

## Pure Cosmos Club

**Matthew Binder**

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Matthew Binder's sharp satirical novel *Pure Cosmos Club* skewers the art world and spiritual snake oil salesmanship.

Paul is an artist whose highest educational attainment was a YMCA scuba diving certificate. With his dog, Blanche, at his side, he careens between studios, galleries, and parties. He is introduced to James, an enlightenment-peddling New Age cult leader who leads the Pure Cosmos Club and who tantalizes him with the prospect of ascending to the ultimate level.

Deflating the pretensions of poseurs and hucksters, the book is often laugh-out-loud funny, applying mordant wit to details as of how Paul's mother first noticed his father's "tireless appetite for drudgery." Paul takes a toké from a crack pipe so as not to seem rude; one of his sculptures is removed from an exhibit to make room for a (Wendy) Chagall in deference to its curator's chiropractor. Elsewhere, a writer talks to a dog about Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, and people pontificate about books they haven't read and films they haven't seen.

Paul is an unreliable narrator who's prone to pleasant digressions. At times, his is a freewheeling picaresque; at others, there's surgical sophistication to his jokes (Paul can't decide if a sculpture with a man's body and sheep's head is anthropomorphism or zoomorphism; an artist's financial success is declared the "best indication that he lacks any semblance of talent"). Even as he muses on heavy philosophical questions, he remains lighthearted. As the depths of his delusions are plumbed, the story becomes somewhat surrealistic, though still working toward an attuned ending that exposes the fantastical elements of his self-deception.

Drawing parallels between artistic and spiritual grifters, the novel *Pure Cosmos Club* spoofs an artist's quixotic pursuits and lampoons a world in which everyone deceives others or themselves.

JOSEPH S. PETE (May / June 2023)

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