



Zanesville

Kris Saknussemm

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WHO IS ELIJAH CLEARFATHER?

Futuristic bioweapon or good old-fashioned messiah? Reincarnated ex-porn star or mutant information-age revolutionary? The man who awakens in New York City's Central Park with no memory of his identity and the enigmatic message FATHER FORGIVE THEM carved into the flesh of his back may be all of these things and more.

Taken in (and then expelled) by a group of freedom fighters battling the soul-deadening Vitessa Cultporation, Clearfather is a stranger in an even stranger land. Following tantalizing clues that point to the gnomic Stinky Wiggler, and pursued by murderous Vitessa agents, Clearfather embarks on a surreal odyssey of self-discovery across an America that resembles a vast amusement park designed by some unholy trinity of Walt Disney, Hunter S. Thompson, and Hieronymus Bosch.

Accompanying Clearfather is an unforgettable cast of characters—including Aretha Nightingale, an ex-football-playing drag queen; Dooley Duck and Ubba Dubba, hologram cartoon characters sprung outrageously to life; and the ethereally beautiful Kokomo, whose past is as much a mystery as Clearfather's own.

By turns hilarious and deeply moving, a savage, fiercely intelligent satire that is also a page-turning adventure and a transcendent love story, *Zanesville* marks the arrival of a brilliant new voice in fiction.

Zanesville Details

Date : Published October 11th 2005 by Villard (first published 2005)

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Author : Kris Saknussemm

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From Reader Review Zanesville for online ebook

Sheba says

I was most impressed with the ideas on expansion, capitalism, and power in the book than I was with the writing or the use of what has become a cliche reliance on "Geek Love"-ish cutesy-cryptic characters.

There's something a bit wanky going on with the pacing in the book, as well, particularly with the action scenes. Where the pace should be faster, it's slow; where it should be slower, it's fast. It's particularly maddening when reading the (predictable? overly extended? overly complicated?) ending, which feels like an extra leg sewn on to fireman's dummy.

Having said that, "Zanesville" is worth it if only for the spot-on perspectives of America that Saknussemm skillfully provides. The best example is a lamentation (prayer?) that should be repeated every day before we sleep, and the likes of which I hope to see more of in not only Saknussemm's work, but in other writers' works: "Forgive us our insatiable need for stimulation and abundance. Forgive us our impossibly high opinion of our supposed generosity and our merciless disregard for anything but our own prosperity. Forgive us for seeing you--the war-torn, weary, diseased, and deserted people of the world in your billions--as simply billions--indistinguishable cartoons of despair. Forgive us for turning the promise of America into a commercial virus that threatens to destroy the other cultures and indeed the whole environment of the earth.

'Shit,' people in the throng said. 'That's pretty heavy.'"

Ray Francis says

No one does Jeremy Lethem better than Jeremy Lethem. No one does Jonathan Carroll better than Jonathan Carroll. Bless his heart, Saknussemm does try, though. On the whole, though, this book is full of occasional flashes of originality strung together by uneventful absurdity.

Robert says

Requires intense concentration that I did not have. Could barely finish. Be prepared for deep social commentary. Every moment a symbol.

I had a moment of brain freeze when Trump and Hillary showed up. This was written 2005!

Tim says

As I was reading Kris Saknussemm's debut novel *Zanesville* , I kept wondering, "In what part of the universe does this guy's mind reside?" I know it's an entirely different plane then mine -- but that's a good thing.[return][return]If forced to pigeonhole *Zanesville* , you would probably categorize the book as science

fiction. But that is an understatement -- it defies categorization. How does Saknussemm describe the book? As "techno-theological post-American monster vaudeville." Now maybe you have a glimpse of why I was wondering what universe his mind inhabits.[return][return]*Zanesville*, which Saknussemm plans to be the first in a proposed series he calls The Lodemania Testament, actually starts in 1838 with the birth of Lloyd Meadhorn Sitturd, "one of the most neglected geniuses in history." As a young boy, Sitturd is whisked up into a tornado on July 4, in Dustdevil, Tex., only to be returned to the exact spot unharmed some 20 minutes later. On July 14, 1913, after a life as an inventor, businessman, recluse and cult leader, Sitturd again disappears in another tornado in Dustdevil, this time never to be heard from again.[return][return]Suddenly, we are in a post-apocalyptic America, where a man we will come to know as Elijah Clearfather awakens in New York's Central Park, not knowing who he is but believing he was deposited there by a whirlwind. This is an America far different than Sitturd's or ours. It is run by the Vitessa Culporation. The California coast has disappeared in an earthquake called Bigfoot and the new center of "culture" in the western U.S. is LosVegas, Nevadafornia. McDonald's has been converted to McTavish's, which has replaced the hamburger with haggis ("sheep stomach with your choice of filling.") Modern technology consists of cyberneering, genetainment and neurotecture. America has survived (?) a Holy War waged by Al-Waqi'a. Much of the country is roamed by bandits, some of the *Mad Max* variety, with the cannibals among them distinguished by the Mickey Mouse flags they fly.[return][return]Balance of review at <http://prairieprogressive.com/?p=686>

Rick says

The American-born, Australian-educated Kris Saknussemm has created the most original novel of the year with this wildly imaginative near-future satire. Explaining exactly what goes on in this dense book – outside of a doctoral dissertation, which someone no doubt will write – is very difficult.

The amnesiac Elijah Clearfather wakes in New York City with the enigmatic message FATHER FORGIVE THEM F carved on his back. He joins a group of rebels led by Aretha Nightingale, a linebacker-sized drag queen, who are fighting the tyranny of the globally dominant Vitessa Culporation. The freedom fighters uncover Elijah's powers. He sings pieces of old pop songs, causing reality-altering events to occur: People cease to exist, injuries heal, items disappear. The band also discovers clues to Elijah's origins. He is either the reincarnation (or clone) of a nearly forgotten 19th-century messiah or a 20th-century porn star – or possibly both. Fearing Elijah, the group expels him. The rebels leave him with a map pinpointing possible leads to his origin. Thus begins his trek across a very different America. As they say, "And then things got weird."

Saknussemm deftly and artfully exposes an underbelly of American society. At one point, Dooley Duck, a rebellious cartoon holographic image who demanded to be anatomically correct and later married Ubba Dubba, a cartoon orangutan, declares, "Forgive us for turning the promise of America into a commercial virus that threatens to destroy the other cultures and indeed the whole environment of the earth." Nothing is sacred. Religion, big business, pop culture, science, love, sex, and nearly everything else falls under Saknussemm's satirical stroke.

At times sobering and humorous, the tale of Elijah Clearfather represents a 21st-century reality with a unique clarity and vision. Volume One of the proposed Lodemania Testament, *Zanesville* is a zany, lyrical tale that, while a complete story, leaves the reader hungry for further experiences with Elijah Clearfather.

This review originally appeared in *The Austin Chronicle*, November 25, 2005.

Eileen says

It took a very long time to get into this book. It was too much science fiction for me to understand it until quite a while into the book.

Janet says

I found this book randomly in the library and was attracted by its cover and description. I give this book a full 5 stars because I have never been able to connect with a book so well. Along with adding words to my vocabulary, this is the first book I really paid attention to. The authors imagination is almost so close to being able to be a reality that it makes you think twice maybe three times. I have shared and will continue to share this book with other people or at least the ideas that have blossomed in my head. This is basically the book that is turning me into this kind of genre, if it could even be placed in one. I really believe that those who do not enjoy this book just don't understand it. Hopefully if you choose to read this, you will take it with an open-mind.

5 stars for making me this "this is why I love reading" the entire time.

zxvasdf says

This is a book of big ideas. Really big ideas that question the nature of reality and humanity's role in the scheme of things. It starts off surreal blend of cyberpunk then scatters into a philosophical and metaphysical treatise. If I had to define a genre for Zanesville, I would call it Mainstream Bizarro. Strange as hell, but not too strange for the average reader.

In the sometimes plodding, non-plot contribution scenes and impossible conjectures you can see the raw, unpolished nature of Saknussemm very much alive in his prose, but the sheer magnitude of his imagination more than makes up for any shortcomings. You can see much love for his work, drawn from a bevy of writers: Stephen King, Tim Leary, Michael Moorcock, M John Harrison, Steve Aylett, Thomas Pynchon, the Wachowski brothers. I might be wrong about some of them, and have missed a ton more influences through my sheer ignorance, but what Saknussemm had done is draw the ideas and qualities of his inspirations and sewn them into a single, bizarre quilt that is entirely Saknussemm.

The sequel (or prequel? It's hard to tell at this point, but I'm leaning towards prequel) The Enigmatic Pilot is a much more polished, clearly realized immersion of the Psyche Wars (Yes, which is the name of this series). What's great about these two books, they throw up so many self-referencing questions that yield answers that are actually secret agent questions. So you've got these two books, and you're madly cross-referencing and trying your damnedest to understand things a little bit more clearly than you think you do. And... hoping that it isn't all.

Stacia says

Mmmm, it's ok, but after about 100 pages in, I find myself not reaching to pick it back up & continue reading....

Carolyn says

What is this? My first thought was Dr. Who meets Rocky Horror Picture Show with some compassion thrown in. I did enjoy it a bit more than expected. I am thankful a friend gave it to me. Four days of weird reading fun mixed with religious and political questions hidden in the story. Wow!

Lyric Powers says

I love this book so much that I've read it five times now--two of those times aloud to friends over the phone over the span of a couple of weeks. They liked it too, in case you're wondering.

It caught my attention in a library a few years ago. Being from Ohio, I was curious what a book named for the city of Zanesville could possibly be about and the blurb on the back of the book immediately sold me. How could I resist "a surreal odyssey of self-discovery across an America that resembles a vast amusement park designed by some unholy trinity of Walt Disney, Hunter S. Thompson, and Hieronymus Bosch"?

Saknussemm is not simply a novelist, he is a creator, a master of language. He has not only done a masterful job of weaving a completely convoluted, though not altogether unbelievable, tale peopled with endearing characters--he has appealed to my great love of language and philosophy and created a work of art full of potent quotables. When I read, I tend to underline my favorite parts of a book, things that I feel are quotable for one reason or another, and my well-thumbed copy of Zanesville is riddled with pen marks.

Zanesville is packed with humor and wit, deep insights, punctilious puns and wordplay, delightful cultural, political, historical, literary, and musical references, conspiracies and inspiracies, amusement parks and bemusement parks, cults and resistance movements, fascinating futuristic technology and holographic characters, the finest modes of travel (a Wienermobile, a flying haggis blimp, a genuine Indian Motorcycle), spies and masters of disguise, fear, confusion and real human tragedy. Everything you could ever ask for in a novel. It is at once hilarious, deeply moving, horrifying, and uplifting.

I've been recommending Zanesville to everyone I know since the first time I read it and I will continue to do so for many years to come, I'm sure. I really feel that almost anyone could find something enjoyable in this book.

Sarahjane says

So much fun! I loved it!

El says

I initially picked this book up because Zanesville! I've been through there on the Greyhound bus, and I have this weird fascination with it even though I've never really spent any quality time there. Just the fact that Zane Grey was born there and... well, that's really it. I mean, who doesn't want to visit a town with a completely uninspired name like Zanesville?

The second reason I wanted to read this book was because of the cover. That's some fantastic cover design going on.

I had never heard of this book previously, nor have I ever heard of the author.

I do not know what I just read.

It's this sort of bizarre science fiction satire thing? That is similar in writing style to Kurt Vonnegut or Tom Robbins or even (in a way) David Foster Wallace. It's a story of a whole lot of different things going on, but what's of personal interest is that a good chunk of the story takes place not in Zanesville as one might expect considering the title - but in Pittsburgh, PA.

But being a bizarre sort of science fiction satire novel, it's not a Pittsburgh that we really recognize, but we sort of do. I mean there are references to the Three Rivers Stadium, but also to Macropotamia, this funked up bizarre version, I think, of Kennywood. There are a lot of little details that I'm probably reading into way too much, but that's part of my schtick; like the fact that Elijah Clearfather (the character the story follows who wakes up in Central Park with no memory or idea of who he is) has a pearl in his pocket, which then I suddenly remember Zane Grey's real first name was Pearl, but is that a real connection or just something I'm making up because I'm filling holes in my brain?

There's a lot of activity, and I found that actually sort of distracting. Here is another book that I felt the author wasn't really sure which direction he wanted to go in, so he went in all teh directions! which made it hard to read. But this is also not my typical genre, and someone with more experience in bizarre science fiction satires might get more out of it.

I think I will give this to my brother to read.

There's really so much going on that it's hard to really discuss any one point of it without giving something away or sounding batshit crazy. Let's just say there is a long sequence involving holographic characters coming to life and also a giant sloth named Calamity Jane, or CJ for short. I mean, really. So instead I'll focus on the author.

Who is this guy? There are rumors, I understand, that he's not even one guy, that he's a combination of people (like some of those guys I mentioned above) who all wrote together under this one pseudonym. I like that idea a lot, but doubt that there's any reality behind that. Or that this is the pseudonym of David Foster Wallace himself. Meh.

In any case, I enjoy that no one really knows who this guy is, even though there are pictures of him up on Wikipedia and all. It makes me think of that Law & Order: SVU episode that was kinda sorta inspired by

those shades of grey books, wherein the hot young woman who supposedly wrote them (and subsequently gets raped... twice) was actually just a model because the actual author was a frumpy college professor who would have died before having her own name attached to such trash because of her scholarly reputation.

Except it's really not like that at all.

But the point is it makes you think about some of these authors we read. Are they really who they say they are? Who *is* this guy with such a name as Kris Saknussemm that lives in Australia but knows a ridiculous amount of trivia and information about Pittsburgh?

Really, though, I think people are just so hard up for more writings by some of those other authors that they just hope they wrote under this fake name.

The story is a bit distracting in that there is a *lot* of name-dropping. Every major player in popular culture gets a shout-out at some point in this novel, whether it's Hilary Clinton Interdenominational Airport (I think I got that right from my memory), or Bill Cosby Center (before the scandal!), to Oprah Winfrey being... well, Oprah Winfrey in a larger-than-life way.

Such a weird story. I can't quite wrap my head around it all, and this is coming from someone who read and enjoyed Dhalgren and Ice Trilogy. But I went in without having any real expectations, so I can't say I'm disappointed. I would definitely at least check out another Saknussemm book should I come across one.

Saknussem. What a name.

E.J. Stevens says

I had some high expectations for this book, since I usually enjoy off kilter novels, however I found this one a bit lacking. It seemed to me that author Kris Saknussemm was trying too hard to shock the reader (through often unnecessarily graphic descriptions) and not enough effort on keeping the plot cohesive.

Rhonda Graser says

This book will blow your mind. Kris Saknussemm writes so visually it's amazing.
