



# Remainder

*Tom McCarthy*

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## **Remainder** Tom McCarthy

A man is severely injured in a mysterious accident, receives an outrageous sum in legal compensation, and has no idea what to do with it.

Then, one night, an ordinary sight sets off a series of bizarre visions he can't quite place.

How he goes about bringing his visions to life—and what happens afterward—makes for one of the most riveting, complex, and unusual novels in recent memory.

*Remainder* is about the secret world each of us harbors within, and what might happen if we were granted the power to make it real.

## **Remainder Details**

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# From Reader Review Remainder for online ebook

## Gumble's Yard says

Really excellent and memorable read, unusually written but satisfying as matches interesting and deep themes with a well written, and internally coherent and consistent (if extremely bizarre) plot and with interesting characters: the narrator obviously but also the facilitator Naz – initially someone who arranges the diaries and lives of rich people but who becomes with this assignment an obsessive information management junkie, actually encouraging the narrator's obsession rather than checking it.

Naz's enthusiasm therefore reinforces the narrators descent into increasingly bizarre re-enactments: first of a trivial incident a tyre repair yard, then a shooting near his house and then more an enactment – of a made-up robbery on a local bank, before finally deciding to stage the re-enactment with real people which descends into an actual robbery and the death of an unwitting actor.

Themes of this very consciously literary and theme-exploratory book include:

Matter and substance - including both the physical matter and impressions left behind by actions & the idea that creation like the common quote re sculpting from marble is about stripping away the unimportant to get down to the residual/remainder/essence);

Reproduction/recreation/re-enactment – the idea that we re-enact scenes in our mind but also in everyday life we consciously play out roles e.g. from films or for others or our own benefit. The re-enactments acquire a meta level by the end when he starts thinking of how actual robbers rehearse robberies and decides to stage an enactment indistinguishable from a robbery.

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## Sentimental Surrealist says

Is it a sign of Remainder's greatness or its unevenness that I can't come up with a firm stance on it? Well, you could certainly make the first argument. Zadie Smith argues that this could become the future of literature, a novel that makes no attempt at the transubstantial miracles of more conventional fiction (words become people! And a representation of the noble human soul! Hence, so say the realists, the importance, the importance of their conventions!), and as someone who can take or leave the realist conventions, I do appreciate this novel's relationship with them. Often it seems like it's written in complete ignorance of those conventions - check out McCarthy's weirdly stunted language and his flat refusal to provide his characters with any interiority whatsoever - but sometimes, as in the truly glorious anti-simile "it looked like something that had come out of something," he seems to deliberately poke at and provoke them.

These aspects of the book are all kinds of fun, and McCarthy certainly has his own approach to minimalism. It's got nothing to do with either the under-the-surface minimalism of Carver and Hemingway or the authoritative minimalism of Didion and the other McCarthy. If anything, McCarthy is closest to Bret Easton Ellis' deliberately flattened affect, and I'd be a hell of a lot madder about that if McCarthy was more of a dick about it. Yes, there are plenty of points where he teeters on Ellis and a merciful few where he falls in, mostly toward the novel's funny yet oddly dissatisfying end (too predictable?), but McCarthy's project interests me far more than Ellis'. See, this novel's unnamed protagonist is a recovering amnesiac, and judging by both the high-obsessive repetition in the prose structure and the occasional reaches into more conventionally lyrical

writing, it strikes me that the simple language is meant to parallel the speaker's attempts to re-comprehend a world that had once seemed so natural to him. The narrator's insistent obfuscation, which he seems completely unaware of, also leads to some deadpan comedy. So far, so good.

My problems with this novel kick in as the plot does, as the narrator grows obsessed with recreating events of his past in search of authenticity. Which leads to a) a lot of rather shallow "nothing is authentic, everything is created" posturing that strikes me, at least, as a knock-off of DeLillo's far more nuanced "realer-than-real" deals (indeed, our very own Greg was astute enough to point out that this gives off early DeLillo vibes), and b) a lot of spinning on narrative wheels. *Remainder* is a novel that knows exactly what it wants to do and doesn't really stray off the beaten path, but there's a part of me that feels I read the whole novel once I read the first half. Sure, the reenactments get bigger and riskier, and it retains its good qualities up until the end, and it's not as though this particular character was going to develop into a full and self-aware human being or find his much-desired authenticity in a more productive way or anything of the sort. Yet I don't know, I just wanted to shake the thing by the shoulders and yell "MOVE, DAMMIT! YOUR CIRCLES ARE GETTING BIGGER, BUT THEY'RE STILL CIRCLES!" Count me as intrigued by the premise and entertained by the book, but other writers had better build on this if they want it to be the road to the future.

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## Szplug says

*In a light that is fierce and strong one can see the world dissolve.*  
—Franz Kafka

In his first (published) novel, I am convinced that Tom McCarthy realized his beguilingly strange fictive vision within a degree of perfection. In a skillfully wrought authorial mirroring, every element begets that which renders it contingent—the *everyman* narrative voice, the unadorned prose, the detached inflection and intonation, the hum of the banal and drone of the workaday, the subdued sexuality, the repetitive nature and clerkish attention to detail, the threadbare characterization, unexplored potentialities, the tangential asides upon minutiae, the rational explorations of the irrational—each and all are of a structure that is necessitated by its component parts whilst simultaneously constraining those parts to fit its formative strictures. Thus, it is the case that, in my opinion, the properties of the novel which have produced an array of negative critiques would be difficult to address without substantively diminishing the level of perfection they have attained towards the full expression of the authorial vision; that those readerly complaints, while reasonably conceived and justifiably construed, would likely prove unanswerable without *Remainder* becoming something entirely different at its very core—for this is a Möbius strip of a novel, enacting the internal and external theaters of existence without ever traversing the environ of the one for the other. McCarthy is herein operating at the margins espied by all whose have experienced the transcendent shivers of a cognition in sensual embrace with the material world, the *pneuma* made aware that its sundering from original unity is neither eternal nor punitive, but of a harmonious cosmic mystery.

*The world is the closed door. It is a barrier. And at the same time it is the way through.*  
—Simone Weil

And a mystery *Remainder*, well, remains—one all the more remarkable in that its fictional essence works on several different levels with seemingly equal plausibility and aplomb. It begs to be reread, that one might either polish the sheen of previous perception, or perhaps opt to explore the possibilities of a differing avenue of interpretation altogether. While it did not blow me away, leave me astounded by the prose or the

concept, it still left me highly impressed with how McCarthy so masterfully achieved the effects that he seemed to have set out to achieve. It's a remarkable achievement: in the annals of literature, it stands unique—a strange but precise unveiling of one man's obsession.

The nameless narrator, a stand-in for the modern English everyman who is whittling away his days within the nebulous-but-ubiquitous commercial environs of market research, having been incapacitated in hospital for several months after *something* struck him at the terminal point of free-fall, receives an eight-and-a-half million pound settlement from the undisclosed corporation held responsible, thanks, in no small part, to the persistent wiles of his solicitor. At a loss for what to do with this windfall, and suffering a perduring sensation of incompleteness, of inauthenticity, since awakening from his coma, a chance encounter at an acquaintance's housewarming party invokes a potent and paralyzing inner vision: of a previous physical environment, within a tenement block, in which a sequence of active and inactive interactions between the narrator and a select portion of his neighbours are recalled as having been complete and purifying in their orderly, natural flow. Though it cannot be determined, with any precision, whether the vision was *deja-vu* or *jamais-vu*, it imprints itself with overwhelming and mnemonically replete force within the narrator's mind, and provides him with an end for his newly acquired financial means: the reconstruction, down the most minute of details, of this tenement, complete with live-in actors to portray the neighbours, and in operation twenty-four/seven based upon the whims of the head conductor. Immensely satisfied with the transcendent results he obtains from these re-enactions, the narrator opts to explore the potentiality within further recreations based upon happenstance that transpires within his new life: that of the repair of a flattened tire and the subsequent flooding of a faulty windshield wiper fluid container; the drive-by execution of a black gang member on the streets of Brixton; and a re-enactment of the re-enactment. As with any addiction, that of the narrator's drive to satisfy his compulsion for precisely contextual unfolding seeks an outlet in ever more complex and variegated dosages, until, in a conceptual masterstroke, he conceives the potential for merging recreation with creation, a blending of actual and fantasy that brings his entire operation unto the precipice.

There are different ways the novel's events can be understood: an ironic look at how the whims of the wealthy are designed to be catered to in our modern societies, the respect accorded their power to buy people, even as beings whose actions are scripted to the utmost detail, and the questionable morality underwriting a power with such subtle immanency for abuse. A satire upon our burgeoning need to feel a connexion with the world, to establish our identities in ways that soothe the alienation imposed by our democratic capitalist system, by means of turning that alienation on its head by observing history and then reworking it until all of the kinks have been ironed out. Yet I believe that McCarthy is aiming for higher ground herein: there is an appreciable level of respect held towards the narrator for the fact that he is sparing no object—effort, time, money—in order to realize a private vision that the others, though obtaining none of the same shivery but serene metaphysical bliss from the results, still manage to attain a considerable satisfaction from, whatever their connexion to a particular facet of the re-enactment; this applies especially to Naz, the logistics *wunderkind* whose organizational prowess proves instrumental in bringing these complex visions to fruition. There is a taste of the pleasures of the Demiurge mingled with that of his *creations*; it is worth noting that, throughout the span of the re-enactment projects, not a single employee—behind the scenes or *live* in the unfolding—quits from frustration, boredom, or anxiety. The narrator, while succoring his own soul, appears to be providing a measure of that solace to the spirits of his vastly expanding crew. By reducing the pace of the recollected flow, temporal progress is brought almost to the condition of canvases parading past—regular modern existence endowed with the sublime and moving characteristics of a painting from a past master; the sterility of a practical and bustling twentieth-century enhanced with the revelational potential of colour-wrought universal expression.

Is it better to use one's money to bring about an artistic endeavor, rather than simply finagling another way to

snag a buck from the consumer? Particularly when there is no intent to recoup any of the production costs through the enactment itself? The narrator is convinced. Self-aware, believing himself clumsy and plastic in this unreal world, it is through the slowing down of scripted, anticipated routines that he manages to bring time to a standstill, merging the past, present, and future into a melange of unity; to go from being outside, forlorn and alone, to within the very core of existence, authentic, enlivened, not observing the world *be* but an integral component of how that being, constrained by the ticking of the clock, can take control of the process, ensuring a flow of life that sets the nerve-ends on fire with its spatial integrality, its enveloping cohesion. Seeing through one's eyes or the eyes of others brings people's lives—otherwise rushed, fleeting, absorbed in the moment—into coherence, provides the room for and establishes the importance of pausing to drink in the amassed richness of one's immediate environment, take an exquisite pleasure from the otherwise banal details of how one is positioned, what materials one is amidst, how the light can be captured in an endless variety of angled reflections and refraction. In the sensory perceptions of an ordered recreation, the otherwise depletable banks of memory are augmented, strengthened, filled to the brim and warded against the decays of aged egress. And yet, the narrator increasingly becomes aware that the introduction of random events into an established procedure, the interplay of chance with preordained regimen, heightens the glow engendered through the re-enactive process; that any element of life is inherent with the possibility of stochastic imposition upon the structuring of things, and that this element constitutes a vital part of lived experience. Hell, contra Einstein, perhaps God *enjoys* the roll of the dice.

It's all very strange, but wonderful; precise and cantered, but flowing and propulsive. I loved it. There are intimations throughout that things are not quite what they seem: is the narrator still in a coma, his dormant mind harvesting these visions in the effort to break the barriers of an unconscious existence? This interpretation is heightened by the unlikely acceptance of the narrator's bizarre schemes by his legion of employees, the odd patina of unreality that coats his more deeply etched material theatre. Other hints point to the fact that the narrator may, in fact, have died in the accident, in which case these enacted visions may be part of the process of shedding his spirit of its material ties through a spiraling ascendance unto the empyrean. Or has he been given some manner of gift through his traumatic experience? And such gifts bear their own thorns: an amorality to how he is using people, and a callousness in his demands and interests—he also cuts himself off from any and all people not of service in the attainment of his weird, compulsive need. Do all great artists need become, in some measure, baser humans? Does a great inner drive demand an abatement of one's humanity? McCarthy raises a bevy of tantalizing questions, whilst never offering hard or complete answers. It is merely put out there for every reader to determine on their own. And the ending, ah, the ending; for the umpteenth time, not at all what I had expected, but utterly apropos to everything that has gone before.

It's a curious thing. I have never, in my entire life, conceived an overriding passion for anything. I'm good at many things, have developed a wide variety of interests over the years, am a jack-of-many trades, in work and in life. But I lack that burning passion that declares itself in others. Anything that I can conceive of doing I can also conceive of abandoning; anything capable of being perfected can prove satisfactory for me through mere proficiency. I've never had a favorite anything. Middle of the road, easy-going, malleable; that's how I pass my days. You cannot fake being consumed by a desire, in thrall to a drive to bring something about, meet someone, attain select goals. It's either there or it isn't. So it is that books like *Remainder* draw me in more deeply, hold me more rapt, than it might others. Such one-way charges, torpedoes be damned, fascinate me to the utmost, and thus the narrator of this tale provided me with a trail of existential crumbs I couldn't fail to follow but with full absorption. Four-and-a-half stars, rounded down because I'm a fickle son-of-a-bitch, and this won't be the last book by McCarthy that I read.

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## Mary says

Flawless. A taut, tidy, disturbing little piece of fiction, and one that certainly won't be for everyone. A novel that should have been stifling and airless somehow manages to feel aerated and cautiously expansive, like an inflating balloon on the verge of bursting.

This isn't the sort of book for readers in the mood for something filled with likable characters or lyrical emoting. I love those books, but *Remainder* is not one of them--it isn't for the heart, it's for the head. It is a thought experiment, intensely rational, with lovely descriptive passages of everyday minutiae.

I kept thinking of *Observatory Mansions* when I read this--the books are quite different, but there is a certain kinship in the quality of the bizarre on display (where *Observatory Mansions* is concerned with the practice of stillness and the collection of objects, *Remainder* is concerned with the practice of motion and the collection moments/experiences).

Some people will, undoubtedly, find it gimmicky and hateable. I sort of understand their point, despite finding this to be an uncommonly polished, pitch perfect piece of writing.

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## Mattie says

Fascinating, disturbing, strange, compelling. To actually write *about* *Remainder* would, I fear, spoil the book for anyone who hasn't read it. Even to list the variety of questions swarming around in my head seems like it could ruin it. So, I won't. I'll just say that this book is unlike anything else I've read and I loved it. I suspect this is going to haunt me for a while. Which is cool.

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## Jamie says

"The Remainder" won the Believer book award, and I thought that gave it a good shot towards being something I would like. Boy, I was wrong. This book is awful. It starts out okay, but then it just devolves into the most painful exercise in futility - which may be the point, but God, this book made me mad.

The unnamed narrator has come into a huge sum of money by being hit by a flying object. He barely remembers the accident but now he has an ungodly amount of money and nothing to do with it. He also doesn't feel anything. He hires a guy to help him reenact events of his life, over and over and over again, with the hope that it will help him feel again. His life becomes a giant piece of performance art, and eventually his obsessions become more and more brutal, leading to the climax, which is totally, woefully predictable in my opinion.

I wanted to like this book. I think maybe I should have liked this book. I HATED THIS BOOK.

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## Banushka says

Tom McCarthy çok acayip bir yazar. C'yi de okuduğum için bulduğu konuların ilginçliğinden çok

çal??kanl???, i?ledi?i konuyu en derinine kadar ara?t?rmas? beni cezbediyor diyebilirim.

Büyük bir kazadan sonra "gerçek" olabilmeyi hissetmek ad?na anlat?c?n?n yapt?klar? hem inan?lmaz hem de son derece anlaml?. Yazar bizi bu ikilemde sallan?rken b?rak?yor.

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## j says

My girlfriend read this book and *hated* it. So there are two reasons not to bother:

- 1) I usually agree with her about this stuff, so why waste the time?
- 2) If I read it and love it, she'll just look at me with contempt and shake her head.

Sorry, Tom McCarthy. If it makes you feel any better, I decided to probably not read C all on my own. It just seems annoying is all.

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## Bookdragon Sean says

I almost never, ever, give up on books. Even when I'm reading the ones I dislike, I make an effort to reach the end. I don't think you can fully judge a book unless you've read it in its entirety. It would be like a movie reviewer walking out of the cinema half way through and writing up a review for the film nevertheless. It would be incomplete. But this one defeated me. I just couldn't go on after hitting the half way mark. It's only the second book during the last four years of reading that I've given up on. Doesn't this say something?

**This is one of the worst books I've read in my life-** here's why I put this piece of garbage down:

The writing is heavily descriptive. This, in itself, isn't a bad thing. Sometimes description is wonderful, but when the author takes the time to painstakingly describe (in huge detail) the attributes of a crack in a toilet wall, I want to shoot myself. These special cracks made the protagonist decide to recreate an apartment complex (one he has half-remembered) with his compensation money. Yay. A man has been given 8.5 million after an accident and he spends it trying to create a boring memory. Excuse me why I stop reading.

He hires in a special organisation company to handle the details, and the details are all so very boringly specific. He dictates how exact the building and the people in it must be according to his memories. And I just couldn't go on with it. The protagonist is an absolute tool. He walks away from his friends, ignores the problems of the outside world all for his vanity project. The memory is obviously important to him, but for me it was all plain monotony. I just don't want to find out what happened. I don't care what happened.

Life is short. I'm not going to waste my time reading the end of a very dull book.

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## Lauren says

I \*loved\* this book, but probably because it has exactly the ingredients I like: "unreliable" narrator, sharp writing, and a page-turning plot -- so hard to find all of these in one book!

I thought the premise was moderately interesting, but it's not what captured me. Rather, it was the way the



book spun out and the narrator unraveled that fascinated me. And Tom McCarthy is just smart and witty, and his prose is razor-sharp. Reading the other reviews on this site of this book, I was genuinely surprised how many people didn't like the book. I think I could read anything written with as much style and precision as this book. The overall idea reminded me a bit of DeLillo or Saramago, and the razor-sharp writing reminded me of Ian McEwan, Damon Galgut, and J.M. Coetzee.

Highly recommended!

Caveat: I gave this a 5, with the understanding that "Pale Fire" and "The Egyptologist" both score 10.

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## Katia says

I had to give this book four stars although I can not recommend it. It really drew me in. I couldn't put it down but then as I went on, it became more and more disturbing until it got just outright creepy. This book is so intricate and well-written. I think it will stay with me for a long time, but I don't really want it to. I was SO creeped out by the end of it, I actually felt anxious for several days after finishing it. It affected the way I looked at things around me, the details that you wouldn't normally notice. The book seemed to heighten my awareness and actually change my perception of my world, for a few days anyway. I want to believe that this is fiction and that there aren't people out there who are so disconnected from humanity and emotion.

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## Hakan says

ingiltere'nin büyük yay?nc?lar?n?n defalarca reddetti?i bir romanm?? kalan. küçük bir yay?nevi taraf?ndan bas?lm??, kitapç?lara bile da??t?lmam??, derken bir tan?t?m yaz?s?yla ele?tirmenlerin dikkatini çekmi?, sonra ödüller alm??, yazar?na ?öhret kazand?rm??, on dört dile çevrilmi?...

bu tür ba?ar? hikayelerine sahip romanlar genellikle biçim özellikleriyle ya da diliyle genel kabulden ayr?lan romanlar oluyor. ancak kalan, son derece sade/basit bir dille yaz?lm??, biçim olarak "düz", okuru kesinlikle zorlam?yor. kalan'? içeri?i farkl? k?l?yor. bu ilginç. içeri?in gittikçe göz ard? edildi?i bir dönemde dikkat çekici ve önemli.

peki ne anlat?yor bu roman?...k?saca, anlat?lmayan ?eyleri. anlat?lmayan de?il, anlat?lmayan, anlat?lmaya gerek duyulmayan ?eyler bu roman?n konusu. "?eyler" de olaylar de?il hareketler, küçük hareketlerin olu?turdu?u anlar ve durumlardan ibaret. bir ad?m atmak, bir yiyece?e uzanmak gibi kendili?inden oldu?unu sand???m?z basit/gündelik hareketleri geçirdi?i kaza sonucu dü?ünerek/anlayarak yapmak zorunda kalan isimsiz bir kahraman? var roman?n. bu isimsiz kahraman dü?ünülme?i dü?ünmeye ba?l?yor, dü?ündükçe sorguluyor ve aray???lara giriyor.

küçük, basit hareketleri dü?ünmeden/anlamadan yapanlar?n böyle bir meselesi yokken isimsiz kahraman kendini "sahici olmayan biri" olarak hissediyor ve büyük sorusunu soruyor: gerçek olan nedir?...cevap için anlar? büyütüyor, zaman? geni?letiyor, tekrarlara, "yeniden canland?rmalar"a kendini ad?yor. okurun romanda izledi?i "hikaye" bu yeniden canland?rmalar oluyor böylece.

gözden kaçana bakmak, detaylar? fark etmek, zaman?n dü?ünmeye yer b?rakmayan h?z?n? dü?ürmek, dü?ünmek için yava?latmak, anlamak için tekrarlamak...kahraman?n?n hayat?ndan okura sunduklar? bunlar

## Greg says

Zadie Smith praised this book and in her essay on 'realistic' versus whatever you want to call this sort of novel. I'm sure she is smarter than I am and she maybe knows more about literature, but I don't share her enthusiasm for this and I think that there are many better examples of books out there fighting the good fight against the naturalistic / realistic novel. But maybe this is the sort of novel that can serve as a gateway read into the more interesting terrain of 'difficult' literature (or post-modern, or whatever term you want to use, I'm lately fond of difficult).

It's not that I hated the book or anything. I enjoyed it, but nothing about it ever really won me over either. The writing is sort of autistic in the same way that Don DeLillo tends to be sometimes and I had no problem with that. McCarthy never got the words to sing though the way that DeLillo does with his overly stylized and flat prose.

My major problem was that this novel was a one-trick show and even with attempts at suspending my judgment and letting the novel play by its own rules I just couldn't get over how monumentally immature the main idea in this novel is.

The main character, the narrator, suffers a severe injury when something falls on his head. Afterwards he is awarded a very large cash settlement that he uses to fund re-enactments of events. His first reenactment is trying to capture a memory he has of an apartment building, so he goes about rebuilding this scene right down to the cracks in the walls and populates the building with a host of people who have to do small tasks over and over again, being a living loop of this particular memory of his. Behind all of this the narrator is trying to capture a more authentic experience, a hyper-reality. He continues doing this with various sorts of events. Crime scenes, getting a tired changed, among the ones he actually carries out along with future possibilities of little moments that he feels will be worth re-enacting.

As a premise I think this is interesting, but it doesn't go anywhere beyond the thrill the narrator has at 'perfecting' reality by replaying an event with actors over and over again until all the messiness of real life has been ironed out of it and the event becomes 'authentic'.

This is the sort of Orwellian  $2+2=5$  that certain strains of post-modernism love to play around with. But just because you say it doesn't make it true. If there were any kind of critique or judgment played out anywhere in this book I'd probably have enjoyed it more, but as the narrator falls deeper and deeper in to his 'unreal' real there is no sign given that the reader should be extrapolating anything other than a Baudrillard sort of nonsense about the nature of reality in our 'post-modern' age. Real life can be alienating and inauthentic, but it's only more alienating and even more inauthentic if you wrap up your view of the world with cutesy paradoxes and empty ramblings of dead French theorists.

Maybe I'm not giving the book enough credit though and there is some critique hiding somewhere here. Maybe a book doesn't need critique, and I agree, not every book does, but maybe I would have liked to see more movement in the main character, or have him off-set with another character. All of the other people who populate this book are enablers who go along with helping him create his view of the world. Yeah, they are basically all being paid by him, but still they are the people who create this growing unreality for him.

Maybe I'm just not sure what I'm supposed to think of his novel. Should I instead be reading this whole novel as a look at the absurdity of this guy who has been damaged by a big corporation and now is retreating from the real world to a safe place where he can just relive an event at a time without the possibility of real life dropping some potentially lethal shit on his head?

Or maybe it was just that the concept of authentic kept coming up, and this works as a code word to me for things to avoid. Generally as soon as someone starts using the word authentic I get the feeling that they are going to tell you exactly what you should do and be and any deviation will make you inauthentic.

Or maybe I'm just a little turned off by the way the novel veers towards the end, and knowing sort of where Tom McCarthy falls in his philosophical allegiances I can't help but see a Slavoj Žižek sort of figure masturbating furiously to images and thoughts of impersonal violence and salivating about how he can turn this fetishistic voyeurism into a new 'radical' theory.

But most likely I'm just annoyed at the basic ideas of the novel, and see too much of my own navel-gazing that I took for profundity and I'm holding it to the same standard that I hold my old self to, yeah, interesting idea but now do something with it. And maybe I just see too many parallels in the trajectory of some of my own thinking and see them both ending in horrific violence and I'm a bit bewildered how it can be seen as anything beautiful or authentic. Or is the reader supposed to make this sort of mental leap themselves? I don't know. Maybe I just missed a nudge or some sign that would have put this into a better context for me.

If you don't want to get hung up on the stuff that I get hung up on, this isn't a bad book at all. I don't think it's a great book, and as I said up near the top of the review I think there are better books of his sort of thing out there. But as a gateway sort of novel into the land of DFW and Gaddis and all of those sorts this could be good. It just doesn't go far enough or do much beyond it's one basic idea and if you don't have an aversion to the idea you just might enjoy this. If the word Baudrillard gives you hives though you might want to skip this.

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## Oscar says

Novela extraña donde las haya, pero también de las que perduran en la memoria tiempo después de su lectura. Mediante una prosa sencilla, Tom McCarthy aborda temas trascendentales como la imperfección de la realidad o la búsqueda de lo auténtico.

La historia tiene como protagonista a un londinense que nos irá narrando lo que le sucedió. Acaba de recuperarse de un accidente; algo le cayó del cielo provocándole unas lesiones que le dejaron temporalmente en coma, y borrándole parte de su memoria. Tras meses de recuperación, un abogado le comunica que ha recibido una indemnización por parte de una extraña entidad: ocho millones y medio de libras. A cambio, él no podrá contarle a nadie lo que le ha pasado.

Tras haberse recuperado y haber pasado por una etapa de re-aprendizaje, el protagonista se da cuenta de que no percibe la realidad de manera natural. Se muestra apático, y la mayoría de cosas le parecen artificiales, como aprendidas. Hasta que un día, en la fiesta en casa de un conocido, tiene un *déjà vu* que le hace recordar ciertas escenas y personas asociadas a ellas. No sabe quiénes son, pero le parecen unos recuerdos ya vividos. A partir de aquí, el protagonista se obsesiona por los ecos de estos recuerdos, por las sensaciones que le proporcionan. Y no es que se trate de nada extraordinario, se trata de recuerdos de una realidad anodina, pero eso sí, le transmiten esa sensación de naturalidad y autenticidad que tanto desea el narrador. Así que ni corto

ni perezoso, decide utilizar su dinero para re-crear estos recuerdos, comprando edificios y contratando a la gente que sea necesaria para dar vida al proyecto. Pero los recuerdos serán sólo el principio de una espeluznante obsesión: repetir la realidad, una y otra y otra vez.

Este argumento que introduce la ficción en la realidad, que puede recordar a 'El Show de Truman', tiene más de una lectura: realidad contra ficción, donde el protagonista únicamente se siente real cuando re-crea y se siente parte de una realidad escenificada, entrando en una clara paradoja; lo que cierta gente es capaz de hacer por dinero, cuando se les pide que se rebajen a realizar todo aquello que se les ordene; la realidad enfrentada al tiempo y al espacio, o movimiento perpetuo, cuando el protagonista se obsesiona en la re-creación de escenas; la obsesión por la materia y sus residuos.

Me pregunto cuándo deja de ser auténtico un hecho que se repite múltiples veces. Sin duda, la novela de Tom McCarthy está llamada a convertirse en un clásico.

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### **Laryssa Wirstiuk says**

Finally, I finished reading *Remainder* by Tom McCarthy. I have been reading this 300-something page book, which I purchased based on a recommendation from McSweeney's, for weeks. Today, I willed myself to finish it.

My professors at the University of Maryland, Merrill Feitell and Maud Casey, constantly discuss the importance of the first fifty pages of a book. They believe that these introductory pages can make or break a novel.

When Victor LaValle spoke to our workshop, he recalled what it had been like to judge a novel competition; hundreds and hundreds of books were sent to him, and he had no choice but to screen them. If the fifty pages were compelling, he would continue reading. If the fifty pages said nothing of interest, he had to put the book aside.

I was more generous than LaValle might have been with McCarthy's book. After fifty pages, this is all the reader learns: a young guy loses his memory after a horrible accident (unnamed), and his lawyer manages to settle for eight and a half million pounds, which the young man invests in the stock market with the help of a financial adviser.

McCarthy's writing isn't even all that compelling.

From the very beginning of the book, the dialogue is painful to read. Words that characters exchange in this novel are boring and unnecessary:

“Does this champagne smell like cordite to you?” I asked.

‘What?’ said Greg.

‘Cordite,’ I said, raising my voice above the music.

‘Cordite?’ Greg said, raising his voice too. ‘What does cordite smell like?’

‘This,’ I answered.

‘I don’t think so,’ Greg said.”

I bet even Tom McCarthy would think that this dialogue is inane and boring, if he were to read it right here, outside the context of his imagination. Most of the conversations in the book follow this particular example, and I found myself skipping through many character interactions to get to the book’s strongest point: the narrator’s thoughts.

Starting on page 64, for a few brief moments, the novel gets really good. The narrator is at a party, and he experiences a strong sense of *deja vu* while staring at a crack in the wall of a bathroom. McCarthy writes: “I’d been in a space like this before, a place just like this, looking at the crack, a crack that had jutted and meandered in the same way as the one beside the mirror...I remembered it all, but I couldn’t remember where I’d been in this place, this flat, this bathroom.” I will spare you the entire passage because the narrator repeats the same thing over and over, basically.

This idea, however, is interesting to me. For the first time since the accident, the narrator remembers something, possibly from the life he lead before the accident. What’s even more compelling is how he responds to his sudden emotional upheaval. He is so moved by this *deja vu*, which made him feel “real,” that he decides to find a way to reenact the scene in the bathroom.

He hires a project manager, Naz, to help him find “reenactors” to play the roles of the people that he imagined and dedicates his money to the purchase of a building just like the one he remembered, with the same crack carefully made in a bathroom modeled after the one at the party.

Just when he thinks everything is perfect, everything goes wrong. He realizes that life is too volatile and random to allow for the manifestation of his desires.

That realization comes around page 150. One hundred and fifty more pages to go.

The narrator decides to reenact all types of events that occur to him in his “real” life, like a trip to the car mechanic, a murder he read about in the newspaper, and a bank hold-up. Naz never questions why he continually wants to reenact these events. The narrator has an idea, they execute the idea, he is generally unsatisfied, and then he moves on to the next whim. Over and over for one hundred pages.

I really liked some of McCarthy’s ideas, and I thought this book had a lot of potential. I mean, I did finish reading the book, despite all the issues that I had with it. I wanted to see if McCarthy would be able to develop this idea, the narrator’s desire for staging his most moving moments, and turn it into something that would make for a good story, one that could move forward and evolve. As it turns out, this was a horrible story but a great concept.

McCarthy seems to me to be a great thinker but a horrible storyteller. I liked the ending, but that, like much of the rest of the book, worked on its own as an isolated incident that gave me no insight into the narrator as a character and demonstrated neither change nor evolution. I don’t think the person at the end of the book is the person at the beginning of the book, but I don’t understand how McCarthy got from point A to point B.

Maybe I will have to reenact my reading of *Remainder* in order for me to better understand. Who wants to see me read five pages and then throw a book down in boredom and frustration?

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## **R. says**

Me and a friend each received promo copies of this...as far as I understand, it's *À rebours* meets *Groundhog Day*...or a man relives aesthetic minutiae, or aesthetic minutiae becomes his life.

Or is that "I and a friend"?

Me (...) received (a) promo

I (...) received (a) promo

I and a friend received promo copies of this...as far as I understand, it's *À rebours* meets *Groundhog Day*...or a man relives aesthetic minutiae, or aesthetic minutiae becomes his life.

I received a promo copy of this. A friend did, too. It's *À rebours* (or *Against Nature*) meets *Groundhog Day*: a man relives aesthetic minutiae, or aesthetic minutiae becomes his life.

A friend and I received free copies of this book. As I understand, it's *À rebours* meets *Groundhog Day*; or a man pays for the reenactment of aesthetic minutiae, or aesthetic minutiae becomes his life.

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## **Adam says**

Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* is a stunner, a breathless plunge into one man's obsession. For anyone who thought existentialism as a genre of fiction tapped out about the middle of last century is in for a treat. This is a very modern take and a story that invites a wonderful bounty of interpretation and handily ducks each of them. A critique of a society where we are increasingly at the mercy of the whims of the rich, on our need for authenticity, locating meaning in the events our urban surroundings, what is art, and what is reality. I of course make this book sound boring by asking these questions, and this book is anything but. The logic of this book takes over and if you can stand it (or stand to stop reading) you will find terrifying, funny, and slightly deranged book that will cast the world in slightly tilted light.

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## **Héctor Genta says**

### **Circoletto rosso.**

*Reminder* (questo è il titolo originale dell'opera) come ricordo ma anche come residuo, rimanenza.

Il libro racconta la storia di un uomo colpito da un oggetto non precisato che gli ha provocato la perdita della memoria e che lo ha costretto a reimparare i movimenti, a capire il significato di ogni singolo gesto prima di poterlo, lentamente, mettere in atto. Un risarcimento multimilionario e il déjà-vu di un momento del passato (o forse inesistente) saranno la molla che porterà il protagonista a cercare di rivivere quel momento specifico e più in generale tutti quelli in grado di farlo sentire vivo e sereno inscenando delle rappresentazioni il più accurate possibili. Il risultato sarà però quello di trascinare l'uomo in un gorgo mortale, una coazione a ripetere fatta di continue limature, di gesti rallentati all'infinito alla ricerca di una perfezione impossibile da raggiungere perché l'asticella delle sue ambizioni si alzerà ogni volta di una tacca, rilanciando la sfida a se stesso fino a precipitarlo in un loop senza via d'uscita.

*Déjà-vu* è un'opera sorprendente, una scatola magica che una volta aperta esplode contenuti, idee e suggestioni in ogni direzione. C'è il tema della memoria, intesa come unico luogo dove l'uomo riesce a essere autentico, ma c'è anche il suo contraltare, quei falsi ricordi che stanno lì a ricordarci quanto la memoria a volte possa essere fallace. Il tema della memoria è inevitabilmente un chiaro richiamo a Proust ma quella che ne fa McCarthy è una rilettura attualizzata perché qui non c'è solo l'interiorizzazione del ricordo ma anche tentativo di portarlo fuori, di inserirlo nelle realtà. C'è poi il tema del denaro, come serpente tentatore che si insinua nelle nostre vite e le cambia. C'è il solipsismo, l'incapacità a vivere con gli altri, l'uso degli altri per perseguire la propria felicità. C'è la ricerca della spontaneità, la consapevolezza che siamo tutti attori che recitano una parte (viviamo per recitare e recitiamo per vivere). Ci sono riflessioni sul tempo che l'uomo cerca di manovrare, manomettere, rallentare per diventarne il dominus, con risultati disastrosi. Ci sono riflessioni sull'arte (con un accenno michelangiolesco allo sbarazzarsi della materia in eccesso). C'è il tema dell'inganno delle parole, che possono significare altro da quello che sembrano (come reminder), parole che rappresentano un terreno minato perché, analogamente al ricordo, se ripetute all'infinito si trasformano in qualcosa di diverso. E c'è, appunto, l'infinito, simboleggiato dal numero otto che si ripete dall'inizio alla fine del libro, il simbolo della ricerca di assoluto, di una perfezione irraggiungibile che porta l'uomo che tenta di trascendere il limite a precipitare nell'abisso. *Déjà-vu* è un'opera vertiginosa e Tom McCarthy è l'avanguardia. Circoletto rosso su questo nome.

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## Drew says

Rarely does a book manage to break down the habits and expectations that a reader builds up in a lifetime of reading.

Novels conform to schemas: there are quests, there are obstacles to be overcome, there are the universal standbys of love, hate, sex and murder: death must come violently and suddenly in order to grip the reader and to disentangle her from the nasty feeling that it might be her destiny too one day.

Of course these are broad and possibly unfair generalisations, but you get the point: the reservoir of storytelling is limited, and most authors are quite happy to wallow in the same shallows that their forebears found so reassuring. True, the 20th century saw some brave and sometimes foolhardy attempts to punt out into uncharted waters - the French nouvelle roman is perhaps the most prominent example of this - but today we are back to compendiousness, narrative and the Jonathan Franzens of this world: wise witty wordsmiths whose pat answers and worldly patter is carefully weighed against liberal Doubts and Cultured Concern as to the Future of the World.

And then along comes Tom McCarthy. A writer whose books (all right, call them novels if you must) record the bravest moments of Robbe-Grillet, but make it all look so effortless and at the same time manage to entertain to the extent that you want to slap him on the back and buy him a pint.

So what does happen in *Remainder*? Not very much, and when it does, it gets repeated time after time after time. Not exactly a recipe for success, you might think. But McCarthy's style is so casual, so insouciant, so offhand, that everything comes across as a paradox and a poser, as if there were a novel behind the novel, a story behind the story.

But what could be behind it though? This is the question that occupied me in the first few run-throughs: who is his model? Is it Sartre, or perhaps Kirkegaard, or is it more contemporary, perhaps Ballard? This last option comes closest to the truth: McCarthy's protagonist in *Remainder* is the victim of an unexplained accident; he obsesses over memories that he believes can lead to insights if re-enacted, and when these actually are re-enacted he falls into fugues and trances that are reminiscent of the catatonic states in which so many Ballard characters spend their happiest hours.

In this way the book is tinged with the atmosphere of both *Vermilion Sands* and *Crash*. The private,

psychological, obsessive nature of the book all speak for a Ballardian inheritance, as does the book's later phase in which the scene moves to an abandoned airport hangar near Heathrow, a Ballardian location if ever there was one.

What speaks against it though is the language, the attitude. Unlike Ballard, McCarthy writes in a modern, idiomatic, demotic style. For anyone who has lived in - or even spent time in - London, the tone and overall slant of the protagonists blank, hacked-off impassivity will be familiar, if not welcome. (A brief aside: this is a London novel with a London attitude that is so far removed from the flavourless word-strudel of *The Finkler Question*, that I feel inclined to suggest that Howard Jacobson should take the time to read his younger contemporary's effort - and learn.)

The city pervades and invades every aspect of the book: places are always described with the utmost accuracy, whether Coldharbour Lane in Brixton, a bank in Chiswick or a lawyer's office in Islington. But more than geography, it's about texture: the brick dust, chewing gum, tarry oil and generic filth that defines the urban environment: a world of tawdry minutiae in which the protagonist loses himself and temporarily escapes the apparent meaninglessness of his existence.

It seems that the more I write the more there is to say with this book. Because I haven't even started describing the actual story, if that's a meaningful label for what happens here.

What does happen is a curious set of events that begins with something unexplained falling from the sky. This object injures the novel's protagonist so severely that he spends several months in hospital: initially comatose, then without the use of his limbs, and eventually in the hands of a physiotherapist who re-teaches him basic movements, from holding objects to eating and finally walking. This is related in flashback on the day when "the settlement", a payment of eight million pounds from whoever let the unknown object fall on our hero, arrives.

After overcoming the initial shock of receiving such a massive payout, he wonders what to do with the money and rejects his friend Dave's hedonism - sniff cocaine off the back of the best-looking prostitute you can find until the money runs out - and his not-quite girlfriend Caroline's altruistic suggestion that he donate the money to a charity in Africa. In fact he has very little idea of what to do until he goes to a party and discovers a crack in the bathroom wall that triggers a set of previously concealed memories. In these memories he lives at the top of a block in a flat that also has a bathroom with a similar crack in the wall, sick but living plants in the hallway and a rear window view of a courtyard where black cats stalk languidly over red rooftops while in the flat below an elderly woman fries liver and in the flat below hers a melancholy pianist practices all day long. Other details also emerge: a motorbike freak who spends hours in the yard tinkering with his machine and a concierge who is present but quite static.

In the midst of this memory is another: the memory of moving through the flat completely at ease in the world: he remembers gliding through the rooms like a dancer, without even thinking about his movements, opening the fridge in a fluid, lyrical movement and not having to think about what he was doing.

Of course this plays with the reader's expectations on several levels: is this a psychological problem, a philosophical problem or rather something in the aesthetic realm? All three ideas are handsomely treated, though none is finally excused. We are kept in suspense between the various possibilities, with connotations, cultural cross-references and symbolically loaded reverberations whizzing around the echo-chamber of Mr. McCarthy's wonderful machine.

I could go on now, but I haven't got the time. It's a wonderful book. More later...

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## Angie says

this book caused me pain. honest, physical pain, primarily in my neck and shoulders, but also a little bit in my left eyeball, where i believe some cellular degradation and apoptosis took place, and also diffusely and bilaterally in the temporomandibular region. it also induced some psychological and existential suffering,



and i believe that this was more the author's aim. that being said, mccarthy comes across as the kind of writer who wouldn't be sad to hear that there were negative physical sequelae associated with reading his novel all the way to the end. sometimes the side effects can't be helped. sometimes they are even a necessary part of the reading experience.

sorry, mccarthy, but this was not one of those times. you wounded me for nothing. thanks. jerk.

plot rundown: a presumably average bloke with average friends and average lady troubles is struck by falling debris of unknown (and legally nondisclosable) origin. he lapses into a coma and awakes with some severe motor deficits--specifically, he can't remember how to move. anything. at all. he relearns eventually but is only able to animate his various body parts by thinking very specifically about what and how he would like to move, and he can't escape the feeling that his new motion is somehow less than "actual" motion. having to think about every move before he undertakes it leaves him distanced from his own body, forced to watch it and instruct it and dictate to it like an off-screen director, rather than simply exist within it like he imagines most people do. this necessary scripting and conscious control of all of his actions makes the narrator feel conspicuously "inauthentic," and the more he considers his circumstances, the more certain he is that inauthenticity has been his default state for most of his life. this troubles him immensely, and he devotes himself to pinpointing a time and place in which he was entirely authentic and then synthetically replicating the movement and surroundings, believing that if he can precisely fabricate or mimic authenticity and then prolong the moment of it, he will be able to memorize it and retrain himself to attain it without deliberation.

i assume that we all see how this is a flawed supposition. i imagine that many of you might even roll your eyes a bit at the cartoonish magnitude of the flaw. this is not the thing that causes the pain. the pain is caused by the narrator's manic and escalating pursuit of fabricated authenticity coupled with his and all supporting characters' failure to note the flaw. this is how allegory works, perhaps? only the divine overseer (i.e., tom mccarthy, me, you if you have read the book) has full awareness of the foolishness and futility of the players' desperate little dance, and in that way he or she gets to feel superior while recognizing something that the characters never see?

i don't know. if that were all there was to it, this book could have ended at least a hundred pages before it did. mccarthy was after something bigger. he was trying to do something, to us, really *do* something. and i thought i knew what, and then i realized that was wrong but thought of something else that might be it, and . . . no, that wasn't it, but it's probably--no. crap. *oh*, i know! i know, it's--

and then the book ended, and it wasn't that last thing, either, and i was left alone, angry and bewildered, with my pain. my very authentic pain. why have you done this, tom mccarthy? i wondered. why have you written this story full of blatantly misguided actions that no one perceives or corrects, with this ending that teaches me nothing and gives me no hope? all of the sidetracks and seemingly pertinent but ultimately irrelevant details, all of the build-ups that come to naught, why?

and then i knew why. and i thought, *oh*, aren't you clever, you microcosm-crafting pedant. aren't you precious. can't you follow the trail of knots and pinched nerves in my sad little spine, the one that you've induced with your hypercrafted philosophy seminar, down to its grand conclusion and kiss my authentic ass.

three stars, though. mccarthy knows how to craft a sentence and a scene, and i would never become invested enough in a meritless piece of writing to get this angry about it. i haven't read his short stories, but i probably will, because he does have talent (even if he occasionally inflates or abuses it), and because i am not the sort to hold a grudge. also, i imagine they're better than *remainder*. the transition from short story to novel can be difficult for the best writer, and ideas aren't always equally suited to both mediums. *remainder* might have

been a blistering short story, and mccarthy's next idea might make for a genius novel. i am not too sore to offer him the benefit of the doubt. but if the next book has the same effect on my jaw, i may not be too magnanimous to send him my dental bill.

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