

Foreword Review SCIENCE FICTION

The Adjudicator

Susan Daitch

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A woman hiding personal neurological secrets probes the limits of genetic control in *The Adjudicator*, Susan Daitch's tense dystopian novel.

Zedi, an adjudicator for Pangenica, a major corporation where babies' genes are coded to delete "extreme cases of physical or mental aberration" and fulfill parents' predetermined specifications, scrutinizes customer complaints. Zedi is tasked with an old case claiming a genetic switch between the consciousnesses of two children. As Zedi investigates this explosive possibility of genetically altering consciousness, she masks her mirror-touch synesthesia (experiencing others' observed feelings and sensations as her own) in a world wherein neurodivergence is erased.

Zedi's investigative commentary is deadpan, injecting dry, almost glib, levity into the text: The impossibility of forthright inquiries, she quips, is "like D-Day is approaching, you're an Allied soldier, and you walk into the German headquarters in Normandy and say, 'Could you show me your plans, if you don't mind, old boy?'" Still, her attempted inscrutability is grueling; she absorbs even the "near-death reactions" of a boy whose neck is stuck between subway doors. These infectious details of Zedi's elevated stakes, magnified by references to people "disappeared" in totalitarian fashion, create an oppressive malaise of claustrophobic entrapment spiked with panic-inducing, inescapable suspense.

Acting as a gritty, hard-boiled detective, Zedi follows dangerous, semilegitimate leads; circumventing bureaucracy, she borrows a fake identity to collect DNA from a rehabilitation facility and accepts clandestine collaborations with shifty men. Through included multimedia clippings of photographs, documents, and scannable barcodes linked to animations and videos, this sleuthing is made interactive. Meanwhile, the book's pressing philosophizing about individuality amid widespread eugenics is consequential: Zedi struggles to formulate a stable, baseline definition of consciousness in the first place.

Suppressing her own brain's proclivities, a woman unravels the enigma of manipulating consciousness in the futuristic noir novel *The Adjudicator*.

ISABELLA ZHOU (March / April 2025)

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