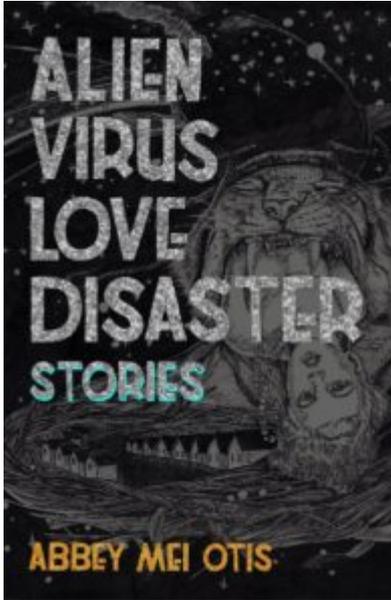


[A Manual for Surviving the Future: A review of Abbey Mei Otis' Alien Virus Love Disaster](#)

written by Guest Contributor | January 2, 2019



Alien Virus Love Disaster by Abbey Mei Otis
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A little over two-thirds of the way through Abbey Mei Otis' highly engaging short story collection *Alien Virus Love Disaster* (2018, Small Beer Press) I suffer from a sense of recognition: I recall reading a version of the story "Rich People" in this past summer's edition of [Tin House](#). Initially, "Rich People" hadn't made much of an impact on me, but encountering familiar work within a larger body of an artist's writing can clarify, sharpen, and transform our understanding of a writer's vision of and sensibility toward her world. Re-encountering "Rich People" here, the story takes on greater depth. Assiduous readers of other literary journals—*Barrelhouse*, *StoryQuarterly*, and [Tor.com](#)—may also recognize Otis' name and a few of the stories in this, her first, collection.

Otis is a writer of vision, attuned to the complexities of privilege and the ways technology married to capitalism tends to produce and exacerbate inequality. Like most science fiction, these aren't tales of the future, but stories about our world now. In the title story, "Alien Virus Love Disaster," Noma, our narrator, interrogates a scientist from a defunct research facility (called the Magic Factory by locals for its nightly display of colorful lights) located on the outskirts of her low-income neighborhood. After the factory is shut down, residents develop unexplainable cysts and are given prescriptions for powerful and mysterious drugs that themselves produce

horrific side-effects.

“...We weren’t bad people.” He twists toward me. “If you had the chance to touch something utterly unknown, something not of this world—wouldn’t you take it?”

I keep my eyes on those far bright trees. “I didn’t have a choice.”

Here, as in other stories, Otis highlights the ways technological advancement doesn’t benefit us all equally or in the same ways.

These observations aren’t necessarily new, but Otis breathes unique and compelling life into them. In the story “If You Could Be God of Anything,” the child protagonists of a derelict suburbia of the future inherit the cast-off remains of a broken sex doll, fallen from one of the zooming city dweller cars that crisscross the skies. The children, chief among them Hailo, the story’s narrator, prop the doll up in a dilapidated house they use as a fort and ask it questions, the way one might a fortune teller or a parent. And in fact Otis encourages us to imagine the dilapidated sex robot as a kind of analogue for Hailo’s own mother and the parents of all the children of the “burbs” who spend their time “plugged in” to some kind of virtual fantasy—produced, we imagine, somewhere in the unreachable city (Hailo and her family return in the collection’s last story “Ultimate Housekeeping Megathrill 4”). The robot itself, of course, is a literal thing from beyond the burbs, a fantasy object emerging from a nebulous elsewhere, and just like in “Alien Virus Love Disaster,” the message seems to be that we should be wary of the fantasies others cook up for us. Or, as Hailo puts it, “We in the burbs—we didn’t need any kind of robot. We had all been pushed out the car door. We fell the thousand feet, we hit the ground, we got up and kept going.”

By focusing her stories on the lives that bear the brunt of the consequences of “progress,” Otis joins a growing cohort of contemporary writers, like Carmen Maria Machado, who have turned to speculative fiction as a way to explore contemporary crises. A professor at Oberlin College in Ohio and a North Carolina native, Otis is a graduate of the prestigious Michener Center at the University of Austin, Texas and of Clarion West Writer’s Workshop. As this pedigree might suggest, she brings to her work a keen eye for the possibilities and playfulness of language as well as a deep engagement with the practice and history of science fiction writing.

While Machado turned to the resources of folk and fairy tales for her 2017 collection [*Her Body and Other Parties*](#), Otis draws on decidedly more familiar science fictional tropes here—stories of alien encounters, secret government research gone awry, ghosts, and futures culled from Isaac Asimov’s nightmares proliferate here. But Otis is able to transform these tropes by exploring them through the unique consciousnesses of her narrators. The sublime “Moonkids,” for instance, is told in a close-third person point-of-view that allows us access to the rhythm if not the full consciousness of Colleen, a Moonie who has been exiled to a crisis-ridden Earth after failing a set of

mandatory scientific exams. The story is a poignant portrayal of the ways the places we come from pull at us, even when we wish they wouldn't, and of the myriad ways we attempt to make homes in dangerous or inhospitable places. "The Earth isn't fit for much anymore," we learn a third of the way through "Moonkids,"

Everyone's given up growth cold turkey, which means they seize on development like an ex-smoker chewing pencils. The moon helps out with that... Hacking away at the mystery forest while they wait for the real trees to grow back.

Advanced environmental and economic destruction is a given in the futures Otis writes—predictions that appear less speculative than inevitable given our national dithering on climate change and unwillingness to reign-in free-market capitalism. "We stand at the edge of a river. The water is cloudy and clogged with floating islands of sticks and muck and lost flipflops," observes Noma in "Alien Virus Love Disaster," while the protagonists of "Not an Alien Story" hunker down in an abandoned K-Mart in Akron, Ohio after the sea level rise has swallowed coastal cities and unnamed islands. The dystopia is deeper than this, however, and Otis unravels the consequences of a futural capitalism that saturates every facet of social life—a world where educational systems are designed around Darwinian standards-based curricula and where both schools and students are seen as customers; where the rich throw baroquely lavish parties to indulge insatiable appetites and where the growing masses of the poor and dispossessed live in suburban ghettos. In other words, a world very much like our own.

A reader might expect stories freighted with these kinds of critiques to be bleak, but throughout this collection characters find ways to survive in their environments, even if they're not exactly thriving. In a present where so much writing seems to fetishize an apocalyptic future, Otis' work suggests that there's too much uncertainty about what comes next for any of us to say, with any kind of certainty, whether the arc of the moral universe will ultimately bend toward justice or injustice. What does seem certain is that for those who live in the future we are rapidly and thoughtlessly creating, survival, no matter how precarious, will be linked to our capacity for practicing creativity and community.



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