



Escape from Spiderhead

George Saunders

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Escape from Spiderhead Details

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From Reader Review Escape from Spiderhead for online ebook

Priyanka says

A well-told and intriguing dystopian story is always fun to read, and this one read like a thriller that kept me on the edge from beginning to end.

I liked the premise of the use of drugs to control human emotions and its implications. As a common underlying theme across most dystopian stories, it addresses the question of what makes us human. Do we reserve any claim on ourselves when our feelings – be it positive or negative – are artificially induced and revoked, and our subsequent choices and actions determined, at the beck and call of a larger authority figure; or are we mere puppets bereft of free will? The concept of institutionalized conditioning of human behaviour, among other things, lends itself to parallels with Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.

Sarah says

A great short story you can read online. Really put our societal definition of humanity, love, etc in a new perspective.

Jon Herman says

This is the best short story I've read in years. It is so ingenious, fucked up, and haunting. Reminds me of the King short stories that fucked me up and shaped my worldview when I was probably too young to read them. Night Shift, Skeleton Crew, stuff like that.

I've never seen the concepts of love and horror so exquisitely, terribly rendered. I'm really in awe of this story. It's so unmerciful, so strange, yet so utterly relatable. It's like a needle straight to the cortex. It's graphic, and yet not so graphic that you can't fill in most of the blanks yourself-- which makes it even more horrifying, of course.

Saunders is a monster, and I mean that in the best possible way. The whole book is amazing actually.

There's magic in this story. Terrible, awful, gorgeous magic.

Jefferson Lam says

This story f'd me up. You should read it.

Rossy says

3.5

Jeff commmited a crime, and as a punishment, he is now in an experimental prison where Abnesti

"plays/experiments" with him and others, administering them some drugs. One of them makes them speak the truth, other makes them love passionately someone they just met, other makes them fall out of love, and the most dreadful one makes them hurt themselves and suffer.
Can Jeff handle all of this?

Althea Ann says

I've previously read and enjoyed Saunders' "Civilwarland in Bad Decline" but I think this story is even stronger. It shows us another aspect of a dystopian near-future, one where convicts might pull strings for the "opportunity" to enter experimental drug testing programs rather than a 'traditional' prison. The disturbing revelations pile up as our protagonist is led toward having to make a terrible moral choice - but the by-the-by implications of what these experiments might indicate about the outside world are equally bad - and completely believable.

Danielle says

In "Escape from Spiderhead" by George Saunders convicts in a prison facility are subjected to chemical testing by the government to see if one day they could manipulate world leaders to feel affection towards their country and either control the world or bring about world peace.

This story makes you question if someone is deserving of pain. Before Abnesti inflicts Darkenfloxx on Rachel, he lists all the bad things she has done to make Jeff feel better about what they are about to do to her. Jeff insists that no one despite what they may have done deserves to feel that way. The other characters show how different people can be outside of stereotypes. Each of the people he is introduced to has been convicted of terrible things, but until the end, you don't know that. These people help Jeff conclude that no person deserves to feel the pain of Darkenfloxx, a chemical that puts a person in physical torment and pain. The chemicals being pumped into the convict's bodies creates a physical conflict and leaves them with no control over their own emotions or actions. The lack of control over his emotions could be considered an emotional conflict too, because at the end Jeff didn't want to give up the only control he had, refusing to say acknowledge, he wanted to prevent Rachel from feeling the effects of Darkenfloxx. As the story goes on Jeff's intelligence develops. He becomes more aware of his surroundings and guesses what is going on with these experiments and the facility they are in. The moral conflict is in Jeff's decision if Rachel is worth less than others because of what she has done in her past. There is a major dilemma near the end of the story. Jeff must prove there are no residual feelings of love left from the drug they gave him. The first test wasn't good enough, so they have to watch his reaction to one of the women he slept with when they receive Darkenfloxx. Except the first girl kills herself. Jeff is conflicted, and the only way he can think of to prevent Rachel, the other girl he slept with under the influence of these chemicals, from receiving the Darkenfloxx too is to kill himself. To prevent Rachel from feeling pain, and possibly committing suicide like the first girl, Jeff gives the Darkenfloxx to himself and ultimately ends his own life. It is hard to say if the characters are realistic in their actions because they are constantly being manipulated by the drugs in their Mobipak. I'm not sure how anyone would react in these circumstances. Typically, people don't have sex with someone they first meet. What I hope is realistic is that every one of the convicts without loving someone cared about their well-being and reinforces my belief that all lives matter. I would hope that would be a default human feeling.

The ending was very sad and surprised me. I thought Jeff would physically escape and take Rachel with him. Then he took his own life instead. The very end when he was floating in the sky, he seemed happy to have let go of the burden of being in prison, and I believe since he gave up his life to save Rachel he was going to

heaven. So in that regard, it was a happy ending.

Christine says

I was caught off guard a bit by the beginning, but what a thoughtful piece. You know it's good fiction when the ending leaves you feeling a bit on edge.

Jana says

In this story, a pharmaceutical test subject at a facility he calls Spiderhead begins to question the benefits of what's being done to him and others. Well-written, well-executed, with a creeping sense of dread that explodes into horror.

Flo R says

Apart from the silly product names, a really captivating read. The more deeper you get into the story the more you know about Jeff, you begin to relate to his feelings, the real ones. You understand.

Poetic ending. Well written.

Luke Jacobs says

The greatest short story I've ever read. I'm a bit bias, because I love dystopia, especially drug-centric dystopia, but it was so good that, upon finishing it, my day was ruined, for this wasn't a novel which I could sink a couple of days into but just a fleeting twenty minutes.

Xavier says

I don't normally read fiction. But when I do it includes lines like:"Back in my Domain, I constructed a who-had-fucked-whom chart, which went like this:"

That's some Unbearable Lightness of Being shit; up in da House, y'all.

Zuzanna says

So GOOD! Never have I read such a short story that made me feel the way I felt after reading this story. The way Saunders writes is unique. The story is very odd, surreal, and incomprehensible but that is what I liked about it the most

Becky says

I read this after a housemate recommended it, having read it for an essay, during a discussion on the relationship of post-human depictions in fiction and dystopian settings. In *Escape from Spiderhead*, criminals have the opportunity to serve their sentences by opting to be experiment subjects. This takes place in the form of various drugs pumped into their circulation, for which they have to acknowledge. These drugs include being able to make users much more eloquent in their speech, of lowering inhibitions, of creating and removing emotions. The short story focuses on Jeff as he reluctantly takes part in a new experiment, the testing of a new drug combination that can incite deep romantic love followed by completely removing it and returning the users to 'baseline', as if they had never been in love at all. The experiment is designed and carried out by Abnesti as he seeks to prove that the "love" the participants feel is truly temporary, going so far as threatening and giving a drug which fills users with overwhelming despair.

Through Jeff's eyes and experiences, *Escape from Spiderhead* acts as an examination of morals and ethics. Abnesti portrays a utilitarianism view of their experiment, choosing to focus on the end goal of "most amount of benefit for the most people", while Jeff portrays the deontological view as the unwilling volunteer of "is what is happening/about to happen right?" In a situation that almost emulates the boat scene from *The Dark Knight* in which the Joker plays his social experiment, the two views and the values each person puts on human life, no matter the history, are tested through how and why they react the way they do. In doing so, *Escape from Spiderhead* also forces the reader to confront where they lay the responsibilities of their actions; do we take it on ourselves even if someone else is pulling our strings, or do we put it on someone/something else as we pull the strings of others.

A beautifully disturbing short story, which gives the reader so much to think about while truly making us sympathetic for Jeff. In particular, the ending monologue by Jeff leaves the reader reeling as in his own personal eloquence he examines the decisions he has made as well as those of his fellow criminals, and where he finally receives the unspoken wish that is an undercurrent in his narration - freedom.

Patty Grealish-Rust says

I wish this were a longer story. Such an interesting premise.
