



Set This House in Order

By Matt Ruff
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Introduction

I was called to finish the job that my father had begun: a job that he had chosen, but that I was made for.

On a daily basis, Andrew Gage struggles to maintain order with more than a hundred other personalities ... other "souls" ... in his head. He has been created for the sole purpose of running the body while the others live in a geography that exists only in his mind. Aaron, the soul who was in charge prior to Andrew and the one that he calls "father," constructed the imaginary house in a countryside setting where all the souls could exist together peacefully.

While Aaron manages the landscape inside, Andrew manages to have a functional, although somewhat cluttered, life on the outside. He does allow his other souls to take over for short periods of time: Jake, a five year boy, likes to brush his teeth; Seferis, the defender, enjoys his morning sit-ups; Aunt Sam, the artist, prefers hot showers, while perceptive yet mischievous Adam needs cold ones. But there is one soul that is not allowed time outside. Gideon, Aaron's brother, has been exiled to an island set apart from the house, apart from the other souls.

Working as a virtual reality consultant, Andy meets another lost soul, computer programmer Penny Driver (a.k.a. Mouse). Their boss Julie believes they would make a perfect match and asks Andy to help Penny confront her own multiple personality disorder -- something that she is only vaguely aware of. Blackouts, waking up in strange clothes in even stranger places, finding daily to-do lists, and receiving letters from The English Society of International Correspondents all serve as constant reminders to Penny that she is not normal. Consumed by paranoia and tragically low self-esteem, Penny is unable to accept Andy's help at first. But her other souls do. Thread, Maledicta, and Malefica take turns pushing Penny closer to the edge of reality until she finally agrees to see Andrew's doctor, Danielle Grey.

Once Andrew and Penny spend more time together, and each of their personalities is introduced, they piece together valuable information about each other and themselves. As they set out on their chaotic journey to unveil hidden truths from Andrew's past, terrifying and heartbreaking memories begin to surface -- memories of the events that forever shattered both characters; memories that explain the shards left behind.

What should be a very confusing novel -- a story about, and told by, someone with multiple personality disorder -- is, in fact, "irresistible" (*New York Times Book Review*) "addictive" (*Portland Oregonian*), and "a stunning feat of literary craftsmanship" (*San Francisco Chronicle*).

Discussion Questions

1. The author tells us from the first page "that a good storyteller only reveals important information a little at a time, to keep the audience interested." Did he succeed?
2. "Part of knowing who I am is knowing why I am, and I've always known who I am, from the first moment" (page2). Andrew's ease with his disorder changes drastically when he falls into the lake giving up control of the body. By the end of the novel, does he return to his earlier confidence? Or is his security forever shaken?
3. Discuss any hidden meanings in the characters' names in the novel: Andy Gage, Penny Driver, Gideon, Thread, Maledicta, Malefica, Xavier, and Seferis.
4. What does Andy tell us is "an inevitable side effect of multiplicity"?
5. In Andy Gage's mind, his "father controlled the weather inside the geography. He did not control the mist" (page 97). Why do you think that is?
6. "Unlike many of the other souls in the house, I was never raped or molested" (page 118). Do you think Andrew's distance from his abuse makes him a good narrator?
7. How did Penny keep her mother from reading her letters from the "Society"?
8. Mrs. Winslow, Andy's landlord, and Julie Sivik, Andy's boss, offer him stability and security. But how are the women different from each other? Are they each other's foils?
9. Discuss the two cellar doors -- the one from Penny's Trash Town, and the one in Andy's mind -- and what is hidden behind them.
10. Why is it that Aaron, Andrew's father, doesn't want to talk to Dr. Grey?
11. How is the storyline of Warren Lodge crucial to this novel?
12. "Does it really matter so much? I mean it's still me ... " (page 238). Did you see any clues as to Andrew's true physical identity before it was revealed?
13. What event sends Andrew into the lake allowing Gideon to take control of the body?
14. What alliances -- between Andrew's personalities and Penny's personalities -- are formed?
15. "Here I sleep but for a while until I am called up again into my Father's house" (page 357). Discuss the layers of irony here and the revelation of horror that follows.
16. What is Gideon afraid of and why?
17. Why does Chief Bradley want to buy Andy's house?
18. How is Chapter 29 significant to the reader?

About the Author

Matt Ruff is not a multiple personality, but he is an obsessive personality, a condition for which he self-medicates with marriage to a patient woman. He is the author of two previous novels, *Fool on the Hill* and *Sewer, Gas & Electric: The Public Works Trilogy*. He lives in Seattle.