You are not Special.

Woody Allen once said, “If you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans.” If this is the case, God likely exists in hysterics. Mankind has a good bit of trouble divorcing itself from the notion that they are in control, that their desires and ambitions and dreams can be fulfilled, that they can make *plans*. Whatever is out there, be it God or nothingness, the plans of petty mortals don’t always come to fruition. Sometimes, it even seems as if something intentionally derails them. One is left to contemplate the failed plans of their past, assess whether or not he or she has any control over plans currently in motion, and wonder if their future will be at all what he or she expects. In this sense, many writers of modern fiction challenge the notion of “Grand Narratives”, plans, and dreams that serve only to disappoint the current generation. Rather, the past must be learnt from but not clung to, the present must be seized, and the future approached with a utmost caution, should we become too disenchanted with reality.

The generation of Baby Boomers, who entered life Post-World War II, were taught by their parents (The “Greatest Generation”, who faced both the Great Depression and World War II) that life is tough, and that through hard work and discipline, it was possible to overcome adversity, and achieve a comfortable and secure living. The generations that followed (X, Y, and now Z) have had a very different upbringing, raised to believe that they are each uniquely special, leading to unfounded expectations of glamourous success with relatively little effort. This disadvantage, coupled with the overwhelming networking that technology allows, has created a generation that believes the world is theirs, just ripe for the picking. Again, reality does not quite agree with these folks, and when their lofty expectations are less-than-met, or even obliterated by the harshness of reality, they become disenchanted with the pettiness of the real world, and seek escape through fantastical hyperrealities that do not contain these constraints. The interconnectedness of these hyperrealities, such as Facebook, encourages these young men and women to compare themselves to their peers. Ironically, a phenomenon known as “Image Crafting” takes place subconsciously as social media becomes more prominent; people feel far more compelled to share good news or experiences than bad ones, leading to a deceptively flattering “identity” coming into existence, no matter how accurate or realistic these projected selves appear. Fiction must investigate how these projected selves become more important or “real” than daily life, rendering the past obsolete and shaping a future where *living* can take place beyond real life.

Many of the characters in Jennifer Egan’s A Visit from the Goon Squad view their pasts with longing, feeling as if their “glory days” have come and gone. Lou reflects on his days as a “younger man”, wondering “When did I get so old?” (pg. 85) Somehow, lying vegetable-like in a hospital bed doesn’t quite compare to cocaine-fueled debauchery with underage girls. In his specific case the best of his days are truly behind him - rebirth is a lost hope. Rather than accept his aging and near-death, Lou withdraws from reality, comforted by the memories of his past. Other characters feel similarly about their pasts; Bennie puts thousands of dollars worth of gold into his coffee on a daily basis, trying to rejuvenate his lost libido (pg. 21.) Dolly is forced to mend the appearance of a genocidal general, having lost her prestige and respect after *accidentally* dousing celebrities with acid (pg. 142.) Alex remembers a world before handsets, when people didn’t sell their opinions for cash (pg. 315.) The dystopian future of Egan’s book exaggerates the notion that these interconnected realms will eventually devour the “real lives” of citizens, drowning them with a neverending cascade of information, advertisements, opinions, and sensations. Future generations will likely face such difficulties, and will have to explicitly *learn* how to ground themselves in reality. The idea of being an independent, uninfluenced *self* will be viewed as “Atavistic Purism”, an unattainable “perfect” state that “doesn’t exist and never existed” according to Lulu on page 319. In this sense, contemporary writers may view the future as a troubled one, in which their craft may no longer be appreciated, or even exist. The artificial “perfection” that can be sought on a screen could one day render obsolete a traditional human existence, where challenges arise, flaws persist, and occasionally, bad things happen (*especially* to good people.). Egan’s vision of the future seems eerily possible at the rate things are going, and it serves as a warning against the mesmerizing allure of hyperrealities, lest they override our perception of the imperfect real world.

Time is portrayed as both circular and irrlevent in Zeroville, A Visit from the Goon Squad, and Await Your Reply. In Zeroville, time is portrayed as circular and/or instantaneous, that it has all already happened and will happen again. This reiterates the notion of rebirth, the possibility that the past could resurface and a sense of comfort in believing that the future holds the same opportunities as the past. Vikar, in the absence of a typical nuclear family, becomes utterly enamored with the silver screen, which simultaneously is able to convey “real life” (leaving him with immature, fantastical sexual expectations, for example) while being fictional. In Goon Squad, each of the characters feels dissatisfied by where they are in life, yearning for a past as they experience nostalgia, or envisioning a future in which they can be made whole again. However in doing so they neglect the current events and relationships in their lives, realizing too late that they have rejected tangible connections for phantasmal ones. In Dan Chaon's Await Your Reply, many of the characters are literally on-the-run from their pasts, seeking to be transform their current identity, be reborn into a new identity, or become lost in the blurred space between reality and hyperreality. Ryan, disenchanted with his regular life, leaps on the opportunity to scamper across state lines for his biological father’s shady business, juggling ID’s and credit cards as he assumes a number of various lives that check out on paper, but don’t actually exist. Lucy, who flees with her high school teacher George Orson, longs to escape from her horrifically boring hometown of Pompey, Ohio, believing that any form of departure is better than a bland existence on her own. Miles seeks to confront his past and control his future by locating his troubled brother Hayden, who has been evading him for years, taunting him through email and telephone call with the idea that his twisted mental state may not entirely be his own. Each of these characters attempts to define who they are as life bowls them over with obstacles and tragedies, reaching into their pasts for fragments that can be used to re-construct the self, and fearing a future in which they will be forgotten or outdated.

In a world of endless copies, avatars, and projected selves, the traditional sense of an “identity” becomes difficult to maintain, especially when these media portray only inflated, unrealistic images. The fact of the matter is, reality does not have infinite success to offer to everyone, and the typical struggles of life can often seem decimating to naive individuals who have been raised to think that life is a cakewalk. More accurately, life sucks and then you die. An overflow of information has stifled the connection between man and reality; curiosity, which was once able to inspire individuals to pursue knowledge, finds itself muted by the roar of information that a google search can turn up in .3 seconds, and the thousands of Facebook friends who view our profile every day weigh heavily upon how one perceives him or herself. Surviving is no longer a struggle in the sense of needing enough food to make it through the winter, but rather, attempting to construct some sense of purpose or meaning in a world where an individual with high expectations is constantly compared to his or her peers. With this in mind, modern humans must be conscious of how devoted they become to their projected selves, and instead lay a foundation for the future that is grounded in reality, perhaps by the bits and pieces of their past that make up who they are.