Discussion Questions

Use our LitLovers Book Club Resources; they can help with discussions for any book:

- How to Discuss a Book (helpful discussion tips)
- Generic Discussion Questions—Fiction and Nonfiction
- Read-Think-Talk (a guided reading chart)

Also, consider these LitLovers talking points to help get a discussion started for *A Hologram for the King*:

1. What do you think of Alan Clay? What kind of man is he? Consider his last name "Clay." Why might Dave Eggers have given him such a name? Is Alan a sympathetic, likable character? Do you feel sorry for him, admire him? Do you find him weak or irritating at times?

2. How would you describe the predicament Alan finds himself in, both at home and in Saudi Arabia? What are the stresses in his life—and in what way might he be a symbolic stand-in for middle-aged, middle-class Americans?

3. What do you think of the conversation Alan has on the plane over to Saudi Arabia? Do you agree with his seatmate—that America has seen its best days pass? Is the American Dream over, with "the dreaming being done" elsewhere—in China, Dubai, Singapore, and Abu Dhabi?

4. The concept of "hollow" pervades this novel, most obviously in the title, which refers to the use of a hologram replacement for human presence. Hanne considers Alan himself "hollow" or defeated. Where else / how else does hollowness show up...and why is the concept so significant? What is Eggers suggesting about Western and Saudi society?

5. What do you think of Saudi Arabian society—talk about the disparities between public values and private action. Were you surprised?

6. Throughout the novel, Alan tries to write to his daughter, but he but never follows through. What is it that he’s trying to convey to her?

7. Alan cuts into the growth at the back of his neck. Why? He thinks, at one point, that scars are evidence of living. What does he mean?

8. Why is Alan’s relationship with his father so fraught with anger (on his father’s part) and disappointment (on Alan’s)? Is Ron correct in his assessment of what is happening to the U.S.—they’re building our bridges in China, for God’s sake!—and his son’s role in it? Or is he overwrought and caught up in defeatism?
9. What was Alan's role with regards to the Schwinn bicycle? Did he have a choice other than moving operations over to China? Does any U.S. company have a choice? Or could things be different?

10. SPOILER ALERT: What do you think of the novel's ending, the futility of the wait in the tent and the fact that the contract went to a Chinese company? What about Alan's decision to remain in Saudi Arabia? Why does he want to stay?

(Questions by LitLovers. Please feel free to use them, online or off, with attribution. Thanks.)
I recently read Dave Eggers’s new novel, “A Hologram for the King,” which is published by McSweeney’s press today. It’s set in Saudi Arabia and concerns an American businessman who’s travelled to the country in an attempt to revive his flagging career. Through the figure of Alan Clay, Eggers explores the changing realities of the global marketplace and reveals hidden aspects of life in Saudi Arabia. It’s a fascinating novel, and I realized midway through it that I’ve read far more journalism than fiction about both globalization and Saudi Arabia. I was interested to find out why Eggers chose to make these the subject of his latest novel and I sent him a few questions about it.

"A Hologram for the King," is about an American businessman who has flown out to Saudi Arabia to pitch an I.T. system to the Saudi royal family. When did you start thinking about setting a novel in Saudi Arabia?
It started with thinking about this businessman, Alan Clay. He’d been kicking around in my head for a couple years—his state of mind, his background, his place in the economy and in his life. He was a salesman, and was then in manufacturing, and like so many in that line of work, his place now is unclear, his expertise superfluous. I always knew the book would find him adrift, but when I heard about the King Abdullah Economic City (http://www.kaec.net/about/kaec-opportunities), it seemed inevitable that Alan would be there, not exactly knowing why, but waiting for the king to determine his fate.

Did you visit Saudi Arabia while you were doing background research for the novel? Did you have any expectations about what you’d find?

I went to Jeddah and the King Abdullah Economic City a few years ago. My brother-in-law had been there, so I had some idea of what to expect. But Saudi Arabia is surprising in a lot of ways. Like any place, or any people, it relentlessly defies easy categorization. Every stereotype was shattered in the first hour, and every assumption was upended within a day.

Your protagonist, Alan Clay, spends much of his time in the King Abdullah Economic City, an ambitious new development, which is far less of a city-to-be, Alan finds, than the name suggests. As he approaches with his driver, they arrive at a modest gate. "It was as if someone had built a road through unrepentant desert, and then erected a gate somewhere in the middle, to imply the end of one thing and the beginning of another," he thinks. "It was hopeful but unconvincing." Did you visit the K.A.E.C. yourself? Can you describe it? Did you share Alan’s response to it?
K.A.E.C. was absolutely surreal; I've never seen anything like it. When I was there, there was little more than a grid of roads cutting through desert as far as you could see in any direction. But then, by the Red Sea, there were beautiful canals being carved, and you could see the possibility that the city presents. If it’s executed to any extent, it would be an incredible thing, on a physical and symbolic level.

_It doesn’t take long for Alan to encounter the contradictions of Saudi society, as he’s drawn into the myriad ways the country’s residents circumvent its rigid code of conduct. “This was the cat-and-mouse game being played in the kingdom,” he observes. “Its people were forced into the role of teenagers hiding their vices and proclivities from a shadowy army of parents.” What kind of challenges or opportunities did these contradictions present for you as a novelist? Could you have written about it in the same way as a journalist?_

Well, I didn’t look at the country through journalistic eyes. I didn’t ask the same questions I would have asked if I was trying to represent it that way. I went trying to see it through the eyes of someone like Alan—what he would see, whom he would have met, what he would have done alone in a hotel room. But I will say that it was not as restrictive a society, on an hourly basis, for a tourist like me, as you might expect. I won’t for a second propose that my experience was indicative of what it’s like to be a woman in Saudi, or even what it’s like to live or visit Riyadh—which is much more conservative than Jeddah—but I will say that there was a very loose, very idealistic spirit to the young people I met. And K.A.E.C. was a bit of an island of relative liberalism, where the women were uncovered, were treated as equals, and the staff was decidedly international.
This is a novel about globalization. In his current role, Alan is a consultant, travelling across the world to sell a software program, but for decades he worked for a bike manufacturer, first as a salesman and then as an executive, overseeing the company's American production lines before moving its factories overseas in the search for a cheaper labor force. Alan's sense of dislocation seems to come not only from the strange, almost dreamlike quality of his days in Saudi Arabia but also from his feeling that America's economy has gone off-kilter—that there's no place for a man like him, and that, to some extent, he participated in his own exclusion. Did you set out to write a novel about the American economy, or did this aspect of the book surprise you?

Before I heard about K.A.E.C., I had been kicking around ideas about a character who had been in manufacturing. The idea of Alan having been in bicycle manufacturing arrived next, and was personal to me, given I grew up about twenty miles from the Schwinn factory, which was building great bikes until the eighties on the west side of Chicago. I wanted to explore how an essentially good man like Alan participated in the process of manufacturing moving offshore in the eighties and nineties, slowly making the factories, workers, supply chain, and eventually, himself, unnecessary.

Did you ever think of having a counterpart to Clay? Someone who could extoll the virtues of a global, interconnected marketplace?

There are two counterpoints to Alan, I think—or groups of counterparts even. One group is the young team of American I.T. experts he has with him: they've never known anything but the interconnected global marketplace (and this is why they see Alan as anachronistic and not so useful). The second counterpart group is the team at
K.A.E.C., who work out of a enigmatic black building and are trying to get the city off the ground. The K.A.E.C. people have to believe that partners from all over the world will see the city-to-be as a viable investment and jump in. But there's a "you first" mentality at play, which has crippled the development. No one has the certainty, or courage, to move first. And in the meantime everyone—the salespeople of K.A.E.C., the I.T. people with Alan, and, of course, Alan—waits.

McSweeney's is publishing the hardback edition of "A Hologram for the King," and in your acknowledgments, you thank the entire staff at the Thomson-Shore printers in Dexter, Michigan. Did you make a deliberate decision to print the book using a U.S. printer? How often do you find yourself making decisions about costs, and whether to use domestic or overseas firms when you're working on McSweeney's other publications?

I have to admit that I had a bit of a come-to-Jesus moment when it came to the printing of McSweeney's books. Over the years, we've done a lot of our production in the U.S., and even more in Canada, and then, about five years ago, we started printing in Asia, too. But then, a few years ago, I got to know this printer outside Detroit called Thomson-Shore. They'd done some pro-bono work for our tutoring center nearby, 826 Michigan, so I visited the plant, and thanked them, and saw some beautiful books they'd made, and met the men and women who worked there. Walking the production floor was very much like meeting members of an extended family; most of the people at Thomson-Shore have been there for decades. And they'd just done a beautiful job printing the Mark Twain autobiography, so we decided to do a book with them—that was the John Sayles novel, "A Moment in the Sun"—and they did a fantastic job with that book. The fact that they're in
Michigan makes it easier to communicate, to reprint, and to correct problems, and the prices are close enough to China's numbers, when you take shipping and various delays into account. I don't mean to beat a made-in-America drum, but I would be lying if I said it doesn't feel somehow right to be printing books in the U.S. And as you can see, Thomson-Shore did an incredible job with "Hologram." We did a lot of tests for the cover, and made a dozen adjustments, and doing that in Michigan is really easy, and even fun. When I was thinking of the acknowledgments, it made sense to thank everyone at the printing plant, given they're a big part of getting the book out into the world.

*Do you think you'll visit Saudi Arabia again?*

I hope so. I met a lot of great people in Saudi Arabia and I'd like to see them again. And I'd love to spend more time in the desert and in the mountains. I felt really at home there.

*Photograph by Alex Majoli/Magnum.*
Dave Eggers Bio - Biography of Dave Eggers

By Mark Flanagan
Contemporary Literature Expert

Dave Eggers

Dave Eggers Birth:

Dave Eggers was born in Boston, Massachusetts on March 12, 1970.

Dave Eggers Background and Writing:

The son of a lawyer and a school teacher, Eggers grew up largely in Lake Forest, Illinois, in the Chicago suburbs. Eggers studied journalism at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign before both his parents died suddenly, his mother of stomach cancer and his father from brain and lung cancer, the circumstances of which are described in detail in Eggers' highly acclaimed memoir, A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius.

After the death of his parents, Eggers moved to Berkeley, California with his eight-year-old younger brother, Toph, who Eggers was now responsible for raising. While Toph attended school, Eggers worked for a local newspaper. During this time, he worked for Salon.com and co-founded Might Magazine.

In 2000, Eggers published A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius, his memoir of his parents' deaths and his struggle to raise his younger brother. Chosen as a Pulitzer Prize finalist for Nonfiction, it became an instant bestseller. Eggers has since written You Shall Know Our Velocity (2002), a novel about two friends who travel around the world attempting to give away a large sum of money, How We Are Hungry (2004), a collection of short stories, and What Is the What (2006), the fictionalized autobiography of a Sudanese Lost Boy which was a finalist for the 2006 National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction.

Other work that Dave Eggers has had a hand in include Surviving Justice: America's Wrongfully Convicted and Exonerated, a book of interviews with inmates once sentenced to death and later exonerated; Created in Darkness by Troubled Americans, a best-of collection of humor from McSweeney's Quarterly Concern; Animals of the Ocean. In Particular the Giant Squid, which Eggers co-wrote with his brother, Tom; screenplay for the 2009 film version of Where the Wild Things Are, which Eggers co-wrote with Spike Jonze.

http://contemporarylit.about.com/cs/authors/p/eggers.htm

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Adventure trips & workshops for women based on great books!

The best work that Eggers has done has not been as a writer, but as a publishing entrepreneur and activist. Eggers is well known as the founder of the independent publisher McSweeney’s and the literary magazine The Believer, which is edited by his wife, Vendela Vida. In 2002, he co-founded the 826 Valencia project, a writing workshop for teens in San Francisco’s Mission District that has since evolved into 826 National, with writing workshops springing up around the country. Eggers is also the editor of The Best American Nonrequired Reading series that sprung from the aforementioned writing workshops.

In 2007, Eggers was awarded the $250,000 Heinz Award for Arts and Humanities, recognizing his numerous contributions in this category. The money all went to 826 National. In 2008, Dave Eggers was awarded the TED Prize, a $100,000 award towards Once Upon A School, a project designed to get people involved locally with schools and students.

In 2009, Eggers will publish Zeitoun, a nonfiction that follows the experiences of a Syrian-American in New Orleans during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and a novelization of Maurice Sendak’s much loved children’s book, Where the Wild Things Are, called simply, The Wild Things. Eggers also co-wrote the screenplay for the 2009 movie version of Where the Wild Things Are with Spike Jonze and the screenplay for the 2009 movie Away We Go with his wife, Vendela Vida.

Books by Dave Eggers:

- How We Are Hungry (2004)
- What is the What (2006)
- Zeitoun (2009)
- The Wild Things (2009)

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- 'Zeitoun' by Dave Eggers - Book Club Discussion Questions
- The Wild Things
A hologram for the king (Jun 2012)

Author: Eggers, Dave

Adults  Fiction 🌟

Description:
In a Saudi Arabian city, far from weary, recession-scarred America, a struggling businessman attempts to avoid foreclosure, pay his daughter's college tuition, and finally do something great.

Book Appeal Terms: Definition of Appeal Terms

Genre: Science fiction; Social science fiction

Storyline: Character-driven

Tone: Melancholy; Thought-provoking

Writing Style: Sparse

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/* Starrred Review */ Alan Clay is in Saudi Arabia, hired by an American company to sell an IT system based on a revolutionary hologram that enables far-flung associates to instantly commune with the "telepresence" of their colleagues, to the nascent (in fact, barely begun) King Abdullah Economic City. As down and out as they come—overleveraged, unable to pay his daughter's college tuition, and scarred by his long-over marriage—Alan hopes all wrongs will be righted when his team lands the deal, and his fat commission will be enough to pay his many debts and start over. But days become weeks while the team waits in the ghostly desert fora meeting with the king, a moving target. Slowly revealing Alan's history as a salesman who encouraged his employers at Schwinn to manufacture overseas, and only too late realized his compliance in rendering his own irrelevance, Eggers effectively shows why Alan "wanted to believe that this kind of thing, a city rising from dust, could happen." In a land of contradictions—Alan repeatedly experiences exactly what guidebooks told him he wouldn't—and in a time when we depend on the instant, laser-sharpness of computers to direct decisions, Alan's greatest glories are in the waiting and in the uncertainty of his own and humanity's gray spaces. -- Bostrom, Annie (Reviewed 08-01-2012) (Booklist, vol 108, number 22, p25)

Publishers Weekly:

Eggers's first unabashedly fictional, original novel in some time nonetheless grounds itself as firmly in the real world as Zeitoun or What is the What. Businessman Alan Clay has reached middle age with experience in manufacturing and door-to-door salesmanship considered almost wholly anachronistic and in post-industrial America, "as intriguing... as an airplane built from mud." Deeply in debt and unable to continue paying for his daughter Kit to go to college, Alan finds himself in Saudi Arabia awaiting the arrival of "the Kingdom's" elusive monarch fora chance to pitch his employer, Reliant, as the information technology supplier fora massive new King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC) development. In limbo, Alan writes letters to Kit that he'll never mail, frets about his health (he's discovered a growth on his neck), and wrestles with insecurity over his past personal and business failings. This confabulation of Waiting for Godot and Save the Tiger is unsurprising, if sympathetic, in its portrait of a global economy with all the solidity of a sandcastle. Eggers strikes fresh and genuine notes, however, in Alan's burgeoning friendship with the young Saudi man, Yousef, assigned to be his driver. Both Eggers's fans and those previously resistant to his work will find a spare but moving elegy for the American century. (June) --Staff (Reviewed June 25, 2012) (Publishers Weekly, vol 259, issue 26, p)

Kirkus:
A middle-aged man scrapes for his identity in a Saudi Arabian city of the future. This book by McSweeney's founder Eggers (Zeitoun, 2009, etc.) inverts the premise of his fiction debut, 2002's You Shall Know Our Velocity. That novel was a globe-trotting tale about giving away money; this one features a hero stuck in one place and desperate to make a bundle. Alan Clay is a 50-something American salesperson for an information technology company angling fora contract to wire King Abdullah Economic City, a Saudi commerce hub. Alan and his team are initially anxious to deliver their presentation to the king—which features a remote speaker appearing via hologram—but they soon learn the country moves at a snail-like pace. So Alan drifts: He wanders the moonscape of the sparsely constructed city, obsesses over a cyst on his back, bonds with his troubled driver, pursues fumbling relationships with two women, ponders his debts and recalls his shortcomings as a salesman, husband and father. This book is in part a commentary on America's eroding economic might (there are numerous asides about offshoring and cheap labor), but it's mostly a potent, well-drawn portrait of one man's discovery of where his personal and professional selves split and connect. Eggers has matured greatly as a novelist since Velocity: Where that novel was gassy and knotted, this one has crisp sentences and a solid structure. He masters the hurry-up-and-wait rhythm of Alan's visit, accelerating the prose when the king's arrival seems imminent, then slackening it again. If anything, the novel's flaws seem to be products of too much tightening: An incident involving a death back home feels clipped and some passages are reduced to fable-like simplicity. Even so, Eggers' fiction has evolved in the past decade. This book is firm proof that that social concerns can make for resonant storytelling. (Kirkus Reviews, July 1, 2012)
A Hologram for the King

*by Dave Eggers*

Hamish Hamilton, 18.99 [pounds sterling], pp. 312, ISBN 9780241145852

The decadence of at least two societies or cultures can be seen in Dave Eggers' new novel, where some bored Americans wait for weeks in a giant cooled tent in Saudi Arabia for the chance to display the latest innovation in conference IT to King Abdullah at the unbuilt 'economic city' that bears his name. Considering current sophisticated video-conferencing and other technology, how vital is it that King Abdullah Economic City (or KAEC, pronounced 'cake') be equipped with a hologram device that enables colleagues walking and talking in London to appear to be striding the stage near Jeddah? But perhaps something similar was said about mobile phones 20 years ago.

In any event, the King knows enough not to give the Americans' hologram more than a few minutes of his time, when, after many false alarms and foreign sightings reported in the press, he does arrive at KAEC for a presentation before rushing away to spend the bulk of his day with the Chinese.

Eggers, known from previous books as a clear-eyed and sensitive observer of embattled civilisations (certainly including America's), seems sure-footed for every step of this story of a broke and squeezed-out consultant, Alan Clay, who started in manufacturing (bicycles, primarily), until that fell apart in the US, and he began wandering the globe looking for his big score or commission from impatient clients like his current patron, the IT behemoth Reliant.

Of course, the novel is about globalisation. But what sticks is an understated environmentalism or gloom in beholding a progressively uninhabitable planet. It may be pinched human settlements in the kingdom's desert mountains that prompts a thought that 'people shouldn't live here', but when the thought is expanded to the idea that man's work is 'done behind the back of the natural world', that 'when nature notices, and can muster the energy, it wipes the slate clean,' it applies everywhere. Earlier, but on the Red Sea, Earth was 'an animal that shakes off its fleas when they dig too deep', that 'shifts and our cities fall; it sighs and the coasts are overtaken. We really shouldn't be here at all.'

But people have to live somewhere: Clay, for instance, who will lose his house if he doesn't earn money, fast; his Saudi driver, Yousef, seemingly urbane, but more of a villager and a primitive than he knows; the cosmopolitan doctor Zahra who removes a cyst from Clay's neck that he darkly believed must be cancer. For all of these characters, human relationships are or become frayed. Clay, long divorced, writes unsent letters to a daughter he'll have to withdraw from her expensive college when the bill comes due, and loses an only friend and possibly a lover. Sleep-deprived from the start, he is also losing his mind. He is alternately indifferent or insanely ramped-up.

Invoking the Chekhovian principle that an uncovered gun must, in time, be fired, Eggers describes a tragedy almost come down on Clay but averted: 'Because he hadn't done anything, for years or ever, he had almost done this.' In a book striking more than a few notes of Beckett, from its epigraph ('it is not every day that we are needed') to the waiting around that is a permanent state of being, Clay's hovering between doing something and doing nothing, resolved in nearly doing something truly terrible, seems almost like mankind's last gasp.

Weinberger, Eric

**Source Citation** (MLA 7th Edition)

Document URL
http://go.galegroup.com-ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA316941078&v=2.1&u=lom_metronetmnfc&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w&asid=8b7fc9ba315a6746a88d56498b9c23fa

**Gale Document Number:** GALE|A316941078
A Hologram for the King

Dave Eggers


"Not able to stand kindness at this time. Feeling, heart, everything in strange condition. Unfinished business," writes Herzog to a friend in Saul Bellow's classic novel of male midlife crisis. The protagonist of Dave Eggers's latest novel, A Hologram for the King, is decidedly Herzogian: indeed, "Unfinished Business" might have been an alternative title for the story of Alan Clay and his midlife crisis.

Like Herzog, Clay spends his novel surveying the wreckage of his life: a vengeful ex-wife, a daughter he loves but from whom he fears estrangement, failed professional ambitions and the anxieties about virility that male writers keep mistaking for a universal symbol of existential crisis. Clay even writes Herzogian letters to his daughter, unsent epistles in which he ties to make sense of his disappointments: Clay is the kind of man who can magically turn success into defeat.

As the novel opens, Clay has just arrived in Saudi Arabia, where he hopes to sell an American IT system (his conglomerate is ironically named 'Reliant') to the King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC). It is Clay's last chance: nearly broke, he is trying to sell his house to pay his daughter's university tuition. Banking everything on the possibility that a few grains of Arabian wealth might trickle down to him, Clay must impress King Abdullah with a hologram presentation that will convince him to use Reliant to provide the KAEC's IT infrastructure.

Once in the desert, Clay finds himself trapped in an absurdist, Beckettian landscape, in which people appear, make gnomic comments and disappear. Banished to a tent, Clay and his young team of IT consultants can't get the air conditioning or Wi-Fi to work. As he waits for the king, who may be no more imminent than Godot, Clay passes the time by wandering around the development, getting drunk, watching baseball games on cable, deciding that an ominous cyst on his neck must be cancerous and brooding over his many failures.

Clay used to sell Schwinn bicycles in Chicago; he was a good salesman, proud of the fine, handmade merchandise he sold to happy, hopeful families. But as he was promoted, he helped render himself obsolete: "More efficient without the unions, cut 'em out. More efficient without American workers, period, cut 'em out. Why didn't I see it coming? More efficient without me, too ... We made it so efficient I became unnecessary. I made myself irrelevant." They also put Schwinn, like so many other local, respected manufacturing companies, out of business.

After contributing to the collapse of his industry, Clay dreams of redeeming himself by designing a new bicycle, "with dean lines, tons of chrome, everything built to last a thousand years and never look weary". Yet his funding collapses and he is left even further in debt than before, relying on holograms instead of "three-dimensional things", as his father, who was a factory foreman, rather too italically tells him:

Talk about three-dimensional, Alan. These are actual things. They're making actual things over there [in China], and we're making websites and holograms. Every day our people are making their websites and holograms, while sitting in chairs made in China, working on computers made in China, driving over bridges made in China. Does that sound sustainable to you, Alan?
Lest we miss the point that Alan's crisis allegorises that of his nation, Eggers creates a series of secondary characters to remind us. On his flight to Saudi Arabia, Clay meets another businessman "who was drunk and maybe unhinged, too, [and] was, like Clay, born into manufacturing and somewhere later got lost in worlds tangential to the making of things". He meets an architect who has been working in Dubai, Singapore, Abu Dhabi and China but not in America: "Not that it's about the biggest or tallest, but you know, in the US now there's not that kind of dreaming happening. It's on hold. The dreaming's being done elsewhere for now, the architect said. Then he left the party."

The ethos of this novel is about the value of making things, of taking pride in them and creating economies based on the solidity of things. But is the making of things really the solution or part of the problem? Eggers doesn't want to ask. Similarly, Eggers gestures towards the problem of oppression in Saudi Arabia and shows us a few fleeting migrant workers but the main characters in the novel are all westernised and speak perfect American English. Clay's driver, Yousef, checks his car for a bomb: "It's nothing terrorist," he assures Alan. "It's just this guy who thinks I'm screwing his wife." Yousef is given some of the novel's best lines, such as when they look at the roads to nowhere in KAEC, which are being swept by workers: "This is where the money's going. They're sweeping the sand in a desert."

Like many such comic characters, including Herzog, Clay is anxious, paunchy, often foolish to the point of buffoonery, and yet the women he meets find him unaccountably attractive. (Just once, it would be nice to read a novel about a man whose midlife crisis so bores all the women he meets that they tell him where he can put his self-pity, instead of prompting them to strip off their clothes.) Clay claims to be tired of himself and yet nothing absorbs him more. He has no time--and neither does the novel--for his three co-workers, who are sketched in only to disappear.

In one respect at least Clay differs defiantly from Herzog: he has lost interest in sex. Part of Eggers's comedy is that Alan is indifferent to the orgies he encounters among the bored expatriates in the desert. Clay's lack of desire is symptomatic not just of his depression but of the novel's theme that Americans have stopped dreaming or wishing for anything real, lost in dreamscape worlds, trapped between nostalgia for the past and hubristic visions of the future.

It is not surprising, however, when a novel about people in limbo encounters problems with plot. How to make anything happen in a story about people who are emotionally paralysed? Eggers falls back on two solutions, both of which feel almost as tired as Clay. There is the inevitable woman who reawakens Clay's torpid desire and a surreal trip into the Saudi countryside that ends with Alan on a wolf hunt with local villagers, which goes quite predictably awry.

A Hologram for the King was nominated for the National Book Award last year in the US, where it has been greeted with rapturous reviews. There is no doubt about Eggers's talent: he is one of the most interesting and energetic young (ish) American writers around and his first novel in a decade is intelligent, entertaining and full of finely observed impressions. However, its lament for a lost dream of real Americans making real things is at the very least deeply nostalgic.

Viewed from one perspective, we might even think that such sentimental materialism is what got us into trouble in the first place. It is telling, surely, that Clay has come to fetishise a sleek, silver bicycle as the object that might redeem him and his country: is such a miracle of chrome a simple child's toy, a mode of locomotion, a modernist art deco vision or yet another object for Americans to worship?

The hologram becomes not just an image of Clay's illusions but of the illusions with which the US sustains itself. The mirage of continued world power, the delusion of economic might, is also a degradation of the American dream. Holograms are all that America dreams about now.

Sarah Churchwell's "Careless People: Murder, Mayhem and the Invention of 'The Great Gatsby'" will be published by Virago in June

Churchwell, Sarah

Source Citation (MLA 7th Edition)

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Read-alikes for A hologram for the king

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A hologram for the king
By: Eggers, Dave
In a Saudi Arabian city, far from weary, recession-scarred America, a struggling businessman attempts to avoid foreclosure, pay his daughter's college tuition, and finally do something great.

Read-alikes

1. *The dog*
   O'Neill, Joseph, 1964-
   **Reason:** The main characters in these darkly humorous literary stories are displaced American expats grappling with dubious business practices and a seemingly soulless society in ultramodern Middle Eastern cities. Both novels take a thought-provoking look at the global economy of consumption. -- Anthea Goffe

2. *The infinite tides*
   Kiefer, Christian, 1971-
   **Reason:** The main characters in these spare, reflective books find themselves in unfamiliar territory as they grapple with personal and work-related problems. But by befriending strangers with whom they have very little in common, they come to terms with their situations. -- Shauna Griffin

3. *Atlas shrugged*
   Rand, Ayn
   **Reason:** These books are Thought-provoking, and they share: the genre 'Science fiction' and the subject 'Businessmen and businesswomen'.

4. *Archform*
   Modesitt, L. E., Jr., 1943-
   **Reason:** These books are Thought-provoking, and they share: the genre 'Science fiction' and the subject 'Businessmen and businesswomen'.

5. *Makers*
   Doctorow, Cory
   **Reason:** These books are Character-driven, and they share: the genre 'Science fiction' and the subject 'Businessmen and businesswomen'.

6. *The demolished man*
   Bester, Alfred
   **Reason:** These books are Thought-provoking, and they share: the genre 'Science fiction' and the subject 'Businessmen and businesswomen'.

7. *The veiled web*
   Asaro, Catherine
   **Reason:** These books are Character-driven, and they share: the genre 'Science fiction' and the subject 'Businessmen and businesswomen'.

8. *The god particle*
   Cox, Richard, 1970-
   **Reason:** These books are Thought-provoking, and they share: the genre 'Science fiction' and the subject 'Businessmen and businesswomen'.

http://web.a.ebscohost.com/novelist/detail?sid=dad2163d-aec8-4b9f-9cc3-5ac2686db5f6%4... 1/7/2015
9. **Sewer, gas & electric**  
Ruff, Matt  
**Reason:** These books share: the genre 'Science fiction' and the subject 'Businessmen and businesswomen'.
Read-alikes for Eggers, Dave

Find more read-alikes in Novelist.

Eggers, Dave
Dave Eggers is a jack of all trades in the literary world. He is an editor and a publisher; he writes nonfiction, short stories, and novels; he works in genres from Humor to Memoir to Literary Fiction. It is difficult to make generalizations about the unpredictable Eggers, who can glide from silly to ironic to tragic in one book. It is safe to say, however, Eggers reliably delivers pathos and passion, whether his subject is serious, fanciful, or somewhere in between. Start with: A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius (Nonfiction); What Is the What (Fiction).

Read-alikes

1. Wolfe, Tom
   
   **Reason:** Tom Wolfe and Dave Eggers represent different generations of novelists and nonfiction writers whose witty, sometimes experimental writing looks at contemporary societies (especially American) as if through a kaleidoscope. Some of their works entertain while skewering sacred cows, while other works, especially their longer nonfiction, soberly assess American cultural flaws. -- Katherine Johnson

2. Didion, Joan
   
   **Reason:** Both writers cover the gamut of literary output -- novels, essays, magazine articles, and memoir. Their thought-provoking and thoughtful work is candid and witty, reflective, moving, and character-driven. They cover a variety of topics, but whatever they're writing about, they're doing it with conviction and elan. -- Melissa Gray

3. Murphy, Yannick
   
   **Reason:** Yannick Murphy and Dave Eggers both write complex fiction in which a character often experiences an unexpected intrusion that flips his (or her) life upside down. These intrusions are often physical events that have lasting emotional consequences. -- Rebecca Sigmon

4. Kelly, Elizabeth, 1952-
   
   **Reason:** Dave Eggers and Elizabeth Kelly both write quirky tales of eccentric, engaging characters who are often riddled with guilt and self-obsession. -- Rebecca Sigmon

5. Sharpe, Matthew, 1962-
   
   **Reason:** Matthew Sharpe and Dave Eggers are contemporary novelists whose books are often darkly comic commentaries on the present world. -- Rebecca Sigmon

6. Wallace, David Foster
   
   **Reason:** If you enjoy contemporary writers whose fiction is darkly comic yet insightful and whose nonfiction is candid and self-deprecating, you may enjoy reading the works of Dave Eggers and David Foster Wallace. -- Rebecca Sigmon

7. Drabble, Margaret, 1939-
   
   **Reason:** These authors' works are Witty and Character-driven, and they share: the genres 'Psychological fiction' and 'Biography, Autobiography, and Memoir' and the subject 'Voyages and travels'.

8. Hay, Elizabeth, 1951-
   
   **Reason:** These authors' works are Moving and Character-driven, and they share: the genres 'Psychological fiction' and 'Biography, Autobiography, and Memoir' and the subjects 'Voyages and travels' and 'Interpersonal relations'.
9. **Quarrington, Paul**

**Reason:** These authors' works are Moving and Character-driven, and they share: the genres 'Psychological fiction' and 'Biography, Autobiography, and Memoir' and the subjects 'Voyages and travels' and 'Interpersonal relations'.

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