

Fiction-Net Rating
Review by: Toni Watkins

Flashes and Specks by Mark Pogodzinski has enjoyably short chapters, which can seem to be a change of subject but at the same time, they connect. Although frequently rather dismal and leaving a feeling of strange emptiness, there are glimpses of happier times that you know and want the main character, Henry, to have.

Flashes And Specks begins with the suicide of Henry's cousin, Carter. The cousins use the comic book world to escape from their own worlds, comic book heroes being a prominent and occurring theme throughout *Flashes And Specks*, particularly the notion of hero verses villain.

Carter's presence is made known to Henry at various times in the book - it is obvious that the suicide has affected Henry. The story then jumps to Henry's adult life. He is a teacher who enjoys his job. He cares, possibly too much. For example, the bully (the villain), Henry wants to be the hero but in reality cannot be. Anyway, Henry has bigger issues - his wife has disappeared, his son goes to a 'special school' and a colleague claims he know the exact date the world will end. Has this colleague lost it or is he on to something? Henry's everyday world seems to be collapsing, so who knows?

Considering *Flashes And Specks* is such an emotional, character-based book, I found myself wanting to know more about the characters, especially Henry's son, Arthur. Often forgetting he is a young child and taking into account his unstable mental issues, I felt as though he was the more mentally stable character, very calm and rational.

Towards the end of *Flashes And Specks*, Arthur becomes stronger and seems to be overcome some of his issues. It is clear that although Henry loves his son, Arthur appears to have assumed the role of parent and become stronger, as his father becomes weaker. I was not initially expecting to like this book but by the time I'd finished it, I was converted enough to consider it almost a 'must read'. *Flashes And Specks* is just the right length for what it is but at the same time, it leaves you wanting more. Insightful, mind-bending and at times challenging to the point of being slightly depressing, *Flashes and Specks* will make you consider your own feelings on life's challenges. Surprisingly unforgettable.

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Recommended by Reviewer: Cecilia Lee, Allbooks Review International
www.allbooksreviewint.com

Title: *Flashes and Specks*
Author: Mark Pogodzinski

Complex! Unusual! Original! Maybe even lunatic!

This novel makes one suspend belief. It also holds the reader hostage: emotionally, psychologically and philosophically. Phew!

- * Emotionally, because it's an emotional roller-coaster ride. It gives a sense of normalcy, and yet at every corner, a dark and sad side makes you despair.
- * Psychologically, because I am captivated by the author's exploration of the psyche of his characters. They are ordinary people like you and me, going about the normal business of living, but in an out-of-control world.
- * Philosophically, because at the end of each episode (not chapter), I have to stop to take a deep breath, and ponder over the many faceted expositions of the characters personal and relational issues. Not only that, but it is juxtaposed with world issues, including the end of the world! At the end of each episode, I ask myself, "Now what? What flashes or specks of a super hero's life will I encounter next?"

The main character is Henry Kent, a grade 8 math teacher, who finds himself a confidante to his colleagues and students, who are filled with either raging or insane issues. His mentor has calculated the date for the end of the world and writes the formulas on his body. His wife disappears, re-appears and disappears again. (You have to read the book to find out if she will re-appear). He is father to a son who spends all his free time in their basement, building and moving his characters around a city, he builds using milk cartons and photographs he has taken from his daily life. No wonder Henry craves to be a comic book super hero to enable him to maintain control of his chaotic life!

The author, Mark Pogodzinski, is a high school teacher in Buffalo, New York. He has written comic books since he was eight and has had numerous short stories published. He has also won several writing awards. In this book he successfully weaves a fascinating tale and this is only his first published novel! Look out for more of his books; he is writing more!

This book is an excellent read for those who have the time to be intrigued or want to take the time to think and ask questions. It's for people who want to weigh every word, incident and to question every issue in this book. This novel will satisfy their thirst for questions and answers, and make them want to ponder even more! Highly

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Reviewed by Kam Aures for Rebecca's Reads

Before I even began reading the actual book I knew that "Flashes and Specks" by Mark Pogodzinski was going to be different. First, the book does not have chapters; it has "episodes." It has 35 of them to be exact with some of the episodes having Prologues or Epilogues.

Another element that caught my eye was on the page immediately after the cover of the book. On this page, Pogodzinski lists quotes from various reviews that he has received for the novel already. Intermingled among reviews from Amazon are fun quotes from various people in his life. For instance, one reads, "It's very nice, dear. No, I didn't read the whole thing. I really prefer mysteries set in Scotland.- Author's mother." I really enjoyed the author's sense of humor and my interest was piqued already after reading this

page.

The actual body of the novel is very unique and the characters are quite intriguing. Just to give a little snippet, the opening episode begins when the main character Henry is younger and is at the funeral of his cousin who had committed suicide. One of the aunts is talking about the cousin in a negative light. The cousin appears to Henry standing behind the aunt and proceeds to make her choke on the roll that she was eating. His cousin will continue to appear to him throughout his life. What follows in the rest of the book is just as unusual as the opening episode.

The storyline moves at a fast pace and the subjects and issues that Pogodzinski touches on are truly thought-provoking. The layout of the novel is original making for an interesting read. “Flashes and Specks” is a complex story which is philosophical and entertaining in nature.



Bettie Corbin Tucker
For Independent Professional Book Reviewers
www.bookreviewers.org

“Flashes and Specks” by Mark Pogodzinski is a mesmerizing, unforgettable, and totally unique novel which is written in thirty-five episodes, each one ending in an unresolved tease. The aforementioned adjectives also describe the characters whose dark sides slowly erode any illusions of sanity in their lives.

I found it a bit unusual that Henry Kent, the main character, is introduced as a young child in the past at a funeral breakfast being held for his young cousin Carter who had committed suicide. The unusual part is that Henry sees and converses with Carter, not only at the breakfast, but several times throughout his life.

Readers are quickly taken to the present where they meet Henry as an adult; he is an eighth-grade math teacher who seems to enjoy his job and shows concern for his students. He appears to be a devoted husband and father; however, his wife was apparently less devoted to him as she had disappeared without explanation. With the mention of medication that is being taken by several of the characters and their eccentric behavior, I found myself on edge, wondering who would take that next step into total madness. The comic book references and names of the characters are interesting, but it is the fast-paced movement of each episode and the definitive style of writing that hooks readers and keeps them asking for more. The author makes every word count and beguiles readers with his dialogue and original situations.

I read this novel all the way through twice. It is philosophical in nature and stirs up thoughts and emotions that made me continue to think about the episodes once outside of the bound pages. Readers will ponder about the fate of school bullies, the next war, and Henry’s son whose grandiose imagination leads him to create a city in his basement. It is made of milk cartons with cut-out photographs of people as its inhabitants. One woman disappears—just like his mother in real life. We do see Mrs. Kent return home with a tale of religion, only to leave again a short time later. Another interesting character is Henry’s long-time friend and mentor who is convinced that he knows when the world is going to end—the exact date—but the formula for determining the date makes no sense. Or, does it?

Other than conversing with the childhood friend of his ghost, I thought Henry was fairly rational, a person who wanted to be a superhero and save the world. However, as the episodes progress so do the questions regarding the teacher's state of his mind. As far as the other characters—was anyone truly sane? When the light of reality exposes the truth, I found myself thinking about the darkness of insanity as opposed to the darkness of sanity. Which is better?

I highly recommend this book as one that challenges the mind; it is also a fascinating read.



Reviewed on 11/23/2010 by ReviewTheBook.com Member Michele Tater

“Listen, my friend, there are two races of beings. The masses teeming and happy -- common clay, if you like --eating, breeding, working, counting their pennies; people who just live; ordinary people; people you can't imagine dead. And then there are the others -- the noble ones, the heroes. The ones you can quite well imagine lying shot, pale and tragic; one minute triumphant with a guard of honor, and the next being marched away between two gendarmes.” ~Jean Anouilh

Just in time for the Christmas holiday season comes a story of comfort and joy, guess again. Even if the book “Flashes and Specks” takes place close to Christmas it is far from being a holiday classic.

“Flashes and Specks” begins at the funeral breakfast for a troubled young man, Carter, who decided to try once more to end the anguish he was suffering. Carter was the cousin of Henry Kent, who is the main character of the book. Let me try and sum up the life as Henry knows it. When Carter was still alive they were comic book buffs. In reading them they found that characters, although you wanted them to stay the same, changed as their writers changed. In the present time he is a 8th grade Math teacher who hopes he is shaping young lives as he teaches his formulas and solutions. Henry's wife has left him with no word as to why and even if she plans on coming back, he is hopeful she will. He has seen his father go through the same situation and his mother, after a time, returned home. He has a young son, Arthur, who takes random pictures of people and adds them to the “city” he has made out of milk cartons and a vast amount of imagination, in the basement of their home. Playing in the background of Henry's life are the rumors of nuclear bombs and of World War III, as seen on news reports and heard of the radio. Even his teaching mentor is having delusions of having the exact date of the end of the world by using random numbers in a secret formula he has developed.

This book will lure the reader into the psyche of a man who craves for a hero to fix things and make the villains go away. On the surface Henry seemingly lives a normal ordinary life, but underneath its really full of complex relationships and circumstances that are out of his control. The book is a fast read and I recommend it to adults who want to read a present day story that shows how life can get in the way of real life. But I would not recommend reading it during the holidays!



Reviewed by April Sullivan for Reader Views

“Flashes and Specks” is a novel unlike any other I have ever read. This truly unique and intriguing book tells the story of Henry Kent, a math teacher who has a kid with strange hobbies, a wife who can’t stay at home, and fellow teachers with issues. But that is not what the book is about at all. These characters are just placeholders. Similar to the photographed cutouts of people that Henry’s son Arthur makes for his city created of milk cartons and tape, down in the basement.

This book is about much bigger issues than the people who create or participate in them. It is about school bullies, religious cults, relationships, death, the end of the world - all the things that tend to keep us up at night. In fact, this book disturbed me just enough that I knew better than to read it at night. I would only pick it up in the mornings, when my mind was fresh and ready for the emotional battle. I consider this high praise for a book to be able to set fear in me, without resorting to horror or gore.

“Flashes and Specks” is written in 35 episodes. What does that mean? Could it be like television episodes? Each one is a cliff hanger to make you want to read the next one. There are definite references to comic books and superheroes and villains. So that could be it. Or could it be like episodes of insanity? Short bursts that ebb and flow when someone has not taken their medicine or when the world becomes too much to bear. This is very likely too, as madness was settling in on many of the characters.

One phrase in this book that kept being repeated over and over was “I can't tell you.” Henry’s principal could not tell him the details of a case where a student tortured another student, and then a teacher beat a student. Henry’s wife could not tell him why she left him or why she came back. Henry’s son could not tell him what will happen in his city in the basement. And maybe I am trying to say I can’t tell you about this book. You will just have to read it for yourself.

All I can say is that “Flashes and Specks” made me think, and made me want to read it again.



More Reviews For Flashes and Specks

“Somewhere between Hemingway and DeLillo is Mark Pogodzinski and his Flashes and Specks. This is the story of a broken superhero floundering gracefully to save his broken family and this broken world. In the schools, in the hospitals, in the homes, and on the TVs, we look on as major scandals and minor triumphs punctuate Henry Kent's life and the lives of those around him. Pogodzinski's book is structured in concise, arresting episodes. Its pace, then, is comicbookesque, but the magic of this read is in the prose: sparse. pointed. not as much as a comma wasted. The scenes breathe naturally, and the reader is often left lingering alone with a phrase or an image at the end of an episode in that way that makes the experience a highly introspective one. In this way, the world Pogodzinski creates is not unlike those in the work of Raymond Carver. It's cynical but warm, existential but engaging, heartbreaking but peaceful. Flashes and Specks will leave you wondering for days if you could save the world...or if you even should”

-Amazon.com (1)

“From the 1st few pages this book was riveting. Filled with a smart, dark sense of humor - the plot is quick paced (I couldn't put it down!) and brilliantly laid out. The characters offer a bit for everyone, and made me laugh at times I probably shouldn't have. Kent is well crafted and the perfect lead for this sordid tale. I enjoyed every moment and highly recommend the book.

-Amazon.com (2)

“I did not really know what to expect going in (with so little familiarity with the author's work) but I know I got more than I bargained for. By the second chapter I was hooked. The character development is excellent and the pace perfect. I found myself vested in all of the action and all of the characters. I thought Pogodzinski masterfully intermingled broad themes with every day actions and every day people. Good and evil sparred throughout shining a light on actions of heroism hidden in the mundane and the mindblowing.”

-Amazon.com (3)

“For fans of thought provoking fiction, Flashes and Specks presents a world well known and easily understood, a world of work and family and the everyday, but then the author shows the reader what lies beneath that world. What happens when the things we're sure of become less sure? The style keeps the reader interested, presented in short episodes, similar to a sitcom. The book has many of these allusions to modern life. The chapters reference comic book heroes and even the names are drawn from comic book characters, a point of interest. It is very reminiscent of Cormac McCarthy, who is an obvious influence on the author. Each episode ended with a cliffhanger, another original aspect of the book. The time the author took with each episode and each word is evident, there is always a double meaning. The plot is driven by the characters and the reader has real feel for them, but also is left with questions as the conflict reaches its climax.”

-BookHitch.com

“Endlessly entertaining and intriguing, Flashes and Specks is a unique and highly recommended read.”

-Midwest Book Review

"It's very nice, dear. No, I didn't read the whole thing. I really prefer mysteries set in Scotland."

- Author's Mother