

by Martin Peichl
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Fiction

It is only us

Es sind nur wir

review

A literary novel with elements of the surreal, *It is only us* by prize-winning Austrian author Martin Peichl is a reflection on grief and trauma through the eyes of a narrator whose grip on reality loosens as he gradually becomes a survivalist.

A former IT teacher, the unnamed protagonist now works on computer game glitches; it is gradually revealed that he hasn't taught since one of his favourite students, Paul, threw himself out of a window during a lesson. Unable to come to terms with his grief, the narrator has become obsessed with loss, noting down things that have disappeared – or are about to – on index cards. He claims to be writing a book but is too preoccupied with the ways in which the world might end.

Reality becomes ever less tangible, as the narrator meanders between the virtual world he is working on and the real world, where there are power cuts, sirens and thunderous rain showers. He is in non-committal relationships with various women and starts an affair with Paul's mother. His other social exchanges consist of visits to his own mother, who is developing dementia, and beers in the pub with his friend Julian. He logs into a live sex show regularly, obsessing about the women on screen and their private lives.

He begins a relationship with Masha, whom he meets on a bird watching trip. Masha takes him back to her flat and shows him her

bunker, where she is preparing for the end of the world.

Things begin to unravel. He finds Masha on the sex channel, watching her pack a bag with everything you would need to survive the apocalypse. One day his mother won't answer her calls, and he and Masha drive out to find her asleep amongst photographs of people she can't remember. Another night he and Julian are at the pub when torrential rain floods the city.

His interactions with the other women in his life become increasingly transactional, and his search for connection ultimately fails. His mother slowly declines, and Paul's mother eventually ends their affair. The world is ending, he thinks, and if it isn't, maybe it should be.

The novel concludes with Masha and the narrator locking themselves in the bunker with enough provisions to survive the end, which, the last line tells us, may or may not be real.

This is a gripping and original novel, with moments of comedy despite the dark subject matter. Exploring the timely theme of climate grief, *It is only us* is reminiscent of Jenny Offill's *Weather* and A.L. Kennedy's *Everything You Need*: a protagonist we shouldn't like takes us on a bleak journey we can't help but want to go on.

Find out more: https://www.haymonverlag.at/produkt/es-sind-nur-wir/

about the author



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Martin Peichl was born in 1983 and lives and works in Vienna. He has published widely and been awarded numerous prizes. He works as a literary agent, including for the libraries of the City of Vienna. He has curated the Literaturmeile Zieglergasse festival since 2023. His new novel, 'It is only Us' (Haymon, September 2024) transports us to a world where everything has seemingly fallen apart but where everything is interconnected.

Previous works: Wie man Dinge repariert, Edition Atelier (2019), In einer komplizierten Beziehung mit Österreich, Kremayr &

Scheriau (2020), Gespenster zählen, Kremayr & Scheriau (2021).

Find out more: https://www.martin-peichl.at

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