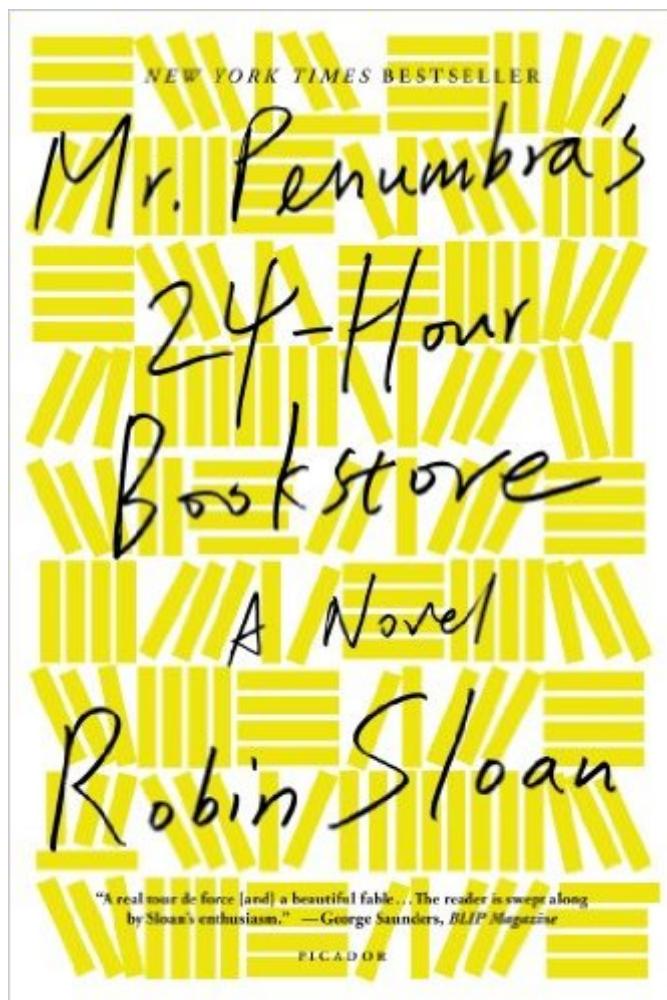


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Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore: A Novel



Synopsis

A Winner of the Alex Award, a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for First Fiction, named a Best Book of the Year by NPR, Los Angeles Times, and San Francisco ChronicleThe Great Recession has shuffled Clay Jannon away from life as a San Francisco web-design drone and into the aisles of Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore. But after a few days on the job, Clay discovers that the store is more curious than either its name or its gnomic owner might suggest. The customers are few, and they never seem to buy anythingâ •instead, they "check out" large, obscure volumes from strange corners of the store. Suspicious, Clay engineers an analysis of the clientele's behavior, seeking help from his variously talented friends. But when they bring their findings to Mr. Penumbra, they discover the bookstore's secrets extend far beyond its walls. Rendered with irresistible brio and dazzling intelligence, Robin Sloan's Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore is exactly what it sounds like: an establishment you have to enter and will never want to leave.

Book Information

Paperback: 288 pages

Publisher: Picador (September 24, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1250037751

ISBN-13: 978-1250037756

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.9 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.1 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 starsÂ ¤ See all reviewsÂ (2,137 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #7,327 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #2 inÂ Books > Literature & Fiction > Genre Fiction > Mashups #7 inÂ Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Books & Reading > Booksellers & Bookselling #30 inÂ Books > Science Fiction & Fantasy > Fantasy > Magical Realism

Customer Reviews

There's so much in this slim volume that I'm not sure where to start. Here's the TLDR version: it's an utter delight, and you should buy it immediately. Our hero is a graphic designer with some meager programming skills who is left jobless by the recession. He finds new work as a bookstore clerk, and soon discovers that the store is much more than it seems. His quest to uncover its secrets leads only to mysteries, eventually sending him not only across the country but (figuratively) back in time to when the technology to make books widely accessible first became available. The "I love the

smell of glue" crowd is represented, as are the "print is already dead" folks. Neither are wrong, because the book as object **and** the book as text are important in different ways. The vast power of the Internet is harnessed, often to great effect, but human handcraft is also vital. That would be plenty, but there's so much more. For instance, consider the idea -- so casually tossed off -- that the world is simply filled with secret societies, the only hitch being that most of them don't realize that they're secret. Or ponder how the standard adventuring party from role-playing games, when the roles are translated into modern terms, actually is a fine combination of human resources for accomplishing a goal quickly. Or think on how movable-type presses were, in their day, the equivalent of a young Internet -- a new technology with limitless and thrilling potential to open vistas theretofore undreamed-of. It's missing a few things, most notably combat and sex. I didn't miss them. I didn't even really notice their lack until I sat down to write this review. There's no need for faux excitement when there's so much genuine excitement. The book is so full of **story,** not to mention ideas, that the pages very nearly turn of their own accord. Buy it. Read it. Rethink parts of your world.

Mr. Penumbra's 24-hour Bookstore is two books woven together. In one book, Clay Jannon happens upon a secret book cult while working at a mysterious store run by the eponymous Mr. Penumbra. In the other book, author Robin Sloan hijacks his characters' voices in order to deliver introductory lessons on font type, The Singularity, immortality, and anything else that happens to interest him. If it sounds like that last sentence is being written in an annoyed tone, you're only getting half of my emotions. The truth is, I enjoy Sloan's viewpoints and his interests. The way they are written and explained is--like the rest of the book--not only entertaining but even gripping. This is because Sloan employs a casual voice throughout the book that makes you feel like you're hanging out with him at a coffee shop in downtown San Francisco. Sloan sits across from the reader for the entire book and doesn't let the written words overtake what is being said. Having explained that, I must admit that annoyance is definitely there. These scenes of history and theory are not fit neatly into the narrative of the main plot: which involves the mystery of the cult. Instead they take place at odd interludes--while characters are having drinks or going out on dates. The reader rarely understands why these characters are talking about these things and many of the subjects raised do not have a bearing on the plot. They could have! The most interesting conversation Sloan starts is a much more subtle one. It involves the question of "Digital versus Physical" (this was particularly ironic for me, reading the book on a Kindle) and gives some startling examples of what cannot be done with all of our vast technology that CAN be done through tactile sensation. The arguments are

there in the book and clear for any reader to see without having to rely on asides, random conversations, or interruptions to the flow of the story. And it is a good story. The mystery described in Mr. Penumbra will keep you flipping pages until the final reveal, which is more or less satisfying in its philosophy. Why does the book work? Because it's a good, old-fashioned mystery with all of our favorite characters and settings. Cultists in cloaks, old libraries, wealthy investors, hidden messages and cryptic clues, and an ensemble cast of characters who literally name themselves after DnD classes (the thief, the wizard, the warrior). It's hard not to have fun while reading Sloan's tale. Unfortunately, these characters aren't developed at all. This was my biggest complaint with the book. No motivations are described aside from the grand one of "let's solve a mystery!" which puts these guys on a level with Scooby Doo. No change occurs in Clay, our main character, because he enters this book without any need to change. He has no inner-destination. Without a destination, there cannot be obstacles, and without obstacles there cannot be the all important conflict (the heart of any good book). Without this, the journey ends up feeling too easy. There's never anything at stake, because nothing has been risked. Even physical danger doesn't come into play, which should be raising some alarm bells for those of who are remembering the last paragraph. That's right: this is a book with cultists and there's no danger. The biggest risk is that they will fail to solve the mystery, but you know from page one that they are going to figure out the answer. It's just clear that this is that kind of book--a little too tidy, a little too nice to its characters. Because of this flaw, Penumbra can only be called a success in the ideas it raises and the conversations it may start. And it does do a good job in this. It could've gone deeper and it could've been given more weight if supported by real characters dealing with problems a reader could relate to. It is just smart enough to make you think, and I appreciate that; but the premise itself promises more.

Mr. Penumbra is one of those books that start a story with a quite good concept. The central narrative is crafted well. The scenes are described concretely and with attractive texture. I think the characters, however, came and went without much, if any, depth. But I am willing to be charitable on character. This is a fantasy tale, in the best sense of the word -- and fantasies can be skimpy on characterization. Its narrative leads to some ultimate statements that may or may not correspond to reality: this is expected, of course, in the fantasy genre. Here is the intriguing point. That very possibility -- that the final revelation of the novel's central gnosis is less than metaphysical -- is itself the most fantastical notion of the book. Nevertheless, this most fantastical conclusion is articulated in a way that does not do justice to the richness of everything the writer has invested in the tale -- even his less-than-solid characterizations. I enjoyed Mr. Penumbra. However, it joins an ever-lengthening

shelf of recent books that promise a lot at the outset, and even succeed at establishing an attractive world, but do not advance a conclusion that is worthy of the beginning.

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