

Jennifer Government

One of the special pleasures of the *Harry Potter* stories is their send-up of modern consumer culture—from Bertie Botts' Every Flavour Beans (and they do mean every flavor) to Chocolate Frogs, which come complete with a collectible card

featuring a celebrity witch or wizard. Potter's creator, J.K. Rowling, pokes fun at contemporary marketing and advertising with tongue-in-cheek warmth that manages to make her simultaneously attractive to Madison Avenue and the rest of us—a remarkable achievement.

Down the rabbit hole

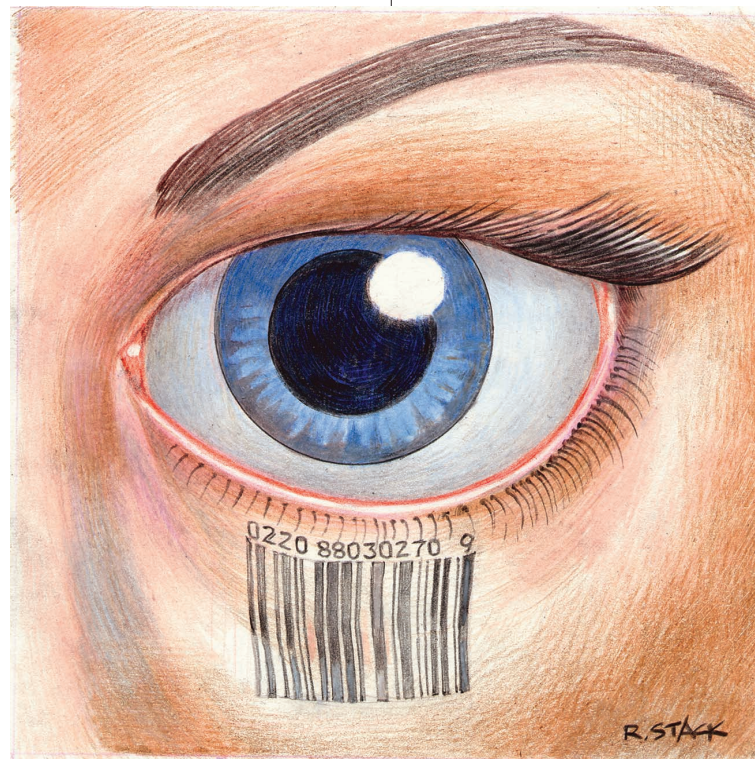
Max Barry's *Jennifer Government*, the satirical successor to his well-received first novel *Syrup*, takes a different angle on the consumer-marketing-gone-mad theme. Although Rowling's products are entirely fanciful, they're unmistakably patterned on things we all instantly recognize. Barry, however, doesn't make up the company names he uses: rather, he includes a defensive paragraph at the front of his novel proclaiming, "So, let's be clear; this is a work of fiction. The use of real company names is for literary effect only and definitely without permission."

In Barry's book, we enter a world in which countries have coalesced into giant confederations. The largest of these, the United States Federated Economic Blocs, includes the entire Western Hemisphere, Australia, southern Asia,

South Africa, the United Kingdom, Japan, and the old Soviet Union. The second major bloc, named France, is composed of the rest of the EC plus China, while Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia make up the delicately disdained Fragmented Markets. Barry thoughtfully provides a map, although its role is purely atmospheric.

The world is different in other ways as well. Your surname is your employer's name, so if your mom named you Joe and you work for IBM, you're Joseph IBM. We don't get a chance to meet any attorneys working for large multinamed partnerships, which is a shame. Understandably, unemployed people have a problem in this system, as do people with two jobs. Kids, of course, take the name of their school's sponsor; somewhat fittingly, the biggest elementary school chains are operated by McDonald's, Mattel, and Pepsi. The world's major powers aren't geographically-based governments but the frequent-buyer programs US Alliance and Team Advantage, so most of the big corporations have

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aligned themselves with one or the other. Of course, in the real world, half of all employed people work for small businesses.

Now let me take you through your options.” He closed the notebook and put it to one side. “First, you can go ahead

Government comes after us, it’s not your problem.”

Alice is not only no longer in Kansas, but the white rabbit has been smoking something stronger than tumbleweed.

Alice is not only no longer in Kansas, but the white rabbit has been smoking something stronger than tumbleweed. From here, and this is only page 11, the plot really begins to get weird. The police subcontract out the killings to the National Rifle Association (NRA), and the marketing campaign is a huge success: kids flock to malls around the United States Federated Economic Bloc to spend 25 times the normal price for a pair of sneakers. John Nike catches hell from HQ for this campaign, but only because Hack subcontracted the murders to the police, a member of Team Advantage, rather than a member of Nike’s program, US Alliance. Of course, John didn’t know that the police had jobbed the hits out to the NRA, which is a US Alliance member, or he might have saved himself a smackdown.

Go ask Alice

As the action begins, we meet Hack, a not-very-assertive, not-very-bright mailroom-clerk type in a Nike office in Melbourne. Two marketing sharpies, John Nike and John Nike, persuade him to sign a contract, but he neglects to read it or keep a copy for himself. By signing the contract, he agrees to commit 10 murders on behalf of the Johns as part of a radical marketing scheme they’ve cooked up to vitalize the sales of a line of extremely expensive shoes. Such a contract would be highly illegal in our world, but it’s enforceable in Barry’s universe, and Hack quickly realizes that he’s in big trouble. His girlfriend, an unemployed programmer who’s the real hacker in the family, suggests that Hack go to the police, which he does. The ensuing conversation should convince you, if it hasn’t become clear already, that this world is more than just a little twisted:

“So what’s your problem?”
He flipped open a notebook.

Hack told him the whole story. When he was done, Pearson was silent for a long time. Finally Hack couldn’t take it anymore. “What do you think?”

Pearson pressed his fingers together. “Well, I appreciate you coming forward with this. You did the right thing.

with this Nike contract. Shoot some people. In that case, what we’d do, if we were retained by the Government or one of the victims’ representatives, is attempt to apprehend you.”

“Yes.”

“And we would apprehend you, Hack. We have an eighty-six percent success rate. With someone like you, inexperienced, no backing, we’d have you within hours. So I strongly recommend you do not carry out this contract.”

“I know,” Hack said. “I should have read it, but—“

“Second, you can refuse to go through with it. That would expose you to whatever penalties are in that contract. And I’m sure I don’t need to tell you they could be harsh. Very harsh indeed.”

Hack nodded. He hoped Pearson wasn’t finished.

“Here’s your alternative.” Pearson leaned forward. “You subcontract the slayings to us. We fulfill your contract, at a very competitive rate. As you probably know from our advertisements, your identity is totally protected. If the

When she’s 10 feet tall!

Enter Jennifer Government.

In case you were wondering, government does exist—though without the power to collect taxes, it’s not the powerhouse it once was. Jennifer Government is an investigator with a past: before her current assignment, she worked in marketing, as proven by the barcode tattooed under her left eye. But now she’s passionate and dedicated to a different cause, with the goal of bringing the perpetrators of the mall killings to justice—as soon as she can raise funds for the investigation.

Jennifer is competent and persuasive and ultimately convinces the parents of one of the victims to mortgage their home to fund the investigation and prosecution. From here, the plot spirals out of control, with the murders subsumed into a larger struggle between the competing frequent-buyer alliances. Barry is a good

writer with a flair for humorous situations, and the plot threads intertwine hilariously, which results more in farce than satire. His writing is not up there with the great satirists of the last few generations, but it's still quite respectable and very entertaining.

What's most fascinating about this tale is Barry's ability to tease out the assumptions underpinning our institutions and construct a world model in which they are negated. Rather than dismiss these negations as insane, though, he follows them through to their conclusions, producing a scary dystopia that effectively rebuts some current radical propositions for reengineering society. What would a world without taxes and government be like? What would replace government in providing basic stability and order? How would competition function if there were no limits on corporate behavior? *Jennifer Government* offers a reductio ad absurdum view.

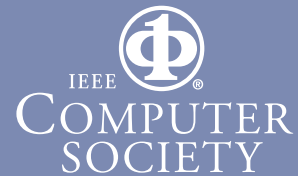
In some ways, Barry's world is all the more frightening because the line of descent from our current world is relatively clear. Stories like this help us recognize the good in the imperfect institutions and infrastructures that enable our daily lives. □

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After two years of writing his popular department for S&P, Marc Donner is putting down his pen.

Watch this space next issue for the farewell installment of Biblio Tech. —Ed.

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