

Man Rants at Popular Book

While reading the number one #BeachRead of 2018, one thought lodged

itself in the back of my brain: Kevin Kwan's Crazy Rich Asians is the

This may seem odd:

Instagram of books. ~~Wait... what?~~ One is a strategically ink-smudged tree

carcass and the other an online photo-sharing service. But the

connection between CRA and Instagram came to my mind almost immediately.

They were both addicting, and they both made me feel kind of... sad?

It has been a while since I used Instagram, but when I did, I used it

It was fun, ...

frequently – probably a couple times every hour. [✓] But I also remember my

life feeling more faded with every scroll. Compared to the raucous high-

contrast novelty of my feed, the regular routine of my life ~~looked~~

was ...

mundane.

~~desaturated.~~ Perhaps my path through life is particularly dull, but my

mental armor does not seem particularly weak – studies on social media

use have revealed a positive correlation with depression and anxiety.¹

The evidence collected so far isn't strong enough to claim a causal

link, but it aligns with my ^{my} ~~own~~ experience. ~~The~~ glumness ~~I felt~~ was in

some sense external, or at least not consistent with other parts of my

mind. ~~I know that~~ I thrive in a life governed by routine. Keeping many

things static frees up my mind to make slow incremental progress towards

my goals. If I had to live it, the life shown on my Instagram feed would

exhaust me without moving the progress bar of my life forward. And yet I

kept pulling-to-refresh. In fact, I only found the #strength to leave

Instagram after the rise of finstas – a separate, more private instagram

account used mainly to gossip with close friends. This additional

pressure to find yet another vein in the mountain of my life to strip-

mine for social media points broke Instagram for me. ~~To this day, the~~

~~fact that people have (or perhaps cultivate, or maybe just fake) enough
variety in their life to justify an entirely seperate account makes my
head spin.~~

But books and social media platforms are quite different – why draw a

link between Instagram and CRA? Leaving Instagram (and various other

social media platforms) *sensitized me* ~~made me more sensitive~~ to the addictive-and-

desaturating sensation that I associated with their use. And in some

ways CRA was a stronger vector for this feeling than Instagram, for all

its algorithms. Books make your brain do they heavy lifting when you

read them – you have to imagine the wizardry when you read Harry Potter

rather than simply register it when you *watch* Harry Potter. This is

actually a strength of books – when a beloved character dies it happens

inside you rather than on a screen. So when CRA opens with a character

wielding incomprehensible wealth as a weapon against a racist hotel

manager, you *feel* righteous and powerful. Until you remember that *your* wealth is all too comprehensible. At least on Instagram you can put a filter on your pictures – perhaps banks should institute a similar feature.

CRA isn't poorly written – in fact I found it hard to put down. While it doesn't spend much time developing its characters, CRA uses its pages to floridly describe opulence. The depictions are well-crafted, incorporating art, fashion, and cuisine. Reading the book feels like learning about actual people living actual lives, just like scrolling through Instagram felt like keeping up with the lives of my friends. It also avoids the pitfalls of tokenism, in my opinion. Slang and history are used to ground the characters and locales, rather than exoticize them.

Kevin Kwan uses culture as a lens through which wealth is shown.

Extravagant art ("He didn't have any Rothkos or Pollocks or the other dead American artists one was required to hang on the wall in order to be considered truly rich these days.") ~~ardons the walls~~ ^{is displayed}. Extravagant

food ("It's always guesswork when you're eating cuisine, even more so when it's Pacific Rim fusion molecular cuisine.") is consumed.

Extravagant fashion ("Astrid was the first to pair a vintage Saint

Laurent Le Smoking jacket with three-dollar batik shorts bought off a

beach vendor in Bali, the first to wear the Antwerp Six, and the first

to bring home a pair of red-heeled stilettos from some Parisian

shoemaker named Christian.") is worn. And just as culture permeates the

displays of wealth, the displays of wealth permeate the structure of the

book. If there's a character we're supposed to dislike, we're supposed

to dislike them because of how they relate to wealth. One such character

~~earns our ire by forcing~~ ^{forces} his family into expensive designer clothes just

to preen for the paparazzi. He eventually receives his comeuppance, but

through a process in which

~~it results in~~ the protagonist receiving a diamond necklace that allows

no italics
~~her~~

to display wealth and get higher status. When the book uses money

and status as its moral currency, it undercuts any lesson about the

dangers of wealth-based peacocking. In fact it implies that justice and

wealth are entangled.

A key theme in Crazy Rich Asians is the struggle to integrate into an

lead

unfamiliar world. The less wealthy, female ~~protagonist~~ struggles to gain

lead

acceptance in the world of the more wealthy, male ~~protagonist~~. CRA makes

it clear that there is a one-way struggle; the male protagonist

effortlessly integrates with his counterpart's environment. This pattern

Synonym

is further mirrored in the B plot. The secondary ~~protagonist's~~ marriage

crumbles because her less wealthy husband fails to integrate into her

world. The structure of the theme conflates success with the approval of

those wealthier than you.

This is a harmful message...

All of this sums to a feeling of discontent that doesn't have a real

basis. Crazy Rich people aren't happier than the rest of us – additional

income only makes you happier up to a point. [^fn2] The hedonic

→ like
treadmill inevitably wears luxury down to the mundane. But reading about

people enjoying private jets and personal chefs makes you want to be

rich
~~wealthier~~. Reading about people who simply inherited their money and

rich
status makes you want to get ~~wealth~~ without effort. That's the kind of

wish that doesn't drive you to action, it just increases your longing.

You want to win a lottery, but not just any lottery. Crazy Rich Asians

makes you want to play the lottery of birth, which nobody – no matter

how incomprehensibly wealthy – can buy another ticket for.

– [1]: NIH Report [^fn2]: *This income satiation point* can differ

depending on where you are in the world, but is around \$75,000.

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