

New Interview with Kevin M. Kearney



Genre-wise, there's a lot at play here. I would call it a coming-of-age novel, but also kind of an "anti-bildungsroman," in that Simon doesn't so much find himself as quite literally lose himself. There are also science-fiction elements as well as horror ones. How would you break it down? What are some of your inspirations, in this vein? Do you think it's horror and science-fiction—or is this just our lives at this point?

I've described the book as a "speculative Philly noir," because I think it captures the vibe, sounds intriguing, and people tend to like compact descriptions like that. That being said, I don't know what it is beyond a novel. To your point, I think writing about technology requires the tools of (at least) science fiction and horror. It helps that I'm drawn to writers who intentionally blur the lines between genres, so it felt natural for me to try to do the same.

Early on in the writing I was leaning into science fiction, reading stuff like *Neuromancer* and the novelization of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. I also read a handful of Raymond Chandler books, like *The Big Sleep* and *The High Window*, because I knew that I wanted there to be this simmering tension, a kind of uncertainty about HYPR and its intentions, and Chandler is the master of that. I'm also very cognizant of the reader's experience—I'm terrified of boring someone—and all of those books are really engaging texts that make you keep turning the page.

I don't know how much those books are reflected in the text, but I like assigning myself potentially inspirational reading while I'm working on a project because I like to believe the

moves of these great works find their way into my brain, even if I'm not totally conscious of it. If nothing else, it's fun.

Philadelphia seems like a perfect setting. It's trite to phrase it this way, I know, but the city feels like a "character." It also feels like a ripe setting for a particular kind of juxtaposition (between old and new, perhaps) you draw in the novel. Why do you think that is? What are some of these tensions? Why is this novel set in Philly and not in, say, New York or Los Angeles?

I lived in Philly as an adult for 12 years, right out of college into my early 30s. I grew up in South Jersey, about 20 minutes outside the city. It was close enough that I went to high school in Philly rather than Jersey.

I started writing the novel almost immediately after moving from Philly to California, back in August 2022. I was pretty homesick, I think, maybe a bit culture-shocked, and found that writing about the city was a good way to process a big life change. So, I think that's the most immediate answer: I was trying to figure out where I was by exploring the place I'd left behind.

I also just think it's a beautiful city, despite all its problems. I lived in the house at 8th and Washington where Simon lives and, because I was in my early 20s when I did, I was enamored with the possibility of the city, in spite of the sidewalks being lined with trash and something in the air always smelling like shit. It felt alive, you know? Like you'd sit down on the stoop and it's mostly just cars passing by, but you still feel like you're taking in this beautiful scene. I guess maybe that's a lot of cities, but Philly was my city for so long, so it felt right for me.

But, to your question about bigger cities, Philly is decidedly not New York or Los Angeles. People in Philly don't want it to be New York or Los Angeles. Unlike other major American

cities, it's still possible for normal people to have respectable lives with modest jobs in Philly. My wife and I were both teachers and were able to buy a house in the city by 31. As far as I can tell, that's not possible in New York or L.A.

So, I think that aspect made the story feel more realistic: Someone really *could* make rent doing rideshare in Philly. It wouldn't be easy, but it could be possible. If *FREELANCE* were set in New York, Simon would have to live in, like, Newark.

The flow of passengers in Simon's Subaru (a good alternate title) is a very effective narrative "vehicle." I notice the voice—his voice—has a particular penchant for classifying customers into "types" and judging them based on certain sociocultural markers. What do you make of this kind of reduction? Is it something a social-media-fueled service economy does to us?

The internet classifies its content as well as its users. Whether you use social media or Google or almost any other popular piece of the modern internet, your keystrokes are being collected and used to frame your experience. Your data is your identity. So, the short of it is: The internet classifies us in the same way Simon classifies his passengers.

I thought of Simon, and a number of other characters in the book, as someone who's been taught to view the world through data and metadata, because I think we're all being taught to do the same.

Simultaneously I'm drawn to and repulsed by the Dylan character. He seemed to embody an important symbol, or carry an important frequency. I didn't find him particularly redeeming; in fact, he seemed to be the target of a good deal of venom. He represented to me a historic truth: that often disaffected privileged people take up the battles of the working class, whether earnestly, symbolically, as a means to

virtue, or as some kind of aesthetic or intellectual exercise or game ("Catan" is a symbol of this). In a way, though, he feels like the novel's villain but also its truth-teller. I'm reminded of his line: "we're accepting the machine's warped versions of ourselves!" What is at the heart of that contradiction, that venom? Are we all bourgeois at this point?

Dylan was a fun character to write because I think he's a very contemporary, very real type-of-guy, at least in certain parts of the country. He is an avowed socialist, yet can't help talking over working class people. He has read a lot of theory on intersectional solidarity, but is still just a loud know-it-all. He's interested in labor issues, though he's never seen working.

I don't think he's a villain, necessarily, because as you pointed out, he actually makes some good points about HYPR, technology, and surveillance. He's not an idiot, even if he's annoying. And I think almost everyone in their early 20s talking about politics, and I include my 20-something self here, is insufferable.

Overall, though, Dylan's worst trait is not that different from the American Left's: he has great ideas but dogshit delivery. So, no, he's not a villain exactly, but I definitely aimed to make him a foil for Simon. Not that Simon is a hero. Both of them are just younger dudes trying to figure out their place in the world. Their pasts are what cause them to do that in such different ways.

This novel feels particularly interested in thematic concepts of "SEO" and the ambiguity of whether, when algorithms are involved, anything is actually "chance." I'm thinking of when the algorithm puts Cassie in Simon's car (a rich allegory for dating apps). I'm drawn to the line on page 74: "It wasn't that robots were spying on humans; it was that humans were just glorified robots." What was the inspiration here; how far has it gone; and to what extent do you think it's true, that

we're essentially pre-programmed for robothood?

I was working for an SEO-focused website when I started writing the book and was amazed at how it changed my perception of the internet. I quickly realized how much of Google's search results were just shoddy, recycled (often imprecise and sometimes outright incorrect) information tailored to rank high on the page and earn clicks. Once you learned a few things the algorithm was rewarding, you could quickly rejigger a page with some keywords, new-fangled headers, and a few lines of code to make it jump to the top of the results. It didn't have to be good, it just had to match what Google had deemed "good."

SEO is now in sort-of a death spiral thanks to AI. But AI is being fed millions of web pages that were written explicitly for SEO—the same pages that were constructed from recycled, shoddy information.

So, the information isn't any better, but people assume it is because it has the appearance of authority. It's AI! But that's just not true. Unfortunately, that might not matter. The more people defer to the internet/AI for answers, the more they begin to see the world in the way the internet/AI sees or wants them to see the world.

Am I rambling? Maybe.

Probably stating the obvious here, but Google (and most popular websites/apps) are collecting massive amounts of data and then using it to spit content back at you. Apple recently paid \$95M in a lawsuit related to Siri listening to user conversations. Years ago, people who said their phones were spying on them were seen as paranoid. Now, we're aware that all these things are happening, but we passively accept them as the cost of having such amazing technology.

But it's still disappointing, for me at least, when I realize that I can be pinned down so easily. It's pathetic that I'm

such a clean marketing demographic, you know? Not that I'm a particularly unique person, but it's depressing to know that what I perceive as the complexity of my brain, past experiences, desires, and interests can be categorized so easily by an algorithm.

I take solace in the fact that there's still a lot of things I do offline. I don't track my exercise, I listen to a lot of physical media, and I almost never rate things I consume. The YouTube algorithm is mostly serving me live Ween videos, so I think that's probably a good sign.

I love Simon's parents. What is it about Gen X parents that begets this kind of depiction—at once kind but something also naïve about them? Can we talk about this?

Thanks for saying that.

I don't know what it's like to be a parent, but I can imagine it must be really difficult to watch your child seemingly become someone you don't recognize. I taught high school for 10 years and got to know lots of parents like Simon's. Good, decent people trying to get a handle on why their kid was suddenly failing out of school. Earnest, well-meaning parents just trying to get through the work week and feeling frustrated that their teenagers were making that so difficult.

And I think people, parents and non-parents alike, often look for easy answers for complex problems—and the internet is happy to provide those for them.

The image of the unseen damage Cassie is accruing over years of standing next to an X Ray is a particularly affecting image, especially when coupled with that she says software will eventually do it, and all that matters materially is the paycheck. Would you call this novel "anti-work?"

No, I wouldn't, but that's mainly because I'm leery of classifications like that. In general, I get uneasy

categorizing anything I write as explicitly political. I'm interested in storytelling above all else. I don't pursue a narrative to execute a theme or an agenda. A lot of times I'm not even concerned with having "a point." I just want to follow a story and see where it goes.

Of course, some people might say, "Okay, but pursuing that story is really just delving into your unconscious, which is filled with the signs and symbols of your belief system." (They might say it *exactly* like that.) And that's fair. It'd be disingenuous for me to say that the book doesn't comment on work. It does. It pretty clearly criticizes work that aims to dehumanize people, in ways both overt and subtle. So, I don't know if it's "anti-work" but it's definitely "pro-human."

There are people in the novel, mostly poor or working class, who are outside of its ire. The bearded man with the capped tooth (until he's revealed to be a plant from a rival ride-share app) functions as a kind of Diogenes the Cynic. Cassie's daughter, Maya, seems to get it, when she says, when asked what she wants to do when she grows up, is just "be Maya." What is the way out, in your opinion, beyond smashing our phones?

I think Simon proves that smashing your phone won't fix the problem. The boring answer is that the tech industry needs to be regulated. It won't fix the deeper problems, but it's a start. And it's one of the few bipartisan wins in this country.

But on a personal level, I don't think there is an easy way out. I think the real answer is you need to go the other way—you need to change your mind. If you believe that tech is intentionally trying to rewire your brain, then that should frame everything you read on a device. Why was this fed to me? And what is it trying to make me feel?

I'm glad the scene with Maya resonated with you. That's kind of the crux of the book, I think. I left teaching after the pandemic and struggled a little with that departure: for so much of my life, I had thought of myself as "a teacher" and assumed that signified things about my values, my identity, and how I treat others. Suddenly, when I no longer had that shorthand ("I'm a teacher!"), I was left wondering...well, am I still someone with values, an identity? Do I still treat others well? Was I ever that person? And I had to try and prove that to myself, outside of a readymade job title. It was difficult but ultimately really healthy; it forced me to confront who I am versus who I say I am.

Around that time, my wife and I were babysitting our nieces, and I helped the older one with her bedtime routine. When she went to brush her teeth, she was so focused on the task at hand. It seemed like there was nothing else floating through her mind—she wasn't worried about the next day's tasks or regretting something she'd said earlier. She was fully present for this totally mundane activity in a way that a lot of woo-woo adults wish they could be. And I found that really beautiful. She's not caught up in her professional identity or even her social one. She's just there. She's just herself. It's something I'm striving for every day.