



Out of My Skin

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Los Angeles. A would-be movie reviewer, looking for romance, takes an assignment to write a magazine article about celebrity look-alikes. After getting to know a Steve Martin impersonator, the writer decides to undertake his own process of transformation and becomes not Steve Martin but a version of him—graceful, charming, at home in the world. Safe in the guise of “Steve,” he begins to fall in love. And that’s when “Steve” takes over. Set in the capital of illusion, this is a story of one man’s journey into paradise—and his attempt to come out the other side.

Out of My Skin Details

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From Reader Review Out of My Skin for online ebook

Beth says

A dude whose name might be Jack moves from New York to Los Angeles. He's lonely. He says "yes" to every invitation extended to him as a means for meeting people and figuring out his place in his new life situation. Boy meets girl. Boy dates girl. He also meets a Steve Martin impersonator and becomes unusually fascinated with the lifestyle of a celebrity impersonator. He decides to "become" Steve. Once he achieves ultimate Steve-dom, he tries to stop and realizes he can't. Steve Martin's Steveness has possessed him. What next?

I casually read this book, which wasn't difficult to do, because it's short and written conversationally. And even though the book explores some philosophical concept of being and self awareness and it probably *deserved* to be read with more care, I didn't give it my all because it was a relatively easy read and the message didn't resonate with me.

To make a silly analogy, it's like being single and meeting someone who really knocks your socks off both physically and emotionally and yet you can't seem to commit to them because you're still working out some of the baggage from your last romantic entanglement and/or focusing on school, your career, etc. and so you sleep with them a couple times like it doesn't mean anything and as soon as it starts to get a little intense, you start ignoring their calls, even though you feel like your future self may end up paying the ultimate price of loneliness for blowing it with this person.

And so depending on what's going on in your life at any given moment, you may or may not be open to any given message from whatever source it may come from. While reading this book, I recognized that there have been certain moments of my life where I would have enjoyed this book but that right now was not one of them.

So I'm giving it three stars.

Jack Silbert says

This book seemed like a natural for me: Guy becomes a Steve Martin impersonator. Quirky, literary fiction, right? Well, I have to say, I was pretty disappointed.

It did make me think a bit about protagonists. I read a lot of books with snarky, neurotic heroes. You know, guys like me. But I also enjoy books with narrators who I'd *like* to be, at least vicariously. This protagonist was neither. On the surface, the main character is a lot like me: movie-obsessed magazine writer named Jack who moves from New York to L.A. and is trying to meet girls. But I kept thinking, I would not want to hang out with this dude. He's boring, passive, shallow.

So maybe becoming Steve Martin will spice things up. But it absolutely doesn't. The key thing about Steve Martin is that he's funny. Very, very funny. And this book is not at all funny. It's as if the author is only familiar with elder-statesman, art collector. *Grand Canyon* instead of *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid*.

And then he tries to get all deep. Except the character (or the author?) isn't a very insightful person. So what

we end up with is warmed over New Age babble as the character wanders through PG-rated *Eyes Wide Shut* settings and a few too many descriptions of food preparation.

I didn't hate the book. I liked "hanging out" in Los Angeles and I appreciate what Haskell was attempting: an exploration of identity and what's left when you strip away yourself. I feel like this could've been something pretty special. But instead I'd recommend reading Steve Martin's *Born Standing Up*.

Larry says

Achingly simple but profound prose that elevates the everyday to the sublime. The ending of this slim volume sooo earns the title that I am left in awe. This is an author in gentle but firm command of his material.

Jess says

This book is supposed to have some kind of lesson, I take it, that it is better to be authentic even if it makes you worse off in some respects. Or, in any case, that is the 'moral of the story' that the author basically underlines and highlights throughout the whole book, to the point that it becomes as annoying as when adults used to tell you to 'be yourself' as if that gave you any deliberative guidance. When the main character is being 'Steve' there is a vague unease, and when he is 'himself' we're supposed to feel more comfortable even if the actual consequences of this are seemingly worse.

But oddly, I found myself taking the opposite lesson despite the obvious intention of driving this 'after school special' message home. The main character is whiny and neurotic, so he starts acting like Steve Martin, who is awesome, and in these moments the Jack/Steve mix seems like a pretty interesting and engaging character. I say, he ought to cultivate that! Why the main character feels the need to give up on Steve is a mystery to me, the revision seemed like an improvement so the book fails to make the case for the value of authenticity, even though that's ostensibly the whole point of the book.

Mark Flanagan says

I really thought I was going to like this novel. The whole Steve Martin impersonator thing hooked me, and I was further enticed with the narrative voice that Haskell creates for his narrator. However, I quickly grew tired of the narrator's neuroses and the author's repeated mining for thematic support. [full review]

Kara says

You'd think a book about a Steve Martin impersonator would be more fun than this one.

Jennifer says

I was looking at reviews of this on-line & came across the description of this book as a *brilliantly muted second novel*. I think that is a most awesome description of this book. (And so much more poetic than the description I was batting around in my head which was along the lines of 'insistently bland'.)

The basic plot of the story is Jack Haskell is a writer who breaks up with a woman and decides to move from New York to L.A. When he gets there he interviews a Steve Martin impersonator and something about this impersonator strikes a cord with Jack - and when Scott (the impersonator) picks up and heads for Arizona, Jack begins to step into the role of his Steve Martin-ness.

This book just drips with identity crisis and for some twisted reason reminded me of Virginia Woolf a few times. (Which makes me want to reread *To The Lighthouse* again to find out if there is truth in my resonance.)

I had a hard time making myself pick this book up and read it even though it could easily be read in one night. Is it because this book spoke too well to the feeling of terrible isolation that lurks in my soul? Does it strike that chord of not really knowing who I am a little too loud? I think so many of us are confused about who we are and the nakedness of this stripped character was a little hard to face. I don't know. It's without a question a good book - but I can't say I enjoyed it.

Daniel says

I really wanted so much to like this. It had been recommended on the Very Short List daily blurb and it looked very interesting. And while it wasn't terrible, it wasn't the quality work that I was hoping for.

It's the story of a loner, a writer, who becomes attracted to the concept of being somebody else ... or at least pretending to be somebody else.

While we get no sense of the character actually being in any way like Steve Martin, we do definitely get the sense that he feels he has captured many great essences of being Steve Martin. In this way, the book is just fine.

The problem, as I read it, is in the style. Haskell's style is very conversational, but not as in two friends meeting on the street conversational. Imagine going to a party and seeing some guy sitting in the corner whom no one is talking to. He looks intelligent and insightful and so you strike up a "hello." Two hours later, he has droned on about nothing in particular and you wish you could get away and you regret having said hello. It is that style of conversational.

Haskell's main character is not only so bland that the only way he can imagine to be somebody worth noting is to be somebody else, he is the sort of person who watches a Houdini-wanna-be (another person with no real identity of his own) and is disappointed when he survives his stunt.

If you are uncomfortable in your own skin, perhaps this reaches out to you. In some ways, I can identify. I think I was 'here' some 20-30 years ago. But I've moved on. Haskell needs to do the same.

Ruby says

Meh, not my style.

Sara says

Fantastic. Got to go back now and finally read *American Purgatorio*. Totally recommend this.

Stop says

Read the STOP SMILING interview with *Out of My Skin* author John Haskell:

In John Haskell's first novel, *American Purgatorio*, the main character Jack, who is strikingly similar to the author, drives from New York to California searching for his wife, Anne. As with all great stories, the journey is about more than the search for one person, place or thing — it's about remembering why finding someone, someplace or something is important to begin with.

You can tell by looking at Haskell in conversation that he not only knows people and how to read them, but also the motivations for the things we do in life. Like some being looking down on us from space, Haskell (with whom I share no relation) traces our behavior in his novels like we trace the movements of the night sky on charts.

Read the complete STOP SMILING interview with John Haskell...

Justin McFarr says

With a feel of the L.A. novels by Nathanael West and Chandler and John Fante and Steve Erickson - and a feel wholly original and wonderful - Haskell's 3rd book is full of personal angst and self-hatred and discovery and the weirdness of the city. It is an exploration of the self, a venture into who we are, who we would like to be, and ultimately what we choose to embrace about ourselves. Meditative, with the relationships and acquaintances people in L.A. make in their late twenties/early thirties before marriage and children and a steady job: a life before you have people who need you and depend on you and before responsibility to others is your main concern. It's a hard life, but it's also a life with freedoms that are afforded to one that never come again. It is a time of youth, and time, when rumination can become as much a full-time occupation as anything else. John Haskell captures this, and much, much more.

Matt says

Here's the problem, obviously, with saying what a novel is "about." This is a novel about a man who, having met a man who makes money as a Steve Martin impersonator, starts to take comfort in impersonating Steven Martin himself as he goes about his everyday life.

I have no interest in reading that novel, really. But what a novel is about is never what is really is. Isn't a novel is always communication with some human consciousness or intelligence? The more "aboutness" it has seems to me irrelevant (or even detrimental) to whether it's any good.

So what is the conversation with *Out of My Skin* like? Affectless, with no depth or specificity to the observations—the stilted, stoned self-obsession of the depressed person comes through in the narration, and if that sounds like a criticism, it isn't exactly. The voice is a strange brand of laconic which I thought in the middle might be slack, but then I recognized the kind of dread it provoked in me. The narrator is certainly on an island of his own actions, which neither the reader nor the people whom the narrator interacts with have any insight into before they happen. This is both off-putting—the narrator's loneliness is *not* sympathetic—and transfixing; the narrator's loneliness is as abject as your own.

The book's drama plays out watching the narrator's mind chew on itself, though a variety of recurring ideas and objects (mostly plots of old movies). This doesn't suck I think because we see the same objects/ideas reworked and revisited, and they're interesting in themselves; and because of the lack of affect. The narrator describes the struggle with crippling self-consciousness in a clinically neutral way, without weak theorizing—it is as though, every time he recounts some plot of a struggle for an authentic identity in some movie or book, he really, really believes that he only talking about that movie or book, not reflecting on his own crisis.

In the end, it resolves as a loveless love story. All in all, there's a brand of honesty here that I think is interesting. I don't know if I would tell other people to read this book, but I will certainly think about it. I think of narrative voice as being produced through a kind of extremity, and there's definitely something extreme about *Out of My Skin*.

Jenny Robinson says

I absolutely LOVED this book. Maybe because I kept getting frustrated with the main character, who while trying to loose himself, he finds "Steve". I related more than I like to admit to the main character. Not liking where you are, or who you have become, to realize that being someone else is no better. this book has such great moments, where you love that he is not afraid of the awkwardness, or where you are mad cause he just can't see what is in front of him.

It starts out with a writer, who is writing about a Steve Martin impersonator. But he realized that you don't need to look the part, it is all in the action. So he adopts "Steve".

Absolutely loved this, so understand that some just wont get it, but I surely did. Awesome.

Jon Frechette says

I liked this book for several reasons:

1. It examines the ways in which we use performance and impersonation in our daily social interactions.
2. There's a sequence involving a Houdini impersonator at Santa Monica Pier that is both haunting and morbidly funny.
3. The ending is satisfying.
4. As I recall, the penultimate chapter takes place at a taco stand that's down the street from my apartment.

I would consider revisiting this book in a few years.
