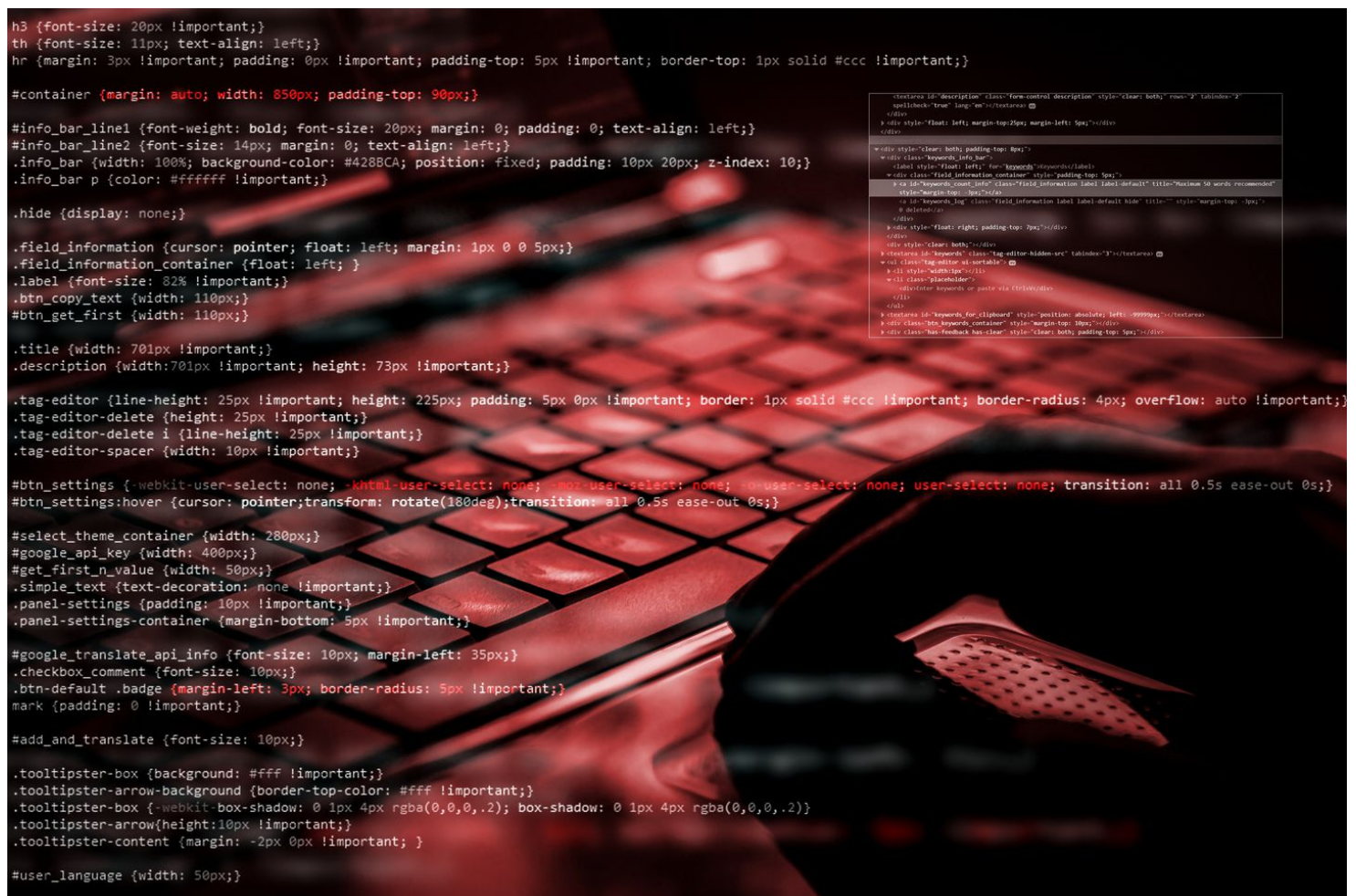


BOOK REVIEW

One site to rule us all

Dave Eggers takes on the consumerist-surveillance panopticon

By **Kerri Arsenault** Globe Correspondent, Updated October 7, 2021, 3:10 p.m.



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Once a decade a book like “The Every” advances the frontier of literary excellence: a book that reflects our culture. Predicts our future. Worm-holes into our subconscious. Delivers artful and complex characters, metaphor, ideas, narrative. Provides percussive movements of levity, gravity, grace, suspense, hilarity. Encourages deep

discussion. The book's genius is also reinforced by Dave Eggers's pitch-perfect satiric observations of modern (mostly liberal progressive) anxieties like healthcare, inequality, environmental disaster, animal rights, food sensitivities, misogyny, truth, big ag, big tech, and anxiety itself.

Plot-wise, "The Every" is simple. Delaney Wells, age thirty-two, is a former forest ranger and rabid technology skeptic when she Trojan Horses her way into The Every — the world's dominant search engine/app developer/ecommerce giant /tech company — and schemes to destroy it from within. Her hope is to free humanity from The Every's constant and ubiquitous electronic surveillance, and how The Every has "disseminated hate," "facilitated the degradation of American democracy," and "never seemed sorry for any regulatory crime nor chastened by any deleterious or misery-causing use of their products."

Delaney feeds The Every silly product ideas, each one more absurd than the next, which she believes consumers will reject. DidI? measures orgasm intensity, duration, and quality. FictFix rewrites old novels, making them more palatable vis-à-vis aggregated complaints about "unsympathetic protagonists," or "problematic and outdated terminology." EndDis allows users to present pictures of anything, and ask the internet if it should exist. If not, it is eliminated, even historical records. Delaney's experiment skids sideways when such platforms become wildly popular instead. Rather than kill the Every, Delaney's ideas engorge it. The will of people *outside* The Every—consumers—are the real Troy.

The platforms elicit an uncanny valley sensation, and Eggers ensures we connect the tilt of our real world habits of tending constantly and furiously to our electronic devices, to his fictional world psychosis of being "dinged eighteen hours a day" and tending to "obligations" that include "churning," meaning the "task of posting, smiling, winking, frowning, rainbowing, sending and receiving Popeyes." Churning

also includes rating everyone and everything else: are your parents, your lunch, or your friend's orgasm any good? To Eggers's credit and keeping in line with his critique of ecommerce monopolist Amazon and its cascading deleterious effects on small businesses, *The Every* will only be sold at independent bookstores and McSweeney's, the book's nonprofit publisher, and *not* on Amazon.

Popeyes — posing as Popeye for selfies — are the apex of Eggers's terrifying humor. In six months Delaney posts 4,290 Popeyes and her friends reciprocate. Meanwhile, *The Every* had “engineered [the trend] to gather location data and examine sundry data points about human behavior, and a billion people had been only too happy to comply.” Delaney even carries a tiny corn-cob pipe in her pocket “because taking pictures with a corncob pipe between one's teeth was impossible to resist and in its own small way, united the world's people.” Popeyes are a benign activity she thinks, as do we, considering the popularity of porn and pet videos and the social media trends of ice-bucketing and the fist-banging “Chopping Dance” on TikTok. The data culled from online habits are not only commodified for advertisers, they are grist for cognitive researchers who use it to advise (governments or companies like *The Every*) how to disseminate opinion and tweak our rage or despair by exploiting the things we feed it. This is the soundtrack of their/our lives. The seemingly harmless hearts and eggplants feed — the word “feed” reflecting an insatiable hunger for ratings, responses, clicks, validation—and create an angry or depressed citizenry, who have been reduced to numbers they're complicit in providing. We become the sum total of our aggregate scores.

“*The Every*” reaches beyond a polemic screed. Eggers sows positive, necessary, even lucrative ideas into the cradle of his narrative: *The Every* provides lifelong health insurance for you and your parents! *The Every* ensures safe, clean, ample housing and organic local food for employees! Commutes are eliminated! Plastic packaging is eliminated so you no longer have to fret about choosing products sheathed in plastic.

In fact, the sublimating mantra underpinning *The Every* is *less is more*, with one employee citing that “stress and paralysis of unlimited options” leads to uncertainty. The stress comes from worrying that what you purchased may be inferior or “you paid too much, or it was made by sweatshop children.” And that uncertainty is a world in which we don’t want to live, an idea played out in a hysterical scene where Delaney takes colleagues to Point Reyes for the day. Consumers are living in a world of enough ambiguity and want to be told what to do, Eggers suggests, and it’s the same with the platforms, what they are worth, what friends are worth, to be measured, to take measure of Every Thing.

But eventually these platforms and initiatives reach extremes. Anywhere off the *Every* campus is called “Nowhere.” People protect the environment so much they never set foot in it. Personal objects, like “summer dresses, wicker baskets, 1980s-era stereos and soiled baby blankets” and “dead son’s trophies” are considered waste and sent to Copenhagen where a carbon-neutral incinerator reduces them to a “durable black paste” that “had become especially popular with California prison-construction firms.”

Eggers leads us like the ghost of Christmas future, where he casts his view on smart speakers and cameras that listen, record, and store everything people do and say, and are slated to be installed in every home. So when an aggrieved citizenry turns on its neighbors toward police after judging what streams across their feeds: “The lawyers and law become irrelevant.” We are not in a dystopia. We are in Texas, 2021, a state that deputized its citizens to carry the law for them. In a Tilt-A-Whirl of algorithms, memories made into paste that’s made into prisons, citizens turning on neighbors, and surveillance and shame as behavior modification tools, “*The Every*” will feed the furnace of moral outrage on *actual* social media while satirizing that social media moral outrage on every page.

The Every

By Dave Eggers

496 pages, \$28 for the [McSweeney's hardcover](#), available now only at independent bookstores; \$17.95 for the [Vintage paperback](#), available in November

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