

This Is Your Book*

By

Peter Cherches

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... Peter Cherches' "This Is Your Book," does a lot of work in such a short amount of time. The main character would be, if my math is correct – which it very well may not be – thirty-two years older than me at the time of "writing" this piece (basically the generation before mine), they are very well versed in pop culture, and have spent many years digesting the commercials and ads forced upon us. In the manner of 200 words or so we're painted this very subjective presentation of an identity, a unique self-characterization of digression and explanation.*

For me, ability to control this information, the ability to craft a sharp and steady character study is a talent worth mentioning from a short short.

I think that where this piece's strengths lie is how Cherches has really drawn this very fine line between what this narrator doesn't want vs what he does want. In a world where this speaker has always known what he wants or does not, what he wants to know or does not, the book of his life has been presented to him and he has found the information accurate. There is a longing about our futures that is created in the knowledge that we have of our pasts, and if a random in a corporation can fill in the details of your life, then what has your life truly been?

For 400 words, this piece offers a very precise glimpse into the moment we always have to be reminded of: that not only do we not know our futures but that our predictabilities in life can oftentimes leave us unsure.

That uncertainty coupled with the craft within this piece easily makes, "This Is Your Book," worth your time.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)

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I'd never previously bought anything from those late-night TV infomercials. I never bought anything from Ronco or its sister brand Popeil. No Pocket Fisherman, no Steam-a-Way, no Veg-o-Matic. I never bought the *100 Most Beloved Classical Masterpieces*, or whatever it was called, the one with the "Polovetsian Dances" by Borodin that you might recognize as "Stranger in Paradise," advertised by John Williams, the tall British actor, not the composer/conductor, not the classical guitarist, nor the novelist, author of the cult classic *Stoner*, but the John Williams who played the police inspector in *Dial M for Murder* and was Sebastian Cabot's replacement on the TV sitcom *A Family Affair*, as Nigel French, brother of Cabot's Giles French, both called simply Mr. French by the two little kids, one of whom, Anissa Jones, the actress who played Buffy, died of a drug overdose at age 18, a tragic Hollywood tale. I never bought a Chia Pet or a George Foreman grill, and I certainly didn't buy whatever cosmetics Ali McGraw was pushing. Even if I was into makeup, I could never forgive her for delivering that awful line in *Love Story*, "I'm a pancreas." I never gave a red cent to Sally Struthers and her Christian cohorts for the starving children in the third world.

But there was one thing I just couldn't resist. It was 1987, and I was 31 years old. Red Skelton was the spokesman for *This Is Your Book*, a personalized book of life. You sent your name and date of birth, and they'd make this book for you that had your entire life, from birth to death. Most of the people who gave testimonials seemed pretty old, so I figured it would be pretty easy to make books for them, but I was still relatively young. Even back then 31 wasn't middle-age. I had plenty of years ahead of me, or at least I hoped. Would they get the rest of my life right, or would it turn out to be a ripoff?

When I received my book, I verified that the first 31 years of my life were accurately represented. Over the ensuing years, I've been fascinated to discover that everything the book had predicted about the course of my life has come true.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: *If I remember correctly, I got the idea to write a piece about something unexpected being sold on a late-night infomercial and took it from there. I grew up in the heyday of the extended infomercial, before they turned into home shopping networks.*

While I write in a bunch of different styles, the underpinning of much of my work comes from a triumvirate of masters of anti-realism: Kafka, Borges, and Beckett. You could say the premise of a personalized book of life for sale on TV is Borgesian in nature with a side of Kafka.

The first paragraph is in my riffing, associative mode, what the late fiction writer and critic Don Skiles called my solos, where I'm most interested in the rhythms and energy of the sentence. All those old infomercials and related cultural detritus just came tumbling out.

AUTHOR BIO: Called “one of the innovators of the short short story” by *Publishers Weekly*, Peter Cherches has published three volumes of short prose fiction with Pelekinesis since 2013, most recently *Whistler’s Mother’s Son*. His writing has also appeared in scores of magazines, anthologies and websites, including *Harper’s*, *Flash*, *Litro*, and *Fiction International*. His latest book is *Masks*, a small collection of pandemic stories from Bamboo Dart Press.