the telling detail, the flashing insight, the cutting remark.

The problem, of course, is that no one can define what "good" is. *Big If* is quite good, and what makes it

work is that Costello accomplishes the dual difficulty of handing us a small town/suburban comedy the likes of John Cheever would have admired, and the other is with the rich detailing of the other secret service agents who work with Vi Asplund. There is something of a domestic comedy seamlessly interwoven with a skewed Washington thriller, with the elements of each spilling over and coloring the underlying foundations of both. In the first part of the novel, we have an atheist Republican insurance investigator who has a habit of crossing out the "God" in the "In God We Trust" inscription on all his paper money, replacing the offending word with "us". Vi, years later, winds up in a job where "in us we trust" is the operating rational, as she and her fellow agents strive to protect their protected from the happenstance of crowds, acting out on intricate theories and assumptions that can only be tested in the field. Costello is wonderful at the heightened awareness in the ways he presents his details, his comic touches, A beautiful agent who still receives alimony checks from her smitten ex husband carries on a correspondence with him via the memo line of the checks, where he continually writes "come back to me". She writes "No, never" each time, deposits the check, knowing that her ex will see the reply when he receives the canceled checks.

The book is full of these fine touches. We have a sense that it's the small things, the small frustrations as much as the larger disasters that conspire against our happiness. On view in "Big If" are different models on which characters try to contain, control, or explain the relentless capriciousness of Life as it unfolds, constructs through which characters and the country and culture they serve can feel empowered to control their fate in a meaningful universe. The punchline is that Life goes on anyway, with it's fluctuating, undulating, chaotic dynamics that only occasionally seem to fall into place. Costello wrests a subtle comedy of manners from the small failures of anyone's world view to suitably make their existence unproblematic. This is a family comedy on a par with "The Wapshot Chronicle", but in an America that is suddenly global, an air that makes even the most familiar things seem alien and fantastic.

Yvonne says

"If you're 50 years old or younger, give every book about 50 pages before you decide to commit yourself to reading it, or give it up. If you're over 50, which is when time gets shorter, subtract your age from 100 - the result is the number of pages you should read before deciding whether or not to quit. If you're 100 or over you get to judge the book by its cover, despite the dangers in doing so." ? Nancy Pearl

I wish I'd read this when I started this book, I would've stopped reading much sooner. Sleazy hopeless characters make me depressed and I don't need another cause for depression.

Mike Cuthbert says

I have failed to finish only two or three novels in my long reading life. This is one of them. Whatever the author set out to do in this book escapes me. There are more or less three settings in the novel: a sophisticated programmer, a female Secret Service agent who is the programmer's sister, and a male Secret Service agent. Nothing happens to them and they do nothing throughout the over half the book I managed to choke down before giving up. The sections concerning the programmer were particularly difficult as they concerned coding and app manufacture that were totally boring and dense. And, again, nothing happened. Another critic on Goodreads said: "One of those people books where nothing much happens." Well said, critic!

Joe Valdez says

I went from abandoning two novels on Stephen King's Reading List Part II, *2666* by Roberto Bolaño and *The Dirty Secrets Club* by Meg Gardiner, to giving a shot to one more, *Big If* by Mark Costello. I finished this one. Wit, character and research go a long way with me, even in the case of books like this, where those elements become indulgent and prove to be an awkward substitute for a story.

I struggled through the cryptic title (science fiction? romance? self help?) and cover design, with both print and digital versions doing a miserable job of trying to prepare me for what I was going to read, but Costello quickly grabbed me by the back of the neck with his pure energy of writing.

Most of *Big If* is set in present day New Hampshire and follows Vi Asplund, a Secret Service agent in her mid-twenties who has moved up to Protection, where she joins a detail guarding the unnamed Vice President of the United States as his presidential campaign swings through the Granite State. Vi's home state.

Vi's older brother Jens is a computer programmer putting his PH.d and his genius to use writing code for BigIf, a violent and cheesy multiplayer video game which their father, an atheist insurance adjuster named Walter, disowned as amoral shortly before he passed away suddenly. Neither Jens or Vi cope with their father's absence well, throwing themselves into work with creeping nihilism.

Jens is married to a childhood sweetheart Peta, now a real estate agent jumping through hoops held by the stunningly rich and staggeringly unhappy software wives combing New Hampshire for their dream home. Jens finds himself increasingly distracted and unable to complete the code for the newest monster in BigIf, a high school shooter. They have a young son they'd like to spend more time with.

Vi, a college athlete who joined the Secret Service essentially following in her father's footsteps by providing protection, has no social life, no home and no direction. Her early career in the bureau's Criminal Division, busting Russian counterfeiters, surrounded her with the most irredeemable people on the planet, but a transfer to Protection proves equally hopeless, with upper level management or emotional burnout the two paths that lay ahead.

A sample of the writing that hooked me on page 11 of 315: *"Walter Asplund believed in many things, the dignity of humankind, the Genius of Democracy, the sanctity of contract, The Origin of Species, the mission of the bloodmobile, the charts devised in Hartford, poplin suits in summertime, brown bread with baked beans, little oyster crackers (with chowder, not with oysters), baseball, tennis, The New Yorker, travel hats he purchased from the back of The New Yorker (which he sometimes wore to baseball games), the pleasures of night skiing with his children on the bunny hill in Rye. He believed, that is, in almost everything but God. He declined to serve the Rotary, and announced the reason why, and after that he was known in Center Effing as the Atheist and his kids were known in school as the Little Atheists."*

Wow. Costello is a writer of precision, wit and social conscience. He knows the worlds of the Secret Service, of a tech startup, real estate and presidential campaigning backwards and forwards. As the above passage indicates, he can tell you every item in the pockets or purses of every character he introduces and at first, I was amazed by this. Then as this level of intensity continued and continued, my amazement turned to fatigue and fatigue turned to repulsion and soon, I just wanted the novel to end.

Big If introduces other characters. Vi's boss Gretchen, a single mother whose son has started asking questions about his father, a hotshit LAPD detective. One of Vi's peers is a senior agent named Tashmo from the Reagan days whose infidelities have finally caught up with him. A fellow agent named Bobbie, whose sexual misadventures could fill a phone book, has premonitions that an assassination attempt will be targeting her.

The novel loses one star for drifting away from Vi to instead catalog nearly everything the reader could possibly want to know about other characters in clinical detail. Any one of these characters could've been the protagonist of their own novel, but that would require a plot of some sort, which Costello resists to his detriment.

The novel loses another star due to the absence of a story. Costello is doing embedded reporting on Americans in the here and now, on the edge of something -- violence, disillusionment, nervous breakdown -- but this isn't part of the background, it's background, foreground and the entire set. I was impressed through about 100 pages and then got impatient with all the lists and anecdotes.

This is a guarded recommendation with the caveat that you enjoy literary fiction and are not expecting a strong story. I liked the ending but even there, Costello might have done his job too well, leaving me with a sense of exhaustion and nihilism. I admired the writing but can just barely recommend the book.

Eliza Victoria says

Mark Costello's novel *Big If* is populated with some of the most interesting, most contemporary, characters. Walter is a moderate Republican atheist working in insurance. He has the habit of crossing out GOD in his dollar bills so that the statement reads IN US WE TRUST. He has two children: Jens, who has grown up as a software programmer, writing code for and pondering the morality (or immorality, or amorality) of the monster game he has developed; Violet has grown up to work in the Secret Service. Vi is assigned to the VP, who is running for president and will have to go to the Democratic primary in New Hampshire to jog (surrounded by security), eat at a McDonald's (surrounded by media), and shake hands with the common people to get their vote. Jens's wife, Peta, is a realtor assigned to manage a supposedly boring building now being attacked by a group of violent right-to-lifers. Gretchen, Vi's superior, has separated from his douchebag boyfriend, but his son has found the boyfriend's address by Googling himself, and now wants to spend time with his father. Before Lydia married Secret Service agent Lloyd Felker, her talent agent said, You're not supposed to marry your own agent. And I'm your agent! He's not that kind of agent, Lydia said, and her talent agent said, Oh my god, is he a literary agent? How will you be able to feed yourself?

Big If, published in 2002, was a finalist for the National Book Award. I wonder what novel it came up against. Costello's novel was funny and touching and relevant enough to have won.
