



## The Spectators

*Jennifer duBois*

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## The Spectators Jennifer duBois

**A shocking crime triggers a media firestorm for a controversial talk show host in this provocative novel--a story of redemption, a nostalgic portrait of New York City, and a searing indictment of our culture of spectacle.**

Talk show host Matthew Miller has made his fame by shining a spotlight on the most unlikely and bizarre secrets of society, exposing them on live television in front of millions of gawking viewers. However, the man behind *The Mattie M Show* remains a mystery--both to his enormous audience and to those who work alongside him every day. But when the high school students responsible for a mass shooting are found to be devoted fans, Mattie is thrust into the glare of public scrutiny, seen as the wry, detached herald of a culture going downhill and going way too far. Soon, the secrets of Mattie's past as a brilliant young politician in a crime-ridden New York City begin to push their way to the surface.

In her most daring and multidimensional novel yet, Jennifer duBois vividly portrays the heyday of gay liberation in the seventies and the grip of the AIDS crisis in the eighties, alongside a backstage view of nineties television in an age of moral panic. DuBois explores an enigmatic man's downfall through the perspectives of two spectators--Cel, Mattie's skeptical publicist, and Semi, the disillusioned lover from his past.

With wit, heart, and crackling intelligence, *The Spectators* examines the human capacity for reinvention--and forces us to ask ourselves what we choose to look at, and why.

## The Spectators Details

Date : Expected publication: April 2nd 2019 by Random House

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Author : Jennifer duBois

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## From Reader Review The Spectators for online ebook

### Tory says

Dang, check the vocabulary on this one! Imagine that Jerry Springer was actually a brilliant, nuanced individual with a background in law and gay rights. Stick him in the AIDS crisis. Enter school shootings. Shake until well-mixed and then serve onstage in an off-Broadway production. Really good, moving, entertaining, profound.

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### Leigh Manning says

I'm a spectator. So I don't know what to think about this book.....

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### Larry H says

I'm between 2.5 and 3 stars.

Both a commentary on the dysfunction incited by the sensational talk show culture of the late 1990s and a meditation on the gay community before and during the AIDS crisis, Jennifer duBois' upcoming book *The Spectators* is at times beautiful and lamenting, at others meandering and confusing.

Matthew Miller is a talk show host whose show, "The Mattie M Show," is a spectacle. With programs that focus on taboo relationships (including a man and a goat) and routinely feature fighting (a la Jerry Springer), the show becomes a cultural lightning rod, one of those programs that commentators like to point to as a sign that our society is in decline.

When a shooting occurs in an Ohio high school, and it turns out the students responsible were huge fans of the show, Mattie becomes an object of intense scrutiny, as does the show bearing his name. The more his critics debate the show's sensationalism, whether it is staged or authentic, and what its role was in the tragedy, the more people—even those who work on the show—realize how little they know about Mattie.

As Cel, the somewhat disconnected, disenfranchised publicist for the show, tries to figure out who her boss really is and how they might right this sinking ship (if she even cares to), she starts to hear rumors of Mattie's past, as an ambitious politician whose career was met with scandal. Does this explain Mattie's attitude toward the show's problems, or hint at what his next step might be should the show get canceled?

Meanwhile, Mattie's former lover, Semi, a playwright, tells a different story, a story of Mattie in the carefree yet politically tense 1970s in New York City, when he went from lawyer to idealistic politician. Through Semi's eyes, we see how the gay community transformed from one of merriment and freedom to one wracked by the horrors of AIDS, how it affected the culture, politics, relationships, everything.

While there was a link between Semi's relationship with Mattie in the past and the Mattie of current times, quite often it felt like *The Spectators* was two separate books. The chapters narrated by Semi—some of which felt like they were being told by a Greek chorus of those whose lives were touched by AIDS—were

beautifully written, poignant, even emotionally searing at times, but when the narration shifted to Cel and the issues with the show, I started to lose interest.

The discussion about media sensationalism and its role in society's crises is certainly a relevant one, yet I didn't feel like the book was willing to stake out a position whether those who foment antagonism or appear to embrace spectacle and falsehood have any responsibility for prejudice, violence, or other actions taken by their viewers or listeners.

Even more frustrating for me was the fact that Cel had very little charisma as a character, let alone a narrator. Much of her interactions with other characters seemed stilted or stammering, and it seemed crazy that a popular show would employ such an inarticulate person as its publicist.

duBois' talent for imagery and emotion was particularly evident in those chapters narrated by Semi and others. There were many passages which I read more than once and thought were almost poetic. Sadly, the book as a whole didn't work for me. I almost wish the whole book could have followed Mattie, Semi, and his friends through the 1970s and beyond rather than get distracted by the whole issue with the television program.

NetGalley and Random House Publishing Group provided me an advance copy of the book in exchange for an unbiased review. Thanks for making this available!

See all of my reviews at [itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blogspot.com](http://itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blogspot.com), or check out my list of the best books I read in 2018 at <https://itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blogspot.com/2019/01/the-best-books-i-read-in-2018.html>.

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### **Jypsy says**

The Spectators is a story of something I failed to connect with. Too many obscure words with not enough engaging story line equals disaster. Unfortunately, I skimmed through this one. Definitely not my type of material. Thanks to NetGalley for an arc in exchange for an honest review.

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### **Diane S ? says**

Leaving unrated as I'm putting it aside. Just not connecting with the story the way it is written.

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### **Sarah says**

Holy pretentiousness. I think I looked up more words in this book than I have in the past year, which really distracted from the otherwise solid story.

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### **Lorri Steinbacher says**

Read in prepub. Due out April 2019.

Really liked this book. Juxtaposes the gay liberation years (and the looming AIDS crisis) against the halcyon days of *trashtalk* TV to perfect effect. The book examines the way secrets can either destroy you outright or eat away at you to the same effect; the difference between having ideals and actually acting on those ideals; guns and who is responsible for gun violence; and much more.

Would be a great book for book groups. While you're waiting for this book to come out, I would recommend her last book, *Cartwheel* about a foreign exchange student in Buenos Aires accused of murder.

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### **Jess says**

I really wanted to love this book. The description sounded fascinating, and I had a gay uncle who lived in NYC in the 70s and 80s before dying of AIDS, so some of the subject matter was particularly near and dear to my heart (for example, I loved *The Great Believers*). And yet... this book did not do it for me. I absolutely hated the first half. HATED it. If I hadn't agreed to review it, I 100% would have abandoned it, and even still I barely managed to force myself through it. It was so long and slow, and the writing just didn't resonate with me. It seemed very... self-conscious? Overwrought? Like the author was extremely aware of the literary devices she was using and the implied subtext she wanted her readers to infer, and was too heavy-handed in her approach. Things did pick up in the second half, and I specifically appreciated her coverage of the AIDS crisis in New York, but even then the writing style just did not speak to me, and I had a lot of trouble figuring out what the point of it all was and how all the different pieces fit together. The second half was definitely light years better than the first half, but overall the book felt tedious to me, and the topic is interesting enough that that shouldn't have been the case. This just was not the book for me.

Thanks to Random House and NetGalley for the ARC.

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