



The Fourth Wall

Walter Jon Williams

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Dagmar Shaw got out of the game... and into the movies.

Sean is a washed-up child actor reduced to the lowest dregs of reality television to keep himself afloat. His life was a downward spiral of alcoholism, regret, and failure... until he met Dagmar.

Except Sean has secrets, dark even for the Hollywood treadmill of abuse, addiction, and rehab. And Dagmar is a cipher. There are dark rumors about her past, the places she's been, the things she was involved in. People tend to die around her and now, she wants Sean for something. A movie, she says, but with her history, who's to say what her real game is?

The Fourth Wall Details

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Cissa says

I liked this novel in a lot of ways.

The POV character, Sean, rather weird but personable and believable. The secondary characters, too. And the plot is pretty tight yet convoluted, and ends up mostly making sense.

(Mild spoiler here, though it's in the first 100 pages) One of the foci of the plot rests on Sean's guilt for "killing" a friend. And yeah, the friend died. However, I think if 2 people drunker than lords decide to drive vehicles, and while trying to avoid a collision one of them dies- well, this is not at ALL the same as premeditated murder. Culpable? oh, yeah. But it's not premeditated murder (like others were getting up to). So that struck me wrong, especially as a motive.

Still, a fun twisty plot with good writing and characters.

And I think I will put blocks on the cameras my various devices have. :)

Stuart Reid says

In my eyes this is the best of the Dagmar Shaw series (so far?) even though here we really follow Sean Makin in first person and Dagmar is relegated to a bit player, albeit an important one.

Sean is a washed up ex-child star, appearing in Celebrity Pit Fighter to get exposure and struggling with the fact that he's done some pretty horrible things in his past in order get recognition. He's been a struggling actor for a long time - not helped by the fact he is skint , his nest egg from his successful sitcom when he was a child wasted by his parents... both now in hiding.

When Dagmar Shaws production company offers him the starring role in a new production, to be played out using augmented reality and serialized he cannot resist, and soon he gets caught up in a conspiracy involving egotistical directors, billionaire investors, and Shaw herself.

I really enjoyed this novel because it continues the modern techno-thriller feel of the Dagmar Shaw books but it delves into the seedy side of Hollywood too. Sean is an interesting character and his adventures with both friend and foe throughout his latest production kept me enthralled. It was a page turner for me, and that's always a good sign!

With its themes of fame and the transient nature of celebrity mixed with a good old fashioned mystery I found The Fourth Wall an interesting and enthralling read. YMMV.

Rebecca Stevenson says

The third installment in the Dagmar Shaw series -- kind of, since it follows an entirely new character.

Dagmar and the usual crew are involved, but the first-person narrative pushes them far to the side. I hate to say it, but I think this is his weakest book in quite some time. I loved it as a character study of Sean and of show biz, but I could not buy the plot.

First problem: Four psychos is two too many. I wasn't convinced by most of the supposed motivations involved. Having the "big bad" be some guy I don't even remember being introduced to and have no reason to care about was a let-down.

A much bigger problem for me was that Dagmar has had the law of unintended consequences get all up in her business to a deadly extent before this; we're supposed to believe she's had the attack of blinding naivete required to think the plot as revealed is a good idea?

The cyber posse get some screen time, but as walk-ons; there isn't a game for them to play, as in the last two books. That made me a bit sad.

The main character, Sean Makin, is interesting, not least because he is the only protagonist I can remember liking *less* over the course of the novel. By the time he confronted Joey, I wouldn't have cared if he'd gotten killed. I spent some amount of time trying to figure out if Sean could actually be the killer. He's really pretty disturbing, and I'm planning to re-read the book to study his portrayal. Narcissistic personality disorder, indeed.

I find myself hoping that all of this is actually a setup for another book in which Dagmar will have to deal with the Frankenstein's monster she's just created, either in the form of the network or Sean himself (or both).

Hildo says

Walter Jon Williams goes from strength to strength. This third Dagmar book is written from the viewpoint of a largely failed actor who's given the chance to star in a Dagmar-produced movie/game/what else... tie-in. Combine this with murders, espionage and crazy parents and it's funny, thrilling and a fulfilling read. It makes me want to re-read the earlier books.

Sharon says

I really enjoyed reading this. The interconnected story of the former child star, his almost Lebowsky-ish inability to comprehend what's going on, the futuristic gaming/movie world, religious cults, and the shadowy realm of international terrorism (or something else?)... it was fun.

I had no idea that one of the characters was a reoccurring lead for W J Williams until I went to log this book into Goodreads. Notable also is that the folks who did know that, didn't seem to like this book as much as I did. Well, taken as a stand-alone, it's thoroughly enjoyable reading. I have to go back now and read the others!

Mike Ratner says

This why WJW is not a more widely popular writer. He is just so uneven. This third book in the series reverts to the detective story format of the first, but now projected on the luridly and scornfully depicted world of Hollywood. The book's "Big Idea" is underwhelming, and when it undergoes a revision during the ending, the new explanation just seems weird and contrived. And the detective story threads resolve themselves in extremely unsatisfactory fashion, so that one is left wondering, what all the fuss was about. But on the positive side, there is plenty of fuss and nail-biting action, and there are some magnificently-written episodes in the book, which reminded me of why I've been such a fan of WJW over all these years. Three and a half stars, really, but rounding up.

Dan says

The Fourth Wall is another thriller that may be billed as science fiction, but barely right to be in that category (there's some "couple years away" technology on show here, and a sort of underwhelming "big idea" at the end). That's okay though, this is a pretty good read, mostly because the main character is not a stellar human being - but you want to follow his story anyway. The story is centered around a series of murders in the entertainment industry, told from the point of view of a former child actor. Not what I would normally read, but it holds together pretty well, and I enjoyed it.

So this book closes the loose collection known as the "Dagmar Trilogy" - but the problem is that this one doesn't have enough Dagmar. She's here, but it's not her story, and she's relegated to an outside supporting character. This certainly doesn't ruin the book, but I was disappointed, as the previous two books really set up a nice relationship between the reader and the Dagmar character. (Dear author: who says this has to be a trilogy - bring back Dagmar!)

These were the first books I've read of Jon Walter Williams, an author who looks to be both prolific and diverse. Even though some of his decisions have left me scratching my head, I do think he's a talented writer with good ideas to spare. I've got another, more traditional science fiction book of his waiting in the wings, that I hope to get to this year.

Finally, I second the notion of another Goodreads reviewer who posited that, following the first book *"This is Not a Game,"* the next two books should have been called *"This is Not a Revolution"* and *"This is Not a Movie,"* respectively. Oh well.

Tim Hicks says

This just squeaks into SF. If Williams hadn't done other stuff that clearly IS sf-f, this one might be on the thriller or mystery shelves.

I hadn't read the previous two Dagmar books, but this one seemed to stand alone OK. Indeed, from the blurbs of the first two, I'm in no hurry to read them.

So what is this book? A character study of Sean's progress? A satire of Hollywood? A thoughtful examination of how mass-media technology can be used for social engineering? A murder mystery? A

thriller? I'd have to say it tried to be all those at once, and that's its weakness.

Williams knows how to tell a story, but as I put this one down I felt unsatisfied. So that's what they were up to? That's who did the killing? Meh.

I agree with those who couldn't buy the "I killed Timmi" part of the plot. Too bad, because Williams leveraged it pretty hard.

Cottage cheese wrestling? OK, I'll remember that. And I liked the explanations/demonstrations of what a director brings to a movie.

A decent page-turner, but in the end, if it was intended as a lightweight, it has succeeded.

Paul says

Interesting to see a Dagmar book from the perspective of someone who is *not* Dagmar, and it's fairly clear why this was done by the end. Similar to Dagmar, Sean somewhat teeters on the edge of likability, which isn't a terribly bad thing in my opinion.

Overall, this book wasn't terrible, but it was somewhat uninspired. It doesn't really make much of a point (maybe in the end there's a somewhat misguided attempt at appealing to technocratic fallacies, but that's almost an afterthought), and the mystery aspects of it are somewhat weak. When I got to the end of each mystery, it wasn't a "Eureka!" moment, it was more of a "Hmm, I guess that explains all the facts..." moment.

2.5 of 5 stars

Randy Bennett says

Williams has written a novel of the near future. The plot lines intertwine and lead you through an interesting novel. Williams has plotted the story well, combining movies, reality TV, video games, augmented reality, and Hollywood. From time to time you may find it hard to put this book down. In my case I read it in several days and learned quickly not to read it in bed before turning out the lights.

Sean Makin, the main character, grows on you quickly. A former child star, not a has-been trying to hang on to a career, he is in love with acting. So when he gets a chance to star in a new production he leaps at it. He does everything he can to hold onto the role, even when people around him begin to die. So in addition to his acting, Sean tries to find out who the killer is, before the killer kills him.

Overall, a very good and engaging book. Worth a read and repeated re-reads.

Alan says

The "fourth wall" is a theatrical convention, the invisible barrier that, for most actors in most productions,

keeps the audience separate from (and invisible to) the players. To "break the fourth wall," to step outside character and address an audience directly, is another theatrical convention, one at least as old as the wall itself. Everyone in this media-literate time probably already knows that much. But you may not know that *The Fourth Wall* is Walter Jon Williams' third entry in the growing Dagmar Shaw series, about a near-future ARG (Alternative Reality Game) entrepreneur. (The first two are, in order, since you'll want to read them first anyway, *This Is Not A Game* and *Deep State*, both of which I greatly enjoyed).

In *The Fourth Wall*, Williams never actually breaks the fourth wall, though—not in the sense of addressing the reader as himself, anyway. He does break with one self-imposed constraint from the first two books: this one's really not a Dagmar Shaw book. Oh, she's featured *in* it, and is in fact a prime mover behind the action... but Dagmar is neither the narrator nor the viewpoint character for this installment.

That honor now goes to Sean Makin, an actor of a type all too common in Hollywood's history: the wildly successful child star whose finances were misappropriated by his greedy parents, and for whom puberty was an audience-killing disaster. Sean's down on his luck... he has been reduced to wrestling around in cottage cheese on *Celebrity Pitfighter*, which is precisely as degrading as it sounds. Dagmar Shaw shows up, but in Makin's world she's a peripheral character, except in one specific regard: what she can do for Sean Makin.

Sean (often known as "Luggage Boy" from his signature sitcom catchphrase) is fond of addressing the audience, but he always does it in character, and often through his blog, "Heavy Luggage" (geddit?). As in real life, the comments that show up on Sean's blog are often illiterate (and kinda funny), but sometimes they're cogent and germane to the post, or plot. Williams occasionally even includes comment spam for verisimilitude, which I thought was a nice touch.

Sean's hard to like, though. I'll admit that I've been spoiled by Wil Wheaton, a real-life child star who's turned out to be an accomplished writer (both online and in print), a well-regarded adult actor, a family man and a pretty decent guy all around—the kind of success story that doesn't happen to kids on stage nearly as often as it should. Sean Makin blogs too, just like Wheaton, but he is not nearly as accomplished a blogger... or as self-aware a person, especially at first.

He does get better, though that's not (as far as I'm concerned) the most interesting plot arc in *The Fourth Wall*. What I found more interesting was the way what starts out as Dagmar Shaw's attempt to enter Sean's world gradually becomes Makin being drawn into Shaw's. Excitement, danger and even a little hopefulness duly ensue.

I picked up this novel on the strength of its predecessors, and I was not disappointed. Now I want to see where Williams takes Dagmar Shaw next.

Craig says

This third Dagmar Shaw is quite different from the first two; it's told from the viewpoint of Sean, an actor (and cottage-cheese wrestler, as well as a -very- unreliable narrator), who is starring in her latest production. It's more of a detective thriller (readers of the first two novels will remember that Dagmar's associates tend to die a lot), than anything, on the surface at least, the sf element being more implied and off-camera. It's a complicated and layered story (which seems to inspire a lot of parentheses and commas and semi-colons here), but does finally wind itself into an intelligent and satisfying conclusion of the immediate events. Sean isn't really a nice character at all and the reader can't help but wonder how accurate his portrayal of some of

the events (and Dagmar in particular) is; I'd like to be able to read a further volume someday and see how she and her (surviving) companions turned out.

Lauren Smith says

Sean Makin is a washed-up actor. As a child he was a household name; now he's getting beat up and humiliated on the crappy reality TV show, *Celebrity Pitfighter*. His big break comes when he gets an interview with Dagmar Shaw, who made a fortune in the gaming industry making "Alternate Reality Games". Dagmar has now turned her attention to film. She's got a big budget to make a revolutionary new kind of movie, and she wants Sean as its star.

It's exactly what Sean was dreaming of, even though the production is beset by danger and tragedy from the very beginning. When Sean arrives for his interview with Dagmar, he's almost run over by a hulking black 4x4, and that's just the first in a series of attempts on his life. Soon, people on set start getting killed. Is it because of Dagmar? Her personal history is stained by terrorism and the deaths of friends in shootings and bombings. She also has a reputation as a woman you should never fuck with. Then again, some have noticed that all the victims were at a very memorable party six years ago, on the same night that the hostess, Timmi, was killed. Her husband Joey (whose career collapsed after his wife's death) is directing Dagmar's movie, which seems like more than just a co-incidence. Or do the deaths perhaps have something to do with Sean, who for years has kept secret the fact that he was the one who killed Timmi? But regardless of motive or murderer, nothing is going to stop this movie from being made, not when it promises wealth, fame and power to those involved.

Read the full review on my blog *Violin in a Void*.

Sdluvingit says

Walter Jon Williams' third Dagmar Shaw novel, *The Fourth Wall*, started slow but turned into a fun read. The first introduced us to the top ARG designer, the second had her involved in an Arab Spring style revolution (right before the real one), and this one has her producing an interactive movie*. This is told from the movie lead's viewpoint and includes intrigue and murder of course. I found the narrative took a bit getting used to but after the first few chapters it wasn't a problem. There is a mixture of blog posts and scene narrative so you need to pay attention to section titles. The main character was a washed up child star and you get a memoir of his life in the frame of making this movie.

*Personal note- they mentioned in the book that the first interactive movie (a style called Kinautomat) was created in the late 60s and shown at a world's fair. I saw that movie, *One Man and His House*, at Hemisfair in San Antonio in 1968. I remember voting on the different plot turns throughout the movie. There were some great movie experiences at that fair.

Guy Haley says

Running on an engine of great characterisation and wit, *The Fourth Wall* mercilessly skewers Hollywood's star machine.

Sean Makin is a washed up child star with cheating parents, a dirty secret, and a desperate need to be adored. Among his problems is a physical condition that makes him appear somewhat freakish. Condemned to the lowest rung of the star ladder – appearing in reality TV show *Celebrity Pit Fighter* – when he's offered the part of extra-dimensional alien Roheen in an international, serialised movie, he leaps at the chance, only to find murder and conspiracy are his wages.

Williams is at his best with Sean's world. Sean's an amusing guide to the tragic life cycle of child actors, with desperation cutting his residual arrogance nicely. Williams has a fantastic feel for life of set, and the passages describing the movie business and its impact on people are the book's most effective parts.

The actual plot, a twisty murder mystery, is fragile, the denouement more so. And it's not really SF. It depends on your definition, we suppose, but aside from slightly more advanced hardware and software and a couple of passing references to augmented reality, this is contemporary satire, right down the line.

But then, exploring the unrealised potential of existing tech is Williams' forte. Although *The Fourth Wall* is not as pertinent as *Deep State* in this regard, the plot gives a reasonable enough frame to hang a bunch of excellent characters and observations from.

Alexandra says

This is the third book in Williams' series about Dagmar Shaw (the others are *This is Not a Game* and *Deep State*). I guess therefore this review may contain spoilers for those two books, like the fact that she survives.

This one is not like the others because Dagmar is not the main protagonist. Instead, she moves onto the sidelines, becoming a somewhat shadowy, sometimes even fearsome, mover and shaker. I was a bit surprised by this change because Dagmar had worked so very well in the others; she's a character I developed a great rapport with. To see her from the perspective of someone else – someone to whom she is a stranger, and quite strange – was disconcerting. It does mean that someone could very easily read this without having read the other two; having read the first two it meant that I had a greater trust than Sean, the narrator, could have in her. Which distanced me slightly from Sean, and meant that I kept expecting great things from Dagmar.

Sean is twenty-something and, as the novel opens, a contestant on *Celebrity Pitfighter*, which is exactly what you're thinking it is, with the added bonus that every round, there's a surprise handicap. When Sean enters the ring to face Jimmy Blogjoy (!), he steps into a ring covered in cottage cheese. Our Sean qualifies for this edifying programme because he was a child star on a show called *Family Tree*... a rather long time ago. Since then, he's done bits and pieces, but the reality is that 'washed up' is a kind description. He is hampered partly by a condition called pedomorphosis, which he describes as meaning that "while the rest of [his] body has aged normally, [his] head has retained the features of an infant" (p34). Cute in a kid, decidedly odd in an adult. This is, however, not a problem for the part that Dagmar Shaw wants him to audition for.

In the first two novels, Dagmar was running Alternate Reality games: games that interacted with reality once you'd signed up for it, that worked on a mass level and created huge flashmobs, and which occasionally had real-world implications. With this novel, she has moved to Hollywood and is looking to make her first feature film, although not quite in the way that Sean and his agent expect. The plot therefore revolves around the making of the film, which has two parts: first, the outrageous plans Dagmar has for making the film and changing the very experience of film-watching; second, the dramas on and off set between cast and crew – both of which suggest Williams has some experience of Hollywood and its weirdness.

If this were all the novel offered, it would still be very entertaining. But twisted throughout the novel is a rather curious reflection on the realities of life for Sean, has-been child star. One of the awesome techniques Williams used in previous novels is forum threads between people interacting in Shaw's AR games. There's not quite as much scope for that here, but it's replaced by entries from Sean's blog - because really, what's a has-been celebrity going to do but blog about his has-been-ness? They come complete with comments, from trolls to supporters to spam. In these entries, Sean reflects on how he got to where he is, and particularly about how he was screwed over by his parents. It's a neat way to get into Sean's head a little bit more.

There's also the fact that someone appears to be trying to kill Sean, which becomes quite the mystery for him to unravel. Williams doesn't overplay this aspect, but weaves it too throughout the main narrative.

As mentioned above, I thought I was getting another Dagmar novel, so there was a level of disappointment when she didn't turn out to be as present as I'd hoped. Sean is not as likeable as Dagmar; he's close to being alcoholic, and while he's not quite the ruthless Hollywood shark that some of his friends are, he is well aware of how to play the game, and is generally willing to do just that. I found his cynicism and pessimism somewhat disheartening, if realistic. Happily, though, he's not completely repellant. He's a good friend - usually - and his devotion to acting as a craft, as a lifelong passion, is a joy. Most of the characters do not get particularly fleshed out. Sean's agent is a sleaze and a huckster; many of the showbiz types on the periphery of Sean's world are not quite caricatures - they're individual enough to miss that - but neither do they have much impact. Even Dagmar is shadowy, occasionally looming large and at other times disappearing into the background.

Finally, it's important to discuss the SFnal nature of the book. It's very much what I think of as 'tomorrow fiction': the technology is only just out of reach (probably), and the world as a whole is intensely, sometimes miserably, recognisable. The main technological advance is in the Alternate Reality goggles and other such 'ware, which allows the user to see and interact with content that has been posted not just on the net, but in the 'real' world'. Sadly, most of the time AR seems to be used for ads and porn (see? recognisable and miserable). It's the sort of SF which doesn't always feel like SF, but then a character uses technology or mentions a recent event that *sounds* plausible, but definitely hasn't happened (...yet...).

It's a fast read, it's a well-structured and pacy read, and it's a lot of fun.

Tasula says

I had read and enjoyed one other WJ Williams book (Implied Spaces), so I tried another, and enjoyed this one too. The narrator is a strange looking, washed up, grown up famous child actor, fallen on hard times, when suddenly he is offered a lead in a movie to be shown as a serial through internet subscriptions. He can't believe his luck and accepts the role- winds up working with a director, other actors, etc. he used to know- but he has some close calls with a black SUV, and some of his friends start dying. The whole story is very clever, full of movie, social media and tech ideas and tidbits, full of heart and sadness. I really liked it and will pick up another WF Williams book soon.

Carrie Slager says

I was introduced to The Fourth Wall by reading Walter Jon Williams' Big Idea essay over at Whatever.

Intrigued by the idea behind the novel, I bought it on pure speculation, as I seem to do quite a bit when I read The Big Idea articles. After all, it's how I found out about Feed, to name one of the best examples. And much like Feed, The Fourth Wall has a killer opening, which is not entirely appropriate for all readers.

"When you spot someone sitting at the beach wearing a headset for Augmented Reality, or wearing AR specs on the bus, or smiling quietly in the back pew of the church with his video glasses on, what do you think?

I'll tell you what you think. You think he's watching porn."

This sets the tone for pretty much the whole novel: cynical, witty and a bit dark. It's also hard to classify this novel because just when you think you know what's going to happen, the plot takes a sharp turn and you're left mystified once more. You really won't be able to predict the ending either, which stays true to the dark, cynical atmosphere that Williams maintains throughout the novel.

Sean Makin is a washed-up child actor and even though The Fourth Wall is set in the future, he offers a lot of insight into the cutthroat world of Hollywood. You see both the glamorous side and the incredibly dark side that no one wants to talk about. Sean is the perfect character to tell a story like this because of his dark past and his highly cynical attitude towards life and acting. He has a very sad past that adds a lot of layers to his character, making him a wonderfully three dimensional character. There is no doubt in my mind he is a memorable character.

After enjoying The Fourth Wall so much, I have a feeling I'll be reading and reviewing a lot more Walter Jon Williams novels in the future.

I give this book 5/5 stars.

Michael K Martin says

Some really good books take me three weeks, and some take me a week. This is not a measure of literary worth or my enjoyment with the book, it just means that it reads into my brain that much easier. Walter Jon Williams is from New Mexico. I grew up in Flagstaff. His syntax pours into my brain like an IV of lactated ringers into a thirsty soul.

The fourth wall is a Dagmar novel, and I love this tangent. Walter Jon Williams is a versatile writer, a writer who can take on a genre or subgenre with an ease that drives more rigid writers to frustration and envy.

Cyberpunk, Historical Novel, Space Opera, Slipstream, Thriller, Contemporary intrigue,(hell, the dagmar genre is still undefined)William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, and WJW are it. I like it. I wish I could give a cogent review, full of insightful previews and recapitulations, and maybe I will later. I liked it. nuff said. John Jakes probably hates his ass.

The third one in the Dagmar series, this one is different in that it focuses more on the lead character and his redemption. He is a washed up child star with a genetic condition that makes his adult head look like a Klingon's.

Suddenly, after licking his wounds after a particularly rough episode of "Celebrity Pit Fighter," he is

contacted by "Great Big Idea," Dagmar's company, and he is invited to audition for a role in an interactive multi-branched cinematic adventure. Intrigue, self-aware comedy, and balls-out craziness ensues.

Walter Jon Williams brings a contemporary immediacy into anything he writes, and this story lives and breathes in your brain. Set in a world that begins the day after tomorrow, all of the characters are familiar to anyone who has happened to watch an episode of TMZ, walking through a world where current technology is puffed into something marvelous and mind-boggling.

Solid extrapolation, amazing dialogue, and realistic action (WJW is a multi-rank black belt). This was a great book. Next please?

Brick says

Not quite sci-fi, not quite techno-thriller, this story builds on the background of the two previous Dagmar stories, and it is fun to make contact again with Dagmar's team. They make the cyber stuff and tech stuff easier, and lets WJW concentrate on this tangential story, a funny and often sad look at the seamy side of the Hollywood entertainment industry and the child actors whose lives fuel this bonfire, often to their great regret. Sean, the protagonist, is the archetype of a child actor, great success and self-developed skill, and amazing and distressing selfishness that allows him to survive his exploitation by his parents and the implosion of his career, until he gets the role of a lifetime, during which he, as required by the script, grows his character into an appealing person, some of which growth seems to rub off on Sean. Lots of detail on the business of acting, developing character, the personalities of people in the business, very often funny, suspenseful, entertaining. A large part of the suspense is in trying to guess who is trying to murder Sean, who is murdering others in the production, and why Dagmar is making this movie.
