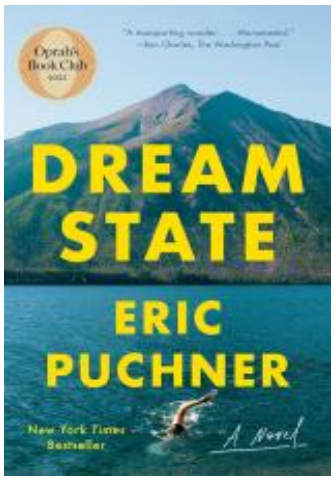
Dream State

by Eric Puchner



About the Book

Cece is in love. She has arrived early at her future in-laws? lake house in Salish, Montana, to finish planning her wedding to Charlie, a young doctor with a brilliant life ahead of him. Charlie has asked Garrett, his best friend from college, to officiate the ceremony, though Cece can?t imagine anyone more ill-suited for the task --- an airport baggage handler haunted by a tragedy from his and Charlie?s shared past.

But as Cece spends time with Garrett, his gruff mask slips, and she grows increasingly uncertain about her future. And why does Garrett, after meeting Cece, begin to feel, well, human again? As a contagious stomach flu threatens to scuttle the wedding, and Charlie and Garrett?s friendship is put to the ultimate test, Cece must decide between the life she?s dreamed of and a life she?s never imagined.

The events of that summer have long-lasting repercussions, not only on the three friends caught in its shadow but also on their children, who struggle to escape their parents? story. Spanning 50 years and set against the backdrop of a rapidly warming Montana, DREAM STATE explores what it means to live with the mistakes of the past --- both our own and the ones we?ve inherited.

Written with humor, precision and enormous heart, both a love letter and an elegy to the American West, DREAM STATE is a thrillingly ambitious ode to the power of friendship, the weird weather of marriage, and the beauty of impermanence.

Discussion Guide

1. Throughout the novel, the characters make unusual decisions when thrown into a state of grief. Cece goes to her newly deceased mother?s hair appointment; Garrett drops out of school after Elias dies in the avalanche, and then he later woos Cece away from Charlie when his father is about to die. Think back to moments of loss or grieving in your

life. Did you behave along these lines --- irrationally or strangely? Were those actions impactful in any way on the rest of your life? If so, how, and would you revise those actions if you had the chance?

2. Consider Cece?s mental condition at the time of her wedding preparations. Do you think she would have gone through with marrying Charlie even without Garrett?s intervention? What thoughts and behaviors illustrate her real feelings about marriage in general and to her original fiancé?

3. Reflect on the various ways the men in the novel bond with each other: Charlie?s bachelor party, the college friends? reunion, etc. How, in these scenes, do they express, withhold or distort their emotions and friendships? How do these gatherings allow the men to grow as themselves and in other relationships, and what important facts and feelings are (mis)communicated in ways that shape the story at large?

4. Later in life, Garrett recognizes that weddings ?were about stopping time. They were about making the world conform, if only for a few hours, to the parameters of your desire, that secret part of you that sang out to perfection and rescued you from ordinary life? (p. 162). How does this concept play out in his own marriage? Is Cece?s dementia a form of stopping time, erasing it or revising it?

5. Garrett spends his career tracking wolverines, an animal about which he admits humans understand very little. Is this much different from the way he ?tracks? Cece, Charlie and Lana --- and the way humans track one another as a whole? Do the human characters in the book --- who seek to make meaning in their lives through drugs and suffering, art and social rituals (like marriage) --- really understand one another?s motives?

6. Discuss the scene at the pizza shop where Cece yells at Lana, losing the bet she made with Garrett when they first met (p. 199). Was it feasible for Cece to keep her promise to become the person she thought she?d become? Have you ever acted --- in a single moment or in a more big-picture sense --- like a person you?d never thought you?d become or wanted to become?

7. Why do you think Charlie really wanted to reunite with Cece and Garrett despite the pain they caused him? Which relationship does he value more --- his friendship or romance --- or does it change over time? Is he seeking revenge, acceptance, forgiveness and/or something else?

8. Discuss Garrett?s awareness of how his life turned out to be the most stable (and maybe satisfying) among his friends and family --- something that seems most unlikely to everyone he knows. How does he account for this? Do his commitments to his job, and to his family, reflect a person who is truly satisfied? How does keeping Charlie in his life help him maintain his equilibrium?

9. Cece acknowledges, a few years into her marriage, that ?love failed to solve their problems?...?it would bewilder her --- actually seem borderline insane --- that she?d chosen him? (p. 185). Do you think this confusion and disappointment fuels her ongoing connection to Charlie --- a way to toe the line of ?what if? she?d chosen the other man? Why do you think she never does anything more with Charlie, especially when both of their marriages experience challenges?

10. When Cece opens her bookstore, she wonders, ?Why were so many novels set in Montana about taciturn ranchers and gambling addicts living in trailers? Most of the Montanans she knew had jobs and families like everyone else. They

also talked up a storm? (p. 255). How would you describe this novel, set partially in Montana, in terms of the qualities of the characters?

11. What might have been different about Cece?s life if the book reading with Gail Tippler had been successful? In what ways was her emotional state at that important moment --- more or less unconscious --- typical or predictable for her character?

12. Discuss the narrative structure of the book as it reflects the passage of time. How are big jumps in time represented? Does the pace or quality of time change depending on the character whose point of view is dominant or the moment in history? Reflect on your own memories of adolescence, young adulthood and older age as applicable.

13. Compare the conflicts and relationships among the young people in the book --- Charlie, Garrett and Cece in their 20s and 30s, in the 1990s and early 2000s, versus Lana and Jasper becoming teenagers in the era of COVID and beyond. What?s similar about their struggles and reactions to rejection and loss, and what?s different? What external/cultural factors influence their values and self-expression?

14. Why is Jasper so resentful of Cece? Whom does his addictions and associated behaviors hurt the most in the end?

15. How do Jasper and Lana continue and/or resolve the conflicts and obsessions of their parents? Are the repetitions in their stories signs of genetic lines, a result of proximity, or an expression of more fundamental aspects of the human experience?

16. Do you think Jasper and Lana would have fallen in love if Lana hadn?t embarrassed Jasper that afternoon in the woods? Are they in love all along, the way Cece and Charlie are?

17. How did you react to the depiction of the environment in the 2030s and beyond? What is the line between the characters? acceptance and complacency with these circumstances?

18. Discuss the title of the novel and various ?dream states? described throughout. In these contexts, do dreams represent escape, wish fulfillment, idealism or a more intense state of reality? Consider Garrett?s thought: ?What if the world had a dream, and it was miraculously about you?? (p. 162). How does this recontextualize the relative importance of human life, experience, emotion?

19. Were Garrett?s words and actions at Cece and Charlie?s wedding, revealed at the end of the novel, what you expected? What do you think Cece saw in Garrett that was missing in Charlie? How do these qualities show up in their final years together, when her memory has all but faded?

20. Reflect on the experience of aging as you?ve experienced it or as you?ve seen it in others in your life. How do values, routines and relationships change when death is imminent? Does witnessing others? deaths prepare you for your own? Is death more like living or dreaming in the world of the novel?

21. Why, given his past, does Garrett choose the particular job he does? What does it mean that he ends up tracking an elusive animal in the snow?

22. How do the individual mistakes the Gen X characters in the book make --- and the irreversibility of these mistakes --- intersect with the larger, collective mistakes of their generation?

23. What did you think of the orrery that Garrett buys Cece for their anniversary? What does it symbolize in the novel?

24. What role does the motif of ghosts play in the book? What do you think it means thematically?

25. Why does the novel choose to return to Charlie and Cece?s wedding at the end, and what does this say about regret, fate and the unscripted nature of the choices we make in life?

26. What did you make of the fact that Cece seems to mistake Garrett for Charlie at the end of chapter 24 --- or perhaps she conflates them into a single person?

27. Did you think Cece made the right choice in leaving Charlie? Would she have been happier with Charlie? Is there a right or wrong choice?

28. What do you think the novel is saying about the nature of happiness?

Author Bio

In addition to DREAM STATE, Eric Puchner is the author of the novel MODEL HOME, a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award and winner of a California Book Award, and two collections of short stories, LAST DAY ON EARTH and MUSIC THROUGH THE FLOOR, a finalist for the New York Public Library?s Young Lions Award. His fiction and personal essays have appeared in *GQ*, *Granta*, *McSweeney?s*, *Tin House*, *The Best American Nonrequired Reading* and *The Best American Short Stories 2012* and *2017*.

He has received a Wallace Stegner Fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts grant, and an Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. An associate professor in the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University, he lives in Baltimore with his wife, the novelist Katharine Noel, and their two children.

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