



Altered Estates

Chris Mathison

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Told with the vibe of a choose-your-own-adventure book, Altered Estates is an intriguing, future-set mystery novel.

In Chris Mathison's ambitious future-set mystery novel *Altered Estates*, entertainment is often consumed in the form of simulated reality experiences.

The novel incorporates several genres, including elements of role-playing, such as being narrated entirely in the second person. The "you" of the story works on these augmented reality experiences and is given a new one to test via a vial of liquid. Upon consumption, voices and figures appear—the "storytellers." Then, the player receives a letter and learns that they are heir to an unknown, rich uncle in England who lives on a lush estate, Manor House, which is attended to by a conniving butler, Farnsworth. But beyond this appealing destiny lies peril: the letter also mentions that people may be targeting both the uncle and his heir.

The plot is expansive, winding, and replete with twists. Its initial wish-fulfillment premise gives way to an incredible tale of an average person thrust into aristocratic circles and lavish environments, replete with fanciful daydreams and complete with palace intrigues. Each scene is populated by appealing stock characters, including a friendly cockney barkeep, Bruce; an erratic but talented French cook, Noel; and a stunning but frazzled receptionist, Penelope. Lest these elements become too predictable, there are frequent upheavals to spice up the book's more familiar plot points and tropes.

Indeed, as the book progresses, the player begins to experience strange hallucinations. Plants talk to them; parts of their uncle's manor begin morphing into his face and having full conversations with them. And the storytellers are no help: their guidance does not line up with what's happening. As layer after layer of reality is peeled back, mysteries are unveiled, each in need of further explanation.

Though the prose is straightforward and digestible, it also gives too much weight to the player's internal monologues, which are often devoted to explaining aspects of prior plot points ad nauseam. So too are comedic moments played out for too long. These indulgences come at the expense of deeper narrative development.

The heap of mysteries with which the player is confronted come to seem convoluted, and the nuances of its topsy-turvy story are buried beneath the book's constant explanations and expository work. In time, these forceful, instructive elements subsume the plot's progression. The book may morph from a Dickensian fantasy into a manor mystery and then a thriller with intention, but its dizzying reality-bending methods become less involving the longer that it continues on.

Despite its diminishing returns, *Altered Estates* is a complex science fiction adventure—a fun ride through a sometimes familiar, often inventive augmented reality scenario.

SÉBASTIEN LUC BUTLER (December 4, 2023)

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