

★ The Default World

Naomi Kanakia

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Naomi Kanakia's sparkling novel *The Default World* exposes the shaky foundations of community, love, and found family in post-capitalist San Francisco.

After being cast out by her conservative Indian parents and struggling to build a life in Sacramento, a young trans woman, Jhanvi, infiltrates a social circle made up of privileged San Francisco techies. She has known one of the roommates, Henry, since college; she hopes to use his affection for her to convince him to marry her, giving her access to his company's generous healthcare benefits.

The friends run an underground play party that they see as a manifestation of the values they hold dear: social justice, inclusivity, and loving community. Jhanvi sees these beliefs as little more than self-protective rhetoric used to hide the guilt the roommates feel about their own privileged place in society. But soon, despite her best efforts to scorn their faux activism and self-indulgent behaviors, she is drawn into their alluring world of drugs, polyamory, and underground sex parties.

Jhanvi is an intelligent and perceptive narrator. Her dark humor cuts to the heart of contemporary social dynamics. Her interior experience is given precedence in the novel's structure and language, which strikes a careful balance between complexity and clarity. The roommates, who make up a majority of the book's cast, are distinctive and complicated. And although the novel often strikes a satirical tone in its exploration of performative politics, the values, behaviors, and desires of all of them are taken seriously and interrogated rather than condemned.

Both incisive and sincere, the novel *The Default World* exposes the hidden transactional dynamics within progressive social circles via a quest for belonging, love, and security.

BELLA MOSES (May / June 2024)

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