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Unplugging

New novel delves into the potential slippery slope of the digital dark side

By Lou Fancher



Photo provided

Technology is too much with us. I'd die without my phone.

The competing love/hate thoughts are universal. Voiced by millions, echoed by Lamorinda residents during a recent, unscientific survey and captured quasi-fictionally by Bay Area author Dave Eggers in his 2013 release, "The Circle" (Knopf), the Internet's push and pull are well-trod terrain.

Unsurprisingly, the subject springs to refreshed life in the snarky, dextrous hands of Eggers, whose award-winning novels frequently unravel the ragged overlap of utopian and dystopian states. Set in the always-online world of the Circle, an initially benevolent big baby Internet company birthed in the wake of Facebook, Google, Instagram and others, Mae Holland is a young, customer service hire. Initially star-struck by the company's gymnasium, food emporium and famous rock stars on the lawn, Mae becomes enamored with numbers.

Soon enough, she's counting the Circle's "zinging" and "smiling" in her direction and promoting surveillance with "SeeChange" cameras and "ChildTrack" chips. She even swallows a smoothie-smothered chip and gains access through a spangly wristband to the minutiae of her body's BMI, blood counts, and an EKG, "shooting right like blue lightning and then starting over." There's an inevitability to the narrative, even when her path is repeatedly speed-bumped by Kalden, a mysterious co-worker who urges Mae to "rein in" the Circle's "very hungry, very evil empire." Gradually, her parents, her ex-husband and even Annie, the BFF who brought her into the Circle's fold, collapse from the digital connectedness.

Failing to recognize how the Circle has become more like a noose, Mae decides "not knowing" is the fear ripping her apart. "It was exasperating, really, Mae thought, not knowing. It was an affront, a deprivation, to herself and to the world," Eggers writes.

Although heavy-handed in a way his previous "A Hologram for the King" was not, "The Circle" is mostly fun/scary, like a ride on a colossal playground swing. The mix of polemic, stomach-churning plunges into the digital dark side and weightless suspension while summarizing humanity's inhumanity, occasionally teeters into scolding, but leaves a thrilling aftertaste. In the end, the novel's pleasures come from Eggers' fascinating, quirky demi-characters (Mae is too dim-bulbed to be admired) and the way he nails contemporary society to the wall while positioning the reader to enjoy delicious, "I told you so" superiority.

Eggers' book also makes the broader point that the Internet won't save us – it might even kill us. And if it doesn't literally lead us to suicide as it did Mercer, Mae's ex and a digital deviant who propels himself off a cliff rather than be tracked, it surely dilutes our uniqueness. So why are we so addicted to something positioned to become a totalitarian nightmare? Why do we risk losing individuality by feeding our lives through a Playdoh-like extruder that reduces us to perfectly-matched "1's" and "0's"? Perhaps it is because the Internet is not the first landscape for mankind's tendency to pair radical rapture with capitalistic ambition. Maybe we're merely revolving in an eternal pattern, albeit one with attractive, new toys.

On March 7, this year's National Day of Unplugging, opinions about technology and its pervasiveness from folks in Lamorinda ran the gamut.

"I have a basket and all the cell phones go in it before a family dinner," said Bryan Murphy of Lafayette. With three boys to raise, he instituted a "no game consoles during the week" rule and said the best way to

prevent a battle over technology is to never let it start. "I don't check email for days," Murphy said. "My friends have to come find me."

Wendy Dunn juggles a variety of volunteer activities and said her phone frees her from a home computer and keeps her on track. When her kids were young, she missed out on family time when getting work done meant being at a desk. "I still meet with people face-to-face and this helps me," she said, holding up her smartphone.

Moraga's Ramey Stevens said she's so tied to her phone it's become like a part of her anatomy. "One day, I left my phone at home. During an appointment, I actually looked at my hand to see what time it was. Like this," she said, upturning her palm as if holding an invisible phone. Ironically, being connected – even on vacation – and handling the avalanche of daily emails she receives as a person in sales makes Stevens feel "untethered."

A group of teens from Campo offered an eclectic mix of responses to the question, "Do you unplug?"

"I put my phone on 'do not disturb' while doing homework, but that's it," 16-year-old Michael Wright said.

"I can't unplug," Garrett Felix, 17, confessed. "I only did it once and yeah, I got stuff done. If I had to unplug? I'd sleep or eat to fill the time – or go to swim practice, I guess."

Michael Peterson, 17, said technology is advancing, not reducing, his social skills. "I'm actually communicating more, even if I'm texting and not talking."

Ryan Shaw, 16, provided a retro profile, in contrast to his millennial generation friends. "On Sunday, my family unplugs. I'm not on the phone. We talk about the week, play sports, read, get food and share it. I'm away from the world. I like it."

And so, Eggers had it right: use technology – just don't fall in love with it.

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Clever Musical Comedy Comes to THT March 30

Submitted by Arron Schuler



Photo Sue Ellen Nelsen

Rita the Cow (Diane Kehrig, left), Jack (Liam Gaard, center), and Lucy the Goose (Caroline Schneider, right) embark on a musical adventure in the East Bay Children's Theatre production of "Jack and the Beanstalk and the Giant, and the Goose, and the Really, Truly-Uly Rotten Day" – an upbeat, clever comedy with Broadway-style songs written by the Bay Area's most prolific creator of new musicals, Ron Lytle, and directed by Sue Ellen Nelsen that will be shown at 2 p.m. Sunday, March 30 at Town Hall Theatre in Lafayette. Tickets: \$12; purchase online at www.EBCOnline.org.