



# Liminal States

*Zack Parsons*

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Deep water rises.

Abandon your spire.

It is coming.

It is 1874 and Gideon Long is dying. Wandering the savage desert of the New Mexico Territory, he craves a last drink before he bleeds out. On the brink of madness, he discovers a place best left forgotten and makes an insidious bargain: escape his fate and incur a debt too great for one man. His country will pay the price over the twisting course of more than a century and Gideon will learn there are worse things to bargain with than the devil.

(Source: back cover)

Liminal States is the debut novel from SomethingAwful editor Zack Parsons, and it's extraordinary. It begins as a grim, relentless western novel that describes a doomed love triangle between a simple lawman, the twisted scion of an land-baron, and a woman who has married one but thinks she might belong with the other. After a botched train robbery and an epic battle, Gideon (the rich man's son) finds himself gutshot in the desert, led by a mysterious spirit animal to a mystical pool that dissolves him and then reincarnates him, young and whole and vital and immortal. Gideon goes back for the woman he loves, only to discover that she has died in childbirth, and, enraged, he kidnaps the lawman who was her husband and throws him into the pool, too. And now they are both immortal. Every time they die, they are reborn in the pool, over and over, locked in orbit around each other like twin suns being drawn into a destructive nova. This first third of the novel is dark and bloody and remorseless, a story of revenge and tragedy that doesn't let up, until...

## Liminal States Details

Date : Published April 1st 2012 by Citadel (first published January 1st 2012)

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Author : Zack Parsons

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# From Reader Review *Liminal States* for online ebook

## Emily says

Zack Parsons will (should, must) be remembered as our modern reply to Arthur C. Clarke. This book assuredly will become a timeless sci-fi classic. Almost like three books in one, this novel dances across genres with an ease and cohesiveness I have never before witnessed. The first book is a high-falutin' Wild West meets hallucinogenic science fiction novel. I struggled to follow along with each new set of Warrens and Gideons, but was intrigued by the mysterious powers of the Pool and what they were experiencing during their time in it.

The second book fast-forwards to the 1950s and maintains a criminal seedy noir feeling that permeates each sentence. Parsons must have paid close attention if and when he read Raymond Chandler, because his style is as catchy, dark and fulfilling. The mystery picks up speed and things begin to fall into place a bit more, filling in some of the gaps for the reader.

The third and final book moves into modern day. An excellent allegory about our modern capitalist society, our obsession with profit over understanding, our lack of community, our need to know how to provide for ourselves are common themes in this section. The mystery unfolds with greater anxiety at this point, until the rush of the final pages.

I cannot describe what this book is about in a few sentences - it is an impossible task. The language oscillates between violence unparalleled to anything I ever witnessed - the descriptions of violence in this novel are intense and caused physical reactions in me that no other book has caused. The romance, the drama, it is all so extreme and intense that I shuddered with every turning page. I highly recommend this book to ANYBODY. I know this review does it no justice, but it is not possible to do so. Simply read it, change your world view, and quietly digest it for decades to come.

I eagerly anticipate revisiting this novel in the near future.

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## Daniel Roy says

*Liminal States* is a book bursting at the seams with genre ideas; so much so that, while this admittedly accounts for a lot of its originality and power, it also damns it to a story lacking emotional resonance.

The novel's unique structure is surely its biggest selling point: its three parts are in turn Western/horror, noir thriller, and SF dystopia. While the events in all three parts interlock successfully, they lack an emotional continuity; that is to say, the emotional investment made by the reader in one part of the book do not carry over into the next. What remains are three very different stories, taking place in three eras of the same strange, original world, but very little emotional depth to tie them together.

It's too bad, because in the first third, *Liminal States* comes very close to pathos and resonance. There's a moment where the rivalry between Gideon Long and Warren Groves kicks into high gear that promises a tense, psychotic conflict to color the rest of the story. But instead of using this conflict to anchor the rest of whole story arc, the author seems more concerned about pushing his world building into yet more unexpected directions.

Some of these directions work well. The SF dystopian setting was interesting, if perhaps burdened by too many complications like the spore infections. But some of the genre-melding is excessive: the alternate history bits, for instance, bring absolutely nothing to the story; nor is there any justification for setting the final part in 2006, instead of placing it into the near-future. Everything about this book would have worked without bringing in alternate history elements that weaken verisimilitude.

The noir setting in Part 2 was the most interesting, but also the most flawed and representative of Parsons' attempt at genre pyrotechnics. When it was used mostly for flavor, it worked well; but most of the times, it bogged down an otherwise interesting tale of secret societies and duplicity with clichés that were meant to ape the thriller genre, rather than leverage its strengths and successful tropes.

Ultimately, that's what takes away from *Liminal States*' potential for greatness: the characters and their very interesting predicament are forgotten in the chaos and the noise of the blending of genres, and we learn very little of what drives them. Their conflict is lost, and moreso unresolved, by the time the story ends. What remains is an impressive *tour de force* of genre blending and world building, but the whole impressive construct, well written though it is, lacks emotional depth and resonance.

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## Sean B says

I don't often read fiction, but *Liminal States* is a work of art worthy of the highest regard. As another reviewer has said, it is more an experience than a book and will leave your mind firing on all pistons after you've finished reading it. It is a deep, complex tale that will fill you with dread and keep you on the edge of your seat as you journey through it. Leave any expectations of standard sci-fi narrative development at the door, as this book will absolutely turn them on their head. If you want a fresh, well researched and well executed apocalyptic sci-fi story, you NEED to have this on your shelf.

The novel is split into three books, each taking place in a different era. It begins as a Western tale of crime, justice, love lost and a deal that puts Faust to shame. The next book takes place in the 1950's and is constructed as noir. The final book takes place in 2006 in a dystopian Los Angeles. These three very different genres constitute a masterfully crafted whole, as the characters navigate a drastically changing world. As the title suggests, changes and becomings are a huge thema within the book and the way the author set up the characters and the narrative itself as constantly in flux makes *Liminal States* something really special.

While it is an enjoyable and extremely interesting read on its own, there is a lot of depth to it for those wishing to dig further. The author used concepts from Deleuze and Guattari's "A Thousand Plateaus" in writing this, among other philosophical works. While none of this is needed to read the book whatsoever, those who are familiar with some of these concepts will possibly get a richer experience from it as things begin to click as the narrative unfolds. Either way, *Liminal States* will leave you with enough questions and food for thought to last quite a while. You will want to kick this one around with fellow readers to share the experience.

Also, as others have mentioned, an alternate reality game took place before the novel's release, giving little snippets of the universe *Liminal States* takes place in. Using music from Conelrad ([...]), artwork by Josh Hass (zombiemariachis.com) and video done by Dan Sollis (digitaldistortion.net), a series of video trailers and illustrations were created to accompany the book (you can see all the ARG related stuff at [Liminalstates.com](http://Liminalstates.com)). The synergy and talent of this crew produced excellent supplementary material and

matched the mood of *Liminal States* to a T. If descriptions of the book have caught your interest, I would highly recommend taking a look at what they have built for it, as these are great works of art on their own.

In conclusion, *Liminal States* is a genre-defying, creative and heavy-hitting novel that will haunt you long after you close it. Like the character Casper Cord, you will wander through its halls, peak through its doors and constantly wonder what is in store around the next corner as you begin to realize the scale and scope of the terrifying plot developing around you. The conclusion will leave you stunned. Don't miss out on this one!

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### **Steve Bernard says**

I am convinced that this book will be remembered as one of our generation's great works of science-fiction.

For those of us who reached adulthood just in time to witness the rise of social networking and the slow collapse of American politics in the aftermath of 9/11, this is a novel that plays on our deepest fears. Beneath its sci-fi trappings, *Liminal States* is a story about being robbed of the illusion that our identities are unique while watching our world march inexorably to self-destruction. It's a story about transhumanism and our slow, insidious drift away from human nature and towards some wholly unplanned and quite possibly catastrophic destination. It's a story about America and its uncertain future.

That this novel worked at all, with its era-hopping, century-spanning plot, is truly a testament to Parsons' skill as an author. The first two acts are not only excellent and well-crafted love letters to their respective genres, but they are core to the plot; where a typical dystopian novel simply drops the reader into its bleak landscape, *Liminal States* guides the reader down the long road by which its world unravels, from an ominous beginning to an inevitable end.

I urge anyone with any affinity at all for either sci-fi or horror to give *Liminal States* a chance. Here's hoping this is only the first in a long line of great literary works from Zack Parsons.

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### **Mindy says**

I've read a good bit of sci-fi in my day, but rarely any so exciting and satisfying. It starts with a simple premise: a dying man in the desert makes a Faustian bargain. However, the repercussions are massive beyond guessing. The plot races forward, becoming ever more expansive and ambitious as the book goes on. There was a point when I was concerned that the author had over-reached in this regard, which I'll get to shortly.

The story is divided into three acts, each taking place in different time periods. It starts out in New Mexico with a western flavor, then into a hard-boiled 1950s murder mystery, and finally into the present. The circumstances had become so complicated by the final act that the story lost a bit of momentum when it stopped to get us caught up. The first two parts were very focused, and I was concerned that the intensity was going to be lost. For a very short while it was, but it quickly picked up momentum and was back in fine form for the (totally crazy and awesome) finale.

I would highly recommend this book for fans of science fiction and alternate histories.

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## Nick says

This novel is excellent. Thought provoking and dark, Liminal States is a fantastic example of Zach Parsons' ability to portray a world that is familiar, yet terrifyingly divergent from our own.

Other reviews have summarized plot, so I'll stick to what impresses. The classic rule of "Show, Don't Tell" is skillfully handled, as the reader is thrust into the world and left to follow a handful of protagonists through the events. We learn and experience not through blocks of exposition, but from over the shoulders of characters. As comprehension dawns, as the events unfold, as knowledge of the unknown grows, so to does the feeling of dread at the nature of the other.

Information is not given to you. The details of this world are woven through everything and deliberately planted. This experience of discovery will leave you satisfied, as the growth of understanding relies on your own desire to comprehend. While not strictly a horror novel, your discoveries may not be pleasant ones.

This book has mixed genres, divergent history, and events and entities of Lovecraftian otherness. The short film and the Reifcant Serial on <http://liminalstates.com/> only add to the deepness of the water.

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## Lea says

[Zack Parsons took a look around the bookstore and said to himself, "Genres are for chumps! I'm gonna write a book that breaks down these walls!"

And then he did.

Like westerns? Check.

Noir? Check.

Sci Fi, Dystopi

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## Daniel says

SUMMARY: A brutal story told through three different genres that centers around the discovery of a strange pool that can revive and duplicate any creatures that fall into it. Brilliantly realized, the novel still suffers a little from some flaws common to first-time fiction.

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Parsons has written a couple nonfiction books, but this is his first fiction novel. The tale mostly concerns two men -- Warren Groves, a wild west officer with murder in his bones, and Gideon Long, a man made cruelly desperate by his wealthy father's emotional abuse. After a train robbery/childbirth gone wrong, the two men cross paths and end up discovering a sort of Fountain of Youth that has the power to revive them every time they die, and which also begins regularly producing duplicates of their past selves. As time passes, these duplicates begin to cause problems, and the true nature of the magical pool is revealed to be far more sinister than it seems.

Although I am not a big fan of Westerns, I was immediately drawn into the tale by Parsons' slick, minutely-detailed prose. His depiction of the big train robbery, for instance, enthralled me in a way few books have in recent years. Furthermore, Parsons' construction of this alternate world is so rich and fully-realized that it is truly impressive. Astounding even. The story is unique, and although the elements of it are often times bewilderingly complex, Parsons' sumptuous prose keeps the story from feeling like a chore.

Parsons does succumb to a flaw common to first-time writers of fiction: overwriting. As far as flaws go, this is the kind you WANT to have, especially if your writing is as accomplished as Parsons'. Still, the book has multiple moments where Parsons' prose seems to coil into itself, admiring its own beauty, and although the writing is, indeed, beautiful, its self-indulgent tone often detracts from the story itself. This is especially true of the very beginning of the book (which was written with such exaggerated poeticism that I shut the book and nearly did not open it again).

This leads to a second problem: there is no tension to the tale. It is masterfully told, brilliantly constructed, and vividly imagined, but there is a lack of humanity to the story. Parsons attempts to use Groves' and Long's rivalry to give juice to the character-driven aspects of the tale, but these two men are not particularly sympathetic or relatable, and their rivalry fades in import as the tale gains scope. In light of the vast richness of the story, this isn't a terribly big problem, although it does render meaningless several key elements of the book. For instance, a character named Milo makes a critical but baffling decision at the climax of the novel, irrevocably altering the shape of the story for every character. Although it is clear he made the decision for deeply emotional reasons, even the most careful of readers would have difficulty accepting or comprehending those reasons. At what should be the tensest moment of the story, there is mostly just confusion.

Parsons touches on concepts of humanity, individuality, family, love, memory, history, and power, but his tale sprawls so much that what lessons he hopes to illuminate get lost in the noise. Once again, if he'd had the talents of a more ruthless editor, he could've cut the clutter and delivered one of the greatest sci-fi novels I've ever read. Instead, there are lovingly crafted passages that seem to have little bearing on the book (transcripts of phone calls home, overlong descriptions of people navigating hidden passageways, and at least two of the most graphic and brutal scenes of cannibalism I've ever read, both of them nauseating me so much I had to stop reading for awhile). As a Lit major, of course, I can see what Parson's is trying to do, the morals or symbols he's trying to convey, but at the same time, I can also see that they're only secondary to the main thrust of his story, and therefore they slow the book down.

The second portion of the book -- written in the form of a hard-boiled detective thriller -- is the only part of the tale written from the first person point of view (that of Casper Cord, a sort of private eye). Casper's story is meant to tie together the first and third portions of the book, and although it does that in a solid way, Parsons' decision to let Cord tell the tale was distracting as well. I will reiterate: I loved Parsons' prose and admired his ability to shift and bend genres, but he dropped the ball here. Cord tries to talk like your typically noirish detective, referring to people as "palookas" and fist-fighting as "chin music," but in the next breath Casper will describe in over-lush detail a "conflagration" or "spiracle" or "ossuary" as opposed to simply saying "fire" or "hole" or "bone orchard."

I know I am spending far more time on the negatives than a four-star review might warrant, but that's because I was so impressed and blown away by the rest of the book that these minor complaints stood out in greater and greater detail as the pages turned. If you don't have a weak stomach, if you like complex sci-fi, and if you are a patient reader with a love of great prose over great characters, then I highly recommend this tale. I will definitely be buying Parsons' next book, and I'm hoping that a little practice and experience will have sanded away these rough spots and left Parsons' with the makings of my next favorite writer.

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## Christian says

*Liminal States* gets two-and-a-half stars - the Charlie Sheen of book review scores and the correct, absolutely on the money number of stars it deserves, tru dat. Which makes the insistent choric whisper I hear behind me extremely annoying - yes, I **CAN** see all those other five star reviews thank you. They're right as well - five stars is also the correct, absolutely on the money number of stars *Liminal States* deserves.

77058, we have a problem.

Note spoiler tags. If you've not read *Liminal States* yet, then feck off elsewhere - you're not welcome round these parts. Caveat lector.

You, Zack Parsons, owe me a beer. Not my money back - I bought this, I'll be buying your next novel and I hope all of that lovely money makes you warm and fuzzy and happy. But you owe me a cold one.

I don't think I've ever been so simultaneously enthralled and frustrated by a novel before - from Kindle splashscreen to "Tweet/share that you finished this book" I just never had solid ground under my feet. Instead I spent most of this novel experiencing a persistent, unpleasant intellectual nausea - the sensation that a handful of crucial chunks of info and context were being kept **DELIBERATELY** kept out of my reach - very uncool.

I'm not 43rd-President slow - I don't think every plot point should be satnav-narrated to me, nor do I expect constant Basil Exposition colour-by-numbers world building. There **SHOULD** be an opening phase where the mystery of the author's vision needs teasing out into view. But those novels I love with a passion always have an epiphanic moment - that shining pivot where you just "get" what the author is doing and where we might or might not be going. Still waiting Zack, still waiting.

(view spoiler)

Do I have the right to be so annoyed? You could argue I don't - there's a vast literary landfill out there of badly written 99c monkey-squared-times-typewriter-squared garbage (Yay for Kindle self-publishing!) within which I'd be equally bewildered.

Except.

*Liminal States* isn't landfill - it's the rarest fucking white truffle you can find, and whilst the *I-have-no-idea-where-the-fuck-I-am-or-what-I'm-doing-here* problem was a drag, I still enjoyed the view - the range and ambition of the writing here is giddyingly exciting and Parsons wears multiple genre tropes with catwalk-like



elegance.

(view spoiler)

Oh, and how many other genre authors could write a divergent history of the Twentieth Century WITHOUT gorging on the low-hanging fruit of The Kennedys and the Titanic? - now that is self-control. Best of all, Parsons wrote the whole thing as a NOVEL - not as a screenplay-in-waiting (hello Robocalypse).

*Liminal States* was a genuine frustration for me then, but I do recognise great writing when I'm in it. So, here's the plan Zack. Next time we go for a spin, just glance in the rearview once in a while and check that last hairpin didn't, y'know, toss us all the fuck out. Cheers.

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### **Michael says**

Probably the best book I'll read this summer. Parsons can write. I mean, he can really, really write. The prose is consistently clever and careful. And while I imagine a fair number of readers may be put off by what they take to be the gimmicky nature of the novel's structure, a pastiche of dime Western, pulp noir, and horror, I also find the conceit not only skillfully handled but very affecting, even gripping. Outsize in its imaginative ambitions, Parsons's novel actually delivers what it promises. Definitely a keeper.

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### **Greg says**

The book starts as a fairly sleepy western, and then builds to a fully fledged multi-generational scifi. And horror. Reminiscent of Stephen King in how the mundane interfaces with the fantastic.

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### **Pamela says**

I tried so very hard with this, but it just wasn't meant to be. I'd settle down to read, and the "time left to finish" would be 3 hours. My mind would wander, I would just stare at the page, I would go back to see if I had missed something. When I'd get up, the "time left to finish" would be 3 hours 45 minutes.

There just wasn't anything I felt invested in. There wasn't anything I felt I could possibly become invested

in. Heck, there wasn't anything I even wanted to read. When I finally called it quits, it felt as though a burden had been lifted.

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### **Jacrify says**

Very strange, very good. Three genres in one book- western, hard boiled, cyber thriller.

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### **Andrew says**

An alternative American history told through American genre fiction. I respect this book more than I liked it. Recommended for SF fans who like their stories' plots and scales to spiral ever upward.

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### **Melki says**

It's 1874.

Gideon Long masterminds a botched train robbery. Gutshot and dying, he escapes into the New Mexico desert. Guided by visions, he crawls into a cave...and emerges younger, unscarred, his wounds miraculously healed. More curse than blessing, what he discovers there will forever change the face of humanity.

Now, hold onto your hat. The book that started as a western morphs into a crime/noir thriller set in 1950s Los Angeles. Long and his archenemy pursue each other for decades, prompting violent confrontations in the unending quest for vengeance.

It all winds up in the year 2006, where we are plunged into pure science fiction/horror as the spores hit the fan, and the world goes pretty nutso. And I haven't even mentioned the giant grasshoppers and flesh-eating mutants...oh, yeah!

Seriously, my words can't do it justice. I have never read ANYTHING like this before!

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