



# Palladio

*Jonathan Dee*

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## **Palladio** Jonathan Dee

In her small upstate New York town, Molly Howe is admired for her beauty, poise, and character, until one day a secret is exposed and she is cruelly ostracized. She escapes to Berkeley, where she finds solace in a young art student named John Wheelwright. They embark on an intense, all-consuming affair, until the day Molly disappears—again. A decade later, John is lured by the eccentric advertising visionary Mal Osbourne into a risky venture that threatens to eviscerate every concept, slogan, and gimmick exported by Madison Avenue. And much to John's amazement, one of the many swept into Osbourne's creative vortex is the woman who left him devastated so many years before.

## **Palladio Details**

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Author : Jonathan Dee

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# From Reader Review *Palladio* for online ebook

## Bart says

This book came so frustratingly close to greatness. It remains an exceptional novel, still. But it did not fulfill its potential.

Blame Part 2. Halfway through *Palladio* Jonathan Dee does something fiercely original with his plotting. It complements perfectly his third-person narrative. And the reader braces for something euphoric and original. And then Part 2 begins in the first-person voice of the novel's least-distinguished voice, and a feeling of disappointment that almost grows into resentment happens.

How could Dee do this? There are two possibilities, probably. The first is that he chose safety. Why ruin the novel's two original characters – Mal Osbourne and Molly – by putting either in the first-person? Why not let the bland John character tell of his pain with the two most-original characters by using his voice? But that raises a question of narration that leads to the second possibility. Why use the first-person at all?

Unfortunately, the answer may be autobiographical. The middle 100 pages of this book have the too-sincere feeling of autobiography, as if Dee, himself, wanted to take vengeance on some extraordinary act of scorn perpetrated on him by a waifish lass in NYC.

The wonderful news is that Dee forsakes the first-person in Part 3 and finishes the novel well as he begins it. The bad news is that Part 2 is still there, compromising what precedes and follows it.

Part 2 really is that bad. In the name of being some character's laptop journal entry, it uses shabby changes of tense and the usual tricks of expressing pain. As if it were lifted from one more creative-nonfiction class of memoirists with no original experiences to which they might attribute their predictable torment. There's no need for it; had Dee wished to put the reader too close to one character's pain, he could have done it with excerpts or dialogue or something else. The first-person bit was poor.

So much of the rest of the book was so fantastic, though – the inevitable ends to which a baby-boomer couple drifts (its delusional self-consumption becoming mere delusion), the dissenting college professors, the rigidly disapproving religious convert, the creative folks in the ad agency and all their petty rebellions, the postmodern concern with art as reality, all of it – that you just wish Dee could have a second chance at Part 2. He wouldn't need to change the story itself one bit, just the narration of it, and he'd have the best American novel since *Sabbath's Theater*.

But finally, and perhaps crucially, Dee, as novelist, didn't quite understand his Molly character well enough to write her. He realized this at a certain moment, it seems, and went for the vividness of her victim's pain instead of her pathos. An understandable choice, but still a lamentable one.

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## Lobstergirl says

Sometimes a novel gives you that "not so fresh feeling." Of course this one dates back to 2002, so perhaps I'm being unfair, but its musings about the intersection between art and commerce, in this case advertising, were inch-deep. Appreciative references to a tiger shark preserved in formaldehyde ("I felt I was in the

presence of something powerful") smell stale, and perhaps books with passages like

Since their incompetence in the kitchen was so general, they tried fancy things as readily as the most basic: vichyssoise, steak au poivre, crème caramel. The latter was doomed from the start, since Molly thought "egg white" meant the white part of the egg, i.e., the shell. John made fun of her; she picked up the phone, ordered a pizza from Domino's, and bet him that she could make him come twice before the pizza arrived.

should have a warning sticker on the cover, maybe "Stupidity".

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### **Lauren says**

I picked this book up after reading "The Privileges" by Jonathan Dee. I almost never read books by the same author back to back, but I enjoyed "The Privileges" so much that I just wanted to immerse myself in another Jonathan Dee novel, and I found myself enjoying this book just as much. He is my kind of writer. I love his style, his craft. He focuses on emotions and the subtleties in human interactions, and this book held an additional interest for me in that I found the relationship at the heart of the story very compelling.

That said, I -- like many of the reviewers on Amazon ;) -- did not understand or enjoy the last ~10% of the novel. It wasn't even that I didn't like the way the plot wrapped up... Stylistically the last 10% was very different from the rest of the book, and I just didn't understand why Dee switched modes and what he accomplished, if anything, in those last pages. The first half of the book was written in the third person, and it mainly followed the lives of two characters whose lives intersected, separated, and intersected again. The next 40% of the book was written in the first person by one of those characters -- an interesting shift in point of view, the rationale behind which I'm not entirely sure I understood. It almost felt like Dee was experimenting with the voice in which he wanted to tell the story, and he decided he liked both... or that for a certain part of the narrative, the third-person voice worked, but for another, he wanted to zoom in and write in the first person. The final tenth of the book was a third-person round-robin between all of the characters, major and minor -- interspersed with some sort of "message" motif that was clearly related to advertising, one of the major themes of the book. I realized in this last part of the book that the minor characters that I had found interesting enough during the rest of the book were not interesting enough to hold my exclusive interest for the pages that we followed them exclusively. And ultimately I didn't find that anything interesting -- personality-wise or plot-wise -- developed in this last part of the book.

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### **Molly Jones says**

As one of my most beloved professors, I was anxious to see Jon Dee's words of wisdom in action. How do we define ourselves? What is individuality and how is individuality reflected in our commercial culture? These are some of the underlying questions of *Palladio*, a tightly woven novel that explores the dissolution of the nuclear family, the convergence of sex-violence-advertising-exploitation-meaninglessness, and what it is to be an American in the 21st Century.

I was impressed with Dee's balancing of several suspenseful plots, all of which subtly presented a far deeper meaning than their face values first suggested. In trying to understand the motivation of Dee's many flawed

characters, I found myself asking larger questions. What leads someone to seek solace in anonymous sex? Is that character's psychology representative of a growing minority (majority?) of America?

My one disappointment was with Dee's ending. I'm all for E.L. Doctorow. I enjoy my fair share of cryptic prose. But why choose to end this otherwise brilliant novel with pieces of meaningless commercials? Okay, actually, I can answer that last question. I get it. But for entertainment's sake, and as a reader, the unresolved ending was a big disappointment.

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### **Anna says**

So good!

A brilliant X-ray of dysfunctional families and (hence) dysfunctional relationships, reminiscent of Franzen, embedded in a gripping and well-written story that explores the nature of art and advertising, condimented with a streak of love story.

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### **Maya Lang says**

This is my second Jonathan Dee novel, following the glorious Pulitzer-finalist *The Privileges*, and I find myself wondering why he isn't a household name. His prose is masterful, and he writes with a humanist's compassion and a satirist's sharp eye. His characters are vivid, his dialogue pitch-perfect, his observations trenchant. His novels are funny yet wise--they make you laugh but make you think.

*Palladio*, a satirical look at the world of advertising and the intersection of art and commerce, made me wonder if "Mad Men" creator Matthew Weiner consulted it when thinking about the show. Though set in contemporary America (and not in the '50s), it follows pitches and campaigns and the sometimes hokey, sometimes brilliant insights of ads. I loved the elusive figure of Molly Howe, her intersection with the very different John Wheelwright, and the story of *Palladio*, a start-up firm meant to revolutionize advertising. I love how these stories join and together serve as a meditation on the search for meaning. That rare novel that manages to be provocative and ideologically rich without sacrificing or simplifying its characters, *Palladio* is an absorbing, beautiful read. I suspect not all readers will "like" its ending, but who said the artist's job was to please?

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### **Petra Kruijt says**

I'm not sure what to make of this. Jonathan Dee is definitely a gifted writer, and I thoroughly enjoyed around 3/4 of the book (not necessarily the first 3/4, though most of it). The 1/4 I did not like was the way the plot took over from the characters, which were so strong in the beginning of the book. I also had a hard time understanding what was so wonderful about Molly. She has so little going for her and yet all these men fall for her the instant they meet her. The descriptions of her appeal remain just that --descriptions-- instead of bringing her to life and making me fall for her myself. John Wheelwright on the other hand is interesting: he's not the type of guy you'd admire or want to be friends with, yet he seems true to life.

So I guess that's all I have to say about it. Not sure this could be considered a review. I'll be reading *THE PRIVILEGES* soon because I like Jonathan Dee's writing and it promises to be an interesting read.

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## John Kaye says

Halfway through I'd have expected to give this three stars or less. It seemed trite, but interesting. Then the faint echoes of a life became stronger—they were there before—and I felt a muc stronger connection. Strange feeling.

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## Brett says

Palladio begins as a couple of different plot lines that converge about 150 pages into the book. It a book about a guy in advertising and the interesting relationship he develops with one of his bosses, and a book about a girl who comes from an unhappy family and is unable to make emotional connections because of that. The two stories merge, separate and merge throughout the book in sometimes surprising, sometimes farfetched and sometimes over-the-top events. The girl's antics wear thin toward the end of the book and to me she moved from being a sympathetic character to a tiresome woe-is-me type who I hoped would never be happy.

Dee's writing was clean and entertaining, but for a book whose story depended so much on avant garde advertising I would have liked to read about more examples of the advertising. It would have been nice if he would have described the end product of the work the artists were doing instead of just saying they were doing work. That's the major deficiency in the book.

Overall, it's an entertaining book and the first one I read by Dee. I liked it enough that I'll go back to him in the future.

385 pages.

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## Suzie says

what a total dissapointment this book turned out. i ran through this book for the first half/two thirds and then it faltered and ran out of puff in a major way. exploring molly howes and john wheelrights different worlds was a satisfying ride. characters were well portrayed, however molly and her family had a very odd ring to them and their disfunctionality really didnt resonate for me. both parents sounded as though they were in their mid sixties when they were just entering their forties, was mother kooky just because husband bought her to a small town, to a house that let the wind in through badly fitted windows and the sun didnt shine on after 2pm? she popped pills and she had an unusual relationship with both her daughter and son. the father was disconnected from the children (nothing new in that) and was the senior manager for a branch of IBM, but he too went downhill in a short space of time and tried to top himself. both the son and daughter left home and had virtually nothing to do with their parents ever, the son became a cult leader/preacher and molly drifted from one extreme sexual relationship to another. there was nothing really to explain, by way of behaviour or prior knowledge of things that had gone on in the family, why this family turned out as odd as it did. was it something in the water? to me it was just a device to give us the inscrutable character of Molly. she was in turn the device for the two male characters to clash and fall upon their swords. it all got a bit

tiresome in the end, \*messages\* that were snippets of advertising copy (John Wheelwright and Mal Osbourne both worked in advertising) meant and said very little and the whole ending was just not very good. Maybe I should have read Dee's other book instead of this one, as he is quite a good writer, it's just the plot really gave out in the end. I liked quite a bit of this book, but then it failed in quite a considerable way and looking back on characters' motives and actions just makes me question them even more.

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## **Diana Tilson says**

It can be odd to read books written by people you know. This book had a lot of sex in it, sometimes graphic, even violent sex. I know Jonathan to be a quiet, polite, mild-mannered man, and it was odd to think of him thinking of these things. I was impressed by his intelligence. I am drawn to quiet people for the exact reason that I am always curious to know what they're thinking, and in this case, it turned out that behind Jonathan's quiet exterior, he had a whole world of complex thoughts going on. It made me wish I'd had more opportunities to chat with him when we were working together. It made me feel like we had more in common than I knew. Isn't that, in a way, the mark of a successful work of art? That it makes you feel a kinship with the artist? Some of this was a little bit dated; it was written in the 90s, and the main preoccupation of the story--advertising--gave me flashbacks of *Adbusters* (does that magazine still exist?) and I wasn't entirely convinced about the character of Molly. She seemed a little too empty, not a real person. But those are my only criticisms, and this left me curious to read his new novel.

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## **Annabel Smith says**

Well, I read 'The Privileges' and I thought it was brilliant so I went straight for Palladio and I was not disappointed. Jonathan Dee is my new favourite!

Some of the things that confused me about Dee's writing in 'The Privileges' started to fall into place for me by reading another of his books. His themes and his characters are quite elusive and there's almost no authorial judgement which is unusual in our spoon-fed world. It's disconcerting at first because it challenges you as a reader. You have to work hard to form your own opinions instead of letting someone else decide for you how you should feel.

Palladio examines the nature of art, and the ubiquitousness of irony in modern Western society, through the medium of advertising. I was very stimulated by the ideas explored and am still processing my own response to the ideas.

Dee's characters are really hard to get a grip on. Is Mal Osborne a visionary? Or is he just a pretentious egomaniac? On one level the agency Mal creates seems inspiring, on another level it seems like a kind of creepy cult. And Molly is a sort of non-character, like a giant black hole at the centre of the book. What did her life mean?

It's hard to review this book coherently because it left me with so many questions, but in a way, that seemed to be the whole point. If you don't mind books which don't give you all the answers, and if you're interested in advertising or art, then I'd really recommend this book.

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## Neil says

There's a lot to think about in this book. In part, it is a love story about a damaged woman and an insecure man. But, alongside this, there's a lot of material about art and advertising, about modern cultural values, about expression of ideas. It is this that gets it 4 stars from me: I found a lot of this really interesting. I was put in mind quite often of "The Blazing World" that I read and really enjoyed last year. The plot that links the ideas in this book is well put together and the characters are, for me, all well written and believable. I've reduced it to 4 stars because the middle section dragged a bit for me so it wasn't perfect! And I need to think a bit more about what the third section was all about with its cryptic messages! Overall, a very engaging and thought-provoking read.

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## Billfrog says

I wanted to like this more, as I'd seen him read from his more recent book and liked what I'd heard (I just wasn't going to buy a hardback without knowing more about his writing). I tore through it, which says something, but much of the last half of it was finishing it just to finish it. Perhaps it's to be expected that a book featuring characters who have a pathological lack of personality would feel a little soulless. The clinical and descriptive 3rd personal narration of the first half was not matched by the shift to first person journaling in the second half.

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## Caroline says

I work at the library, and I picked up this book because I liked the cover. I was very surprised by how good it was. I was disappointed in the ironic ending, but it was about what I expected. The book really went downhill after the first two-thirds. Character development is awesome, as is the structure of the first part of the book.

"She holds herself so cheaply, her sense of her own worthlessness is so profound, that she's drawn into situations she knows are bad for her; and then when they don't work out, when things fall apart, she says to herself, See, see what you've done, you knew it all along, you've left it worse than you found it. Then it's on to the next disaster."

"Of course he didn't love her. He was just looking for something to borrow that would approximate what he felt. It was as if, having stripped away all the outer layers of his self - the ingratiation, the fear of ridicule, the sense of his misfortune, the layers which were himself, the rest of the time - in order to discover what was essential in him, it had turned out that there was nothing there: he still said what he thought he was expected to say. Nothing at the core of him - at least not yet. That was okay. He was sixteen years old."

"Living away from home simply meant a different relationship to food; meals came not according to relentless schedule but only when you felt hungry enough to get up and do something about it."

"The worst, most humiliating part of any failed love affair is the suspicion that maybe it never meant as much to the other person as it did to you."



"Jealousy: well, maybe. But also, if those two people find what they need in each other, then, I think, I become truly superfluous in the world."

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