

## “REPO MEN” (Book Review)

Written by Allan Dart

Friday, 19 February 2010 19:19

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“The first time I ever held a pancreas in my hands, I got an erection.” That’s the darkly humorous and attention-grabbing first line of Eric Garcia’s REPO MEN, which first saw publication as THE REPOSSESSION MAMBO last March and has now been rereleased by Harper as the retitled REPO MEN, to coincide with the film adaptation hitting theaters March 19 from Universal Pictures.

The story is told in the first person by an anonymous author (named Remy and played by Jude Law in the movie), a former Repo Man now hiding out and living in an abandoned hotel. We’re introduced to him on the 115th day of his fugitive status, and REPO MEN’s narrative consists of his typewritten account of who he is and how he ended up in this dire situation. Garcia delineates his chronicle in a Kurt Vonnegut-like fashion, in which the narrator’s story jumps back and forth in time, shifting from the past to the present and vice versa at a moment’s notice, meandering through his memories, life and marriages. While on the surface this storytelling style may seem capricious and impulsive, Garcia’s decision is a good one and appropriately fitting for a character who has major problems seeing the big picture, lives in the moment and breaks everything down into tiny pieces.



For clarity’s sake, I’ll review the nonlinear REPO MEN as chronologically as possible (although I was tempted to go avant-garde and try otherwise, but feared the potentially disastrous and incomprehensible results). Like its anonymous protagonist, REPO MEN’s setting is a nameless city in an unspecified near future where artificial organs (called “artiforgs”) are the latest and most sought-after technology. You can imagine how many people are eager to replace unhealthy body parts and extend their lives, but the hitch is that these transactions are rentals, not sales, and if you fall behind in your payments to the artiforg manufacturers, the Repo Men are sent to find you and retrieve their property. Let’s just say that these guys are good at their job—and their customers don’t usually survive the procedure.

The narrator and his best friend Jake work for the Credit Union and are two of the best Repo

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Men in the business. They served in the African War together, and that’s where they realized that they could impassively kill people—which makes them prime Repo material. The duo’s motto is “I’m here to do a job,” and that’s how they treat their often bloody and brutal duties. In their minds, they’re not killing people; they’re simply taking back merchandise. These people signed on the dotted line and have reneged on their agreement. They made a deal and can no longer pay. And it’s the Repo Man’s job and responsibility to return the “property” back to its rightful owner.

One of the book’s nice (well, not-so-nice, really) qualities is that the lead character is a bastard. He’s cold-hearted, apathetic and selfish. But while his professional life is going especially well, his personal life is a wreck. The narrator has been married and divorced five times: Beth, Mary-Ellen, Melinda, Carol and Wendy. The reasons they listed for divorce: jealous, inattentive, absent and incontrovertibly self-absorbed. One of his wives once told him, “You can’t put things together. Everything is pieces to you.” His former therapist diagnosed him with a knack for deconstruction, someone who can’t interact with people and sees humanity as a dysfunctional collection of its representative parts. The narrator also has an estranged son named Peter.

If you think the narrator sounds like a pretty disagreeable and miserable person, wait till you read about him at his job. One client tries to make his payment but comes up a mere \$200 short, and the narrator wastes no time extracting the man’s lungs—*at the bank*. And that’s not even close to his most despicable act.

But then something unexpected happens that changes the narrator’s life forever—and more importantly, it makes him realize that people can change, even him. After a defibrillating accident on the job, he wakes up with an artiforg heart in his chest. When he’s able to return to work, he finds he can no longer be a Repo Man. His hand trembles and shakes. So he stops taking jobs and eventually quits—which means he can no longer make his artiforg payments. Which means a Repo Man is going to be coming after him. Which means that the narrator has to go on the run.

And that’s where we find #12 on the Credit Union’s Most Wanted List—hiding out from the Repo Men in that abandoned building. That’s also where he meets #1 on the Credit Union’s Most Wanted List: Bonnie. She’s 74 percent (!) artificial, and the Repo Men and Jake are closing in on both of them.

“Lucky me. I lost a heart and found a soul.” That’s the narrator’s journey, and that’s (no pun

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intended) the heart of Garcia’s novel. The narrator is someone who has been constantly sacrificed for, but who has never sacrificed himself. He’s someone who only saw the job, the organs, the property, but never the person. And he’s someone who convinced himself that he didn’t care about anything or anyone, but who, deep down, is afraid to be alone and more afraid of connecting with his emotions. But being on the other side of the coin, someone with an artificial organ, isn’t the only reason why the narrator has a change of heart. And that’s where Bonnie comes in.

Don’t panic. While REPO MEN does have sentiment, it’s far from maudlin, sugarcoated slop. There’s a dark side to this tale, as well as black humor: Harry the Heart and Larry the Lung are the Credit Union’s mascots. In one war flashback, the narrator recalls a soldier who was killed in a tank because he was whacking off to a skin mag and accidentally pulled the ejection lever.

REPO MEN is hopeful and jaded, violent and sad, blackly comical and optimistically soulful. And while you might assume that the narrator will reach the end of the story a better and wiser person than he began, Garcia adroitly and successfully uncovers and exposes a wide spectrum of emotions—which is particularly impressive considering the aforementioned nonlinear and circuitous narrative. The book is a quick and entertaining read with a splendid ending, and this edition concludes with “The Taming of the Mambo,” in which Garcia explains the origins and years-long development of the tale from a 13-page short story to a novel and screenplay. Like its narrator, REPO MEN turns out to have a heart and a soul—but it’s also delightfully sardonic and enjoyably cynical along the way.