

Artefactum

J. E. Tobal

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Artefactum is an immersive novel in which a lovestruck man travels through the multiverse, hoping for a second chance.

J. E. Tobal's gripping science fiction novel *Artefactum* is the origin story of a destroyer of worlds.

Sam is a typical sarcastic New York bartender. His sense of humor leans dark and self-deprecating, a combination that does not work with every woman. When he meets and connects with Una, he is sure that he has found the one. But when Sam breaks a rule in their relationship, the resultant fight leads Sam down a path that has no good end. Little does he know there are other versions of him contending with similar dark paths, and they are all converging on a central point.

On the surface, the book appears to be straightforward: boy meets girl; they discuss their interests; they fall into a relationship. One of Una's interests happens to be religious iconography, and here the story shifts toward its science fiction center. Una's statue of a fertility goddess takes the lovers into different intimate worlds. When the unthinkable happens, this ability to move through realities spurs Sam to think there may be other artefactum that can take him to realities where he can see Una again. The emotional gut punch that is Sam's grief permeates his spiral into exploring death realities, fear realities, and dream realities.

Conversation-forward and propulsive, the book includes discussions of complicated philosophical and moral concepts, as on how religions form, whether one has a duty to intervene, and when it is acceptable to keep secrets in a relationship. Throughout the book, people wrestle with language, testing its boundaries to express themselves. But the tonal shifts between chapters and realities are controlled and precise. When Sam descends into the fear and death realities in successive chapters, his fear is palpable and the atmosphere is steeped in a sense of foreboding. When he begins a new relationship, there is joy and lightness.

With the multiverse playing an essential role, the book anchors each reality that Sam explores in some way, whether through the presence or absence of another person, a difference of personality between the same people across multiple realities, or different ways of people arriving at the same information. These techniques keep the story from hurtling into the far reaches and causing confusion, but only just. As the story unfolds, it becomes an exercise in suspending disbelief, with unexpected, gasp-worthy surprises arising.

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DONTANÁ MCPHERSON-JOSEPH (February 28, 2023)

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