



Chum

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Mary and Bickerman are the center of their circle of friends—but these friends are strangers as well as family to them. In the course of a year, under the influence of a stressful wedding and a whole lot of alcohol, relationships and nerves are twisted and broken as the dynamics of the cozy-seeming group shift. Secrets are kept, emotions withheld, and it doesn't look like it's going to end well for anyone.

Told always in first person, but not the same person, and unfolding in double-helix chronology that provides a *Rashomon*-like narration, *Chum* is the story of love, liquor, and death.

Chum Details

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Author : Jeff Somers

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From Reader Review Chum for online ebook

Candice says

I love books with multiple narrators. However, though the chapters were supposed to be written by different characters, the writing style did not change at all. Instead, the author seemed to rely on specific words that were supposed to suffice for character development: words like motherfuckery (uttered ad nauseam, by the way), Glee (with a capital G, don't forget), The Stupid Fuck (how very INVENTIVE?) or Sub-Doofus (who SAYS that???) And I GUESS Henry is supposed to be the funny one? Eh.

And speaking of character development, if you are a fellow, you get to be EITHER a Machiavellian animal OR a gosh-golly sweetheart. If you're a gal, you get to just be a lush...BUT you can be a slut lush or a jealous lush. Yay!

It isn't revealed until almost halfway through the book how old these people are. Spoiler alert: too old to be acting like this. Nothing sadder than aging frat boys and sorority girls. Sigh.

And yeah, people drink. But the bulldog grip of alcohol as a plot focus was grating.

Speaking of grating, I'm thinking that the out-and-out vulgarity ("This was the second time in my life that I'd wanted to fuck a corpse") was meant to be provocative, but it read like a child desperate for attention yelling "Shit! Damn! Hell!", looking pleased with itself for its rebellion. Yawn.

Still trying to figure out how this was a Rashomon-like narration: that just seems like a grandiose and inaccurate descriptor. These characters are just regurgitating the same simplistic story. And though "double helix" sounds cool and all, let's leave it to the realm of DNA, because as a book jacket blurb, it's not valid.

I skimmed the second half of the book because I DID want to see what happened but even reading the first sentence of each paragraph was insufferable. Tits, ass, fuck, drink, boobs, alcohol. Oh, and tits and fuck.

DON'T READ THIS BARF

Patty Blount says

Those of you who know me know I'm a huge fan of Jeff Somers. His Avery Cates series left me sweaty and breathless and his urban fantasy Trickster had me ready to open a vein. When I read Chum, I was left feeling a whole jumble of emotions – at the top of the list? Awe. Nobody makes me want to know what makes unlikeable characters tick the way Jeff does. I'm a writer myself and trust me on this, Jeff's deft handling of characters who are anything but nice is pure magic.

Chum opens with a wedding – typically a happy occasion, right? Not so for these characters. The bride is on her last nerve, the groom is checking the guest list for a divorce lawyer, the bridesmaid can't keep her hands off anything with a Y chromosome and the groomsmen are making bets on how long the marriage will last. This is not a happy group. This isn't even a particularly nice group. Jeff's writing is like some kind of drug, enticing me to read more.

Think about the reasons you pick up a book. For me, it's because I want to escape real life for a little while or maybe sink into a happy ending. Reading about dysfunctional false friends isn't fun – but it's something – a mix of introspection and unanswerable questions and squirmy discomfort and maybe even a touch of schadenfreude. This is Jeff's genius and someday, when I figure out how he does it, I will retire on the royalties from the Someresque novels I will write in homage.

At the wedding, we meet bride and groom Mary and Bick. There's Mary's sister, the slutty Miriam. Her friends, Denise, Kelly, and Flo. Then, we have the guys. Tommy, Hank, Mike, and Luis. Some of the connections date back to childhood, others to college, and others – who knows? What formed the connections doesn't matter – what sustains them, however, does matter. On the surface, it appears that alcohol is their glue. But as I read more deeply, I decided it's their contemptibility that keeps them together. The story is told from multiple points of view on different days, when the lives of this group of friends intersect. Aside from the Bickerman wedding, we get a glimpse of Saint Patrick's Day, where we learn somebody has some serious trust issues and also get a glimpse that foreshadows things to come. The book doesn't follow a timeline in the conventional sense – events are not shared in sequence. Jeff jumps from the wedding to various holidays in a Memento-like series of narrations – each from a different character. Confusing? Yeah. Brilliant? Hell, yeah. Jeff's mastery of dialogue and characterization leave you with no question as to who's narrating each chapter, particularly when Henry or Tommy are on stage.

If I have to find something to pick on, it would be the title – this book should have been called WE ARE NOT GOOD PEOPLE, but Jeff already used that in his urban fantasy, TRICKSTER.

You may need to read it more than once to appreciate all the subtleties, but read it. It won't disappoint.

Tyrone Swanson says

Okay, what the fuck, this book pulled off some sort of miracle and in the final few chapters went from crap to enjoyable. (Was sitting on one star, until I finished it just this afternoon.) Maybe I just didn't get what the writer was going for until the final scenes, but still, I put that fault on him, not me.

Utterly detestable characters for most of the book, and in some cases, throughout, and not in an interesting way, but a way that makes you want to punch them -- and the author perhaps -- in the face. So at times, it's a real slog. I did actually throw the book in frustration at one point, swearing to never read another word, then somehow a few days later, found myself back into it. I guess I like disasters, and these people are certainly that.

The writing was fine, better toward the end. There are chapters where the same joke and the same phrase are repeated many times over, to the point I became angry, which is probably when I threw the book. During these chapters, the writer is a bit too amused by himself. It's in the later chapters he gets out of the way and lets the story tell itself.

Honestly, this could have been an incredible short story or even a novella. It's got a lot of padding. Many chapters can be summed up as, "Then we got drunk." In some cases, scenes are recycled -- from another angle, sure -- but the scenes are not that interesting to begin with, so who cares?

Bonus points for weird structure, none of that really bothered me, it's probably what kept me going through the Badness.

Melanie R Meadors says

It's like Friends...on booze. This dark look at a circle of friends with a mystery in the center may not be to everyone's taste, but I found it fascinating to read. The timeline of the story is different--things don't happen sequentially, rather, you see them as they need to be seen. Also, each chapter is from another character's POV. Once i got the hang of it I didn't find that this took me out of the story at all. Each character has a distinctive voice, and I was able to tell pretty much right away whose head we were in.

Once again, Somers proves he is a master at showing a rather, um, contemptible character (there might be a few in this book ;)) and keeping the reader completely engaged in this person, reading on to find out what exactly this person could do next. I love that no one had to be "redeemed" in this book. The people are who they are, and that is what makes the book so engrossing. Anything else would have felt cheap. At the end, things are open, but that's OK. I left it feeling like life went on in its own messed up way, and I didn't feel like I was missing anything or that there were loose ends.

Those who enjoyed Somers's speculative fiction should enjoy this as well--it still has that distinct Jeff Somers flavor (for those of you that are into that stuff ;)). I enjoyed reading something different and seeing what a versatile author Somers is.

Akeiisa says

Alcohol is what makes it tolerable for this group of "friends" to stay in each others company. Jumping forward and back in time and alternating narrators, Somers provides a meandering story about some very unlikable characters that doesn't really go anywhere. The writing is fine, I just didn't find much substance here.

Amanda Byrne says

Told through alternating points of view, Chum is not a story that unfolds in a linear fashion. It starts with the wedding of Mary and Bick, skips back, then forward again, then back, then waaay forward. Eventually, one member of their little group dies, and the reactions of the characters run the gamut on the grief spectrum, from outbreaks of hysterical crying to drinking the pain away to a sort of blase acceptance of the whole thing.

The narrative switches mostly between Hank and Tommy. Hank seems like a nice enough guy, smartish, loyal to his friends, bumbling in a cute way when a pretty girl tries to flirt with him. He's stuck with a girlfriend he tries desperately to please and fails to on a regular basis. This isn't his fault; Denise is a vapid

bitch. She's completely unlikeable, and when we spend some time in the story at her point of view, it only serves to make her even more unlikeable.

Tommy is also unlikeable, but in that train-wreck kind of way. He has few, if any, redeeming qualities about him. He has an overinflated opinion of himself. Yet you can't stop watching him because he's fascinating, in a repulsive sort of way. While Hank eventually goes off the deep end with guilt and grief, Tommy's still on an even keel.

The way the story skips around could be confusing at times. Not that you couldn't quickly figure out if it was past or present, but who was narrating that particular chapter. Aside from Hank and Tommy, though, the snippets from the others for the most part felt unnecessary and used as a way to convey information the author thought we needed to know but likely didn't. Especially the one piece we get from Denise. Completely unnecessary.

Chum isn't the type of book I'd normally read, because it lacks a clear definition. I don't know if you'd classify it as mystery, thriller, or what. But the characters make a lasting impression, and I'm still thinking about Tommy and his outsized ego weeks later. That's the mark of a good book, no matter what genre you stick it in.

Matt says

CHUM is a really entertaining story about some not so good people. I like how CHUM was written and that it jumps from different points of view, several times showing the same event from a different character's point of view. The jumping back and forth in time also was a bit different then I am used to, but it worked pretty well in CHUM. I also like the the different characters from Henry to Luis to Tom and everyone else.

I really liked CHUM. It was another fine book by Jeff Somers.

Cheryl, The Book Contessa says

Initially, for me, this book started with a -bang-! It was funny and intelligent. Henry & his friends were drinking; personalities were colorful. I could relate. Each chapter was spoken from the voice of one of the friends in the group. I could identify with the characters' thoughts as they weren't able to speak them to each other, when they didn't want relationships to change. The friends would get together for holidays, events, birthdays, etc. All involving a considerable amount of liquor, drunkenness, and debauchery(candidly referred to as mother***kery in the book). I am not certain if Mr. Somers meant for this comparison; but 2 TV series' of the past come to mind: "Friends" and "That 70's Show"--both funny, with characters who were all a little overconfident and annoying in their own right. A much understated character in the book, Luis,reminded me of Fez("That 70's Show"). I also came away from some of the chapters, feeling quite inebriated! Wow, these people could drink! A level of consumption I have not witnessed since my own college days.They were very relate-able, in exaggerated form. I kept thinking of people in my own life I have tried to befriend & couldn't because they were too shallow, too angry, too slutty, etc. The book made me question, "How do my friends see me?" It was intelligently written, compelling, frustrating at times, and somewhat dark. The ending was not at all as I expected! What did I expect, I don't know. I'm still contemplating the whole enchilada. Maybe I'll pour myself a cocktail & it will come to me. 3.5/5 stars.

Thank you NetGalley, for the ARC. *Cheers* to Jeff Somers for a thought provoking read.

Sasha says

[THIS IS HOW YOU WRITE A BOOK ABOUT PEOPLE THAT SUCK, JUNOT DIAZ. (hide spoiler)]

Emily says

I liked this book before I started to really know the characters. Initially, I felt I could relate to some of them and the story took me back to drunken college days and some fond memories but that is about where my relating stopped. As the story went on, I began to relate the whole novel to a night of boozing. In the beginning, you have a few drinks and start to feel the buzz which leads to good times and lots of socializing. You are having fun and making friends, albeit superficial. As the drinks increase, so does the excitement and poor decision making. But as the night progresses and the alcohol wears off, your true feelings and personality come to light (be that good or bad) and things aren't as entertaining. By the end of the book, when all of the true colors of the characters were revealed, it made me think of the morning after a night of debauchery (or motherf***ery, as in the story) when the alcohol has worn off and the hangover remains. Not a good feeling. I was disgusted by the majority of the characters, with the exception of maybe Kelly, and surprised at how weak their connections and loyalties to each other were. I think this book does a good job of showing how friendships can progress and regress based on certain events and the harsh reality that comes with seeing who a person actually is, rather than who you initially imagined.

As far as formatting goes, I liked the idea of different narrators who allowed us to see their unique perspectives on each event but for me, it got a little confusing. It took a page or two to figure out exactly who was narrating and the constant switching back and forth on the timeline caused me to have to stop and figure out where we were.

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Kristin (MyBookishWays Reviews) says

<http://www.mybookishways.com/2013/11/...>

Chum opens with the wedding of Mary and Bickerman, as narrated by Mike. As he takes in the scene with its requisite drinking and carousing, you'll get a taste early of the dark undercurrent that runs through Mike and his group of "friends". I use the term loosely. Mike seems to be the least sociopathic of the bunch, and strangely, I don't mean that in a bad way, and that may even be unfair to Mike. He's actually quite sensitive and tends to come off like a wet blanket, but he's loyal, and his observations were, for me, the glue that held this story together. His are not the only observations, however, we get perspective from just about everyone on the cast list. Not all of them, though. Tom and Mike are the main navigators in the treacherous waters of the year following the wedding, and about the very dark secret that holds them all together.

Chum is a huge departure from Jeff Somers' other work (his UF series, The Ustari Cycle and the sf Avery

Cates series), but I'll be damned if it doesn't work. I was pulled into this one immediately, and I think what got me is Somers' honest excavation of friendship. Especially the friendships that we cultivate as adults. I don't know if there's actually a character in Chum that's particularly likeable, although Mike comes close, but he's seen as weak in turn by his girlfriend Denise and also by Tom. Ohh, Tom. Tom's passages were actually some of my favorite, because he's such a scoundrel that it's almost shocking, and he says things in his narrative that most of us would probably have loved to say at some point in our lives, but were afraid to. He's certainly a sociopath, and possibly more, but his passages are where the exquisite dark comedy in Chum comes out in force. I laughed out loud at times and was mildly ashamed of myself for doing so (but not for long.) Mike is a guilty pleasure, to be sure, and reminded me a bit of Patrick Bateman in American Psycho (although, as far as I know, without the horrid killing spree). As un-charming as these hard-drinking, sometimes back-stabbing group of friends are, I saw a bit of myself in all of them, especially in their insecurities, and I'm betting you will too. The observations are swift, smart, often brutal, and sometimes blackly hilarious. Remember that dark secret I mentioned? You'll begin to suspect what it is later in the story, but the author is subtle, and this book can't be categorized as suspense or even as a mystery, although it has elements of both. Don't let the term "character study" scare you away, because Chum is indeed spot on in that capacity, but reading as these friends' lives unravel spectacularly, you can't take your eyes off of it. Trust me on this one, it's a must read, and it showcases the awesome versatility of a very, very talented author.

Lisa says

Let me preface this review by saying I don't particularly enjoy books that change perspective. That said, I can adjust when the chapter title tells you whose perspective to expect. This book did not give that information. Maybe that exclusion was to add to the drunken stupor state of the reader? Not sure. In any case, I did not enjoy this book. A bunch of raucous drinkers going from day to day, drinking binge to drinking binge. Not my cup of tea, though people who live lives such as these folk may enjoy (learn from?) reading about that lifestyle.

Victoria says

By Jeff Somers – By the time I finished this 2013 book I felt like I had a very bad hangover and my tongue had been used as an ashtray. Practically nothing seems to hold this group of nine friends and one slutty younger sister together except drinking and smoking, and the quantity of alcohol consumed explains many of the difficulties they encounter.

Written in the stripped-down modern style, the book is unencumbered by information about jobs, personal histories, and life outside the interactions among various pairings of these friends. With alternate chapters told by different members of this seriously dysfunctional group, the book starts with a hilarious wedding scene in which first the bride, then the groom, lock themselves in the venue bathroom, refusing to come out and carry on with the proceedings. Subsequent chapters skip backward and forward in time to before the wedding and some months after. Nevertheless, Somers guides the reader well, and I was never confused about when events took place or who narrated them.

Much of the narrative focuses on two characters—bad boy Tom and good guy Henry—as much of the plot focuses on the trials of the newly married or to-be married couple, Bick and Mary. The book is full of snarky dialog that's at first amusing, as in this conversation between Tom and Henry on the wedding day. Ultimately, though, it's just sad. Henry speaks first:

"How long you give them?" I asked.

Tom sat forward immediately, as if he'd been thinking about the very subject. "Well, let's be logical. Bick drinks, and Mary doesn't like it when he does. Mary drinks but doesn't think she has a problem, when she very obviously does. Mary is jealous and controlling. On the other hand, Bick is snide and weak, while Mare is easily annoyed and shallow."

"Be fair," I admonished, "They're both shallow."

"Fine. Put all that together, and I don't give them a day over seventy years. Eighty years, tops."

As I neared the end, I started to wonder whether Tom and Henry are actually two sides of the same person and could think of only one scene where that wouldn't actually work. Both were described as present in scenes, just as multiple sides of other characters' personalities were present, waiting to break out—usually after a couple of cocktails.

While the novel starts strong and with good humor, the excessive alcohol use, which damaged existing relationships and prevented the strengthening of new ones was, in the end, a downer. Back-of-the-book copy calls it "the story of love, liquor, and death." That would be one actual death and the death of friendship too.

4

Shannon says

From page 1 Chum shines with Jeff Somers' distinctive voice and crisp prose. The book is written achronologically, with each chapter told in first person from the point of view of a different character in a group of friends. Most chapters take place on a major holiday over the course of about a year, but while the chapters aren't labeled by character, it's always clear within a page or so (or often much less) whose head we're in. Many of the events repeat from different points of view, and because the whole novel follows the same group of 8 people, we get to know all the characters with amazing depth not only through how they see themselves and how they perceive each other, but the way they all respond to the same major life events.

The plot is revealed deftly and circuitously, leaving you questioning, suspecting, and re-analyzing the actions and motives of all the characters, even after the "main event" is fully revealed about 2/3 of the way through the book. Several of the other reviewers here seem to have found the timeline of the book confusing, and I'll admit that as soon as I finished the last page, I immediately started flipping back through chapters before deciding to reread the book in its entirety. But I didn't start over because I was confused - quite the contrary, I found myself reading again because I immediately remembered nuggets of foreshadowing and possibilities in the cracks of the chronology that only came into focus in retrospect. I found myself hungry to squeeze a little bit more out of this delightfully dark book. Despite the twisty structure, I personally never felt lost or confused, but in full disclosure, I'm also an English Lit kid who really enjoyed Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, so, there's that.

One piece of praise often leveled at Somers (by myself and others) is that he does a great job writing unlikeable characters. But while Chum is full of characters that certainly fit that description - self destructive, self-absorbed, adultolescent alcoholics - I realized that Somers isn't really writing unlikeable characters, he's just writing people. With one or two exceptions, the main characters aren't outlandishly deplorable - they aren't evil and they aren't villains (though a few of them do some pretty awful things). Even the most repugnant person in the group masquerades for most of the novel as not particularly worse than some skeezy guy who catcalls women. A good guy? No. But only the most banal and everyday "evil." Even the best among them are still human - there's no day-saving or dragon-slaying, just people who are sometimes weak and susceptible to outside pressure or their own preconceptions and fears, or who put themselves before others. In other words, this is a book about eight humans.

I realize that this is why I like Somers' writing so much, because it's not only elegant, precise, and subtle, but also uncommonly authentic. I mostly read in genres that feature lots of overpowered protagonists and (let's be honest) Mary Sues and Marty Stus, but even the protagonists in Somers' spec fic feel particularly human (if you haven't, definitely check out Trickster and his Avery Cates novels). Chances are, you'll even recognize one or more of the characters in Chum as someone from your own group of friends (or maybe some part of yourself). Reading through the novel, I felt myself balanced precariously between feelings of empathy and schadenfreude.

I haven't said much specifically about the plot, but it isn't for a lack of Interesting Things That Happen - more that it's difficult to do so without spoiling the beautiful non-linear narrative. Suffice it to say, Chum follows eight friends for a year as their group gradually collapses under the weight of its own collective dysfunction. A poignant sense of doomed inevitability hangs over the whole novel, and as it's revealed in bits and pieces, it only becomes more tense and more horrifying. As we go from holiday to holiday, from Wedding to Funeral to Tomorrow, the actions and reactions of the characters demands the rapt, breathless attention of a really awful train wreck.

Chum is filled with subtleties that are even more rewarding on a second read, and is definitely a book I'm going to be coming back to.

Kevin says

Like a jack of all trades, it didn't go deep in any direction: not much insight on the big philosophical questions or on relationships, some witty banter, not wholly original in structure, virtually no plot. Most of the characters are unlikeable and hard to identify with (unless you're a lost thirtysomething whose salvation is booze). On the upside, the writing is breezy and the use of a secret pulls you through to the end.
