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Coventry, 1976. For a brief, blazing summer, twelve-year-old Mark Barrowcliffe had the chance to be normal.

He blew it.

While other teenagers concentrated on being coolly rebellious, Mark - like twenty million other boys in the '70s and '80s - chose to spend his entire adolescence in fart-filled bedrooms pretending to be a wizard or a warrior, an evil priest or a dwarf. Armed only with pen, paper and some funny-shaped dice, this lost generation gave themselves up to the craze of fantasy role-playing games, stopped chatting up girls and started killing dragons.

Extremely funny, not a little sad and really quite strange, "The Elfish Gene" is an attempt to understand the true inner nerd of the adolescent male. Last pick at football, spat at by bullies and laughed at by girls, they were the fantasy wargamers, and this is their story.

The Elfish Gene: Dungeons, Dragons And Growing Up Strange Details

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From Reader Review The Elfish Gene: Dungeons, Dragons And Growing Up Strange for online ebook

Melissa says

Barrowcliffe describes Dungeons and Dragons, at the height of its fame, as being played by millions of boys and two girls. Well, I was one of those girls. And that's ok, I'm comfortable in the fact that I was and still am, a total nerd. And a memoir about Dungeons and Dragons in quite unique.

Barrowcliffe was introduced to Dungeons and Dragons at a young age. And once immersed he stayed in the life for quite awhile. In fact, he became obsessed with it. All his pocket money went to D&D figurines, books, and other such fantasy role playing games. His free time, playing games with large groups or one other person. And his normal conversation? Well, it couldn't get out of the Dungeon either, and not many people want to know the hitpoints of a dire wolf. As he grows he stays immersed in the Dungeons and Dragons world, until finally hitting his twenties and leaving it for what he calls reality.

Barrowcliffe freely admits that he was obnoxious and annoying in this book. And I have to agree with him. There were so many times I wanted to roll my eyes or shake my head that I lost count. And while it makes for a true seeming memoir, it can also irritate because you don't like hanging around those types of people let alone reading about that. He did describe the other players fairly. He was sure to list out their bad qualities, but also tell why he looked up to them. And he gave a bit of an epilogue letting you know what happened to them and if they escaped their D&D addiction.

I was once a halfling cleric named Nyaevae. If you're already lost at this point you're going to be hopelessly lost while reading this book. There is a lot of technical language about D&D that someone who's never played before isn't going to recognize. Sure Barrowcliffe explains some of the terms, but it still would be quite confusing for those who haven't even played one game. Also, there is some cursing and a little bit of violence and sex in this book, for those that pay attention to that sort of thing. The memoir itself has some interesting aspects, and it did bring up a lot of old memories. However, at times I found it boring and tedious as I really didn't care about some of Barrowcliffe's exploits. Especially since they were repetitive in the fact that he gamed and there was friction amongst the players in the game. I was also a little sad at how he seemed to look down on the players of the game now, most significantly if they were adults playing the game. I don't consider myself to be too pitiful and I would still play a game at this age if given the time and opportunity. Or maybe that says something about me I just haven't realized yet.

An interesting book for all those fellow D&D nerds out there. You may agree or disagree with Barrowcliffe, but he does stir up the memories.

The Elfish Gene
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277 pages

Review by M. Reynard 2013

More of my reviews can be found at www.ifithaswords.blogspot.com

Alisa Kester says

I wanted to read this book because I have the 'elfish gene' myself (although I never played D&D), and now that I *have* read it, I'm not sure how to rate it. Yes, I did find it a compulsive read, but by the end I was alternately disliking the author and feeling sorry for him. Though he claims to have 'grown up', he seems exactly the same as he was as a teenager, with all the accompanying and annoying character traits. For instance, as a teen, he found his own way of claiming 'coolness' by rejecting anything that the popular kids found cool - even when they were actually things he liked. He says he's past that sort of thing now, yet look at the contents of this book.

He clearly still loves fantasy and D&D *to this day* - and he doesn't attempt to hide that, writing one chapter in particular where he actually becomes lyrical. Yet, he feels compelled to write all but a few paragraphs of his book in this sarcastic, unpleasantly snarky way, putting down fantasy, role playing games, and everyone who enjoys either. It's a total condemnation of the entire genre. He clearly feels he's 'become an adult' and 'grown out of it', so he must force himself to condemn it, in exactly the same way as he used to condemn everything 'cool' as a teenager that he wasn't a part of.

I also found it sad how unhappy he seems, now that he's 'grown out of it'. He admits that his teen years were the happiest of his life, and the ending chapters were completely depressing, given the few peeks he gives into his current life. I could better understand the tone of his book IF once he'd given up his (admittedly obsessive) addiction to D&D, he'd discovered happiness with non-wizards in the real world, but how...strange...to write such a nasty book about the only thing in his life that seems to ever have given him joy.

Nerine Dorman says

Warning: If you're hoping this is a book extolling the virtues of fantasy roleplaying as a positive outlet for socially marginalised teens then WRONG. This is not the book you're looking for. Step away while you still can and go read some fanfiction. What The Elfish Gene is, however, is Mark Barrowcliffe's memoirs of growing up in Coventry during the 1970s, and how as a completely gauche, socially maladjusted teen he fled into the world of fantasy RPGs because he simply couldn't cope with reality.

This is a tragic book. And it made me incredibly sad. Mark comes across as bitter about his past, possibly bitter about the fact that he was so lost in the games that he wasn't functioning in society. These are not the types of memory I have of my own gaming days, and after finishing this book, I almost feel tainted. I ask myself, is this how I am with regard to the books, games and films I get excited about? To the exclusion of participating in the world at large?

Then again, I don't recall the sheer, blithering nastiness of my fellow gamers that Mark does. Possibly, one can say that boys will be boys, but I'm an anomaly in that regard – a girl who likes her fantasy RPGs a little too much. Sure, I met a few like Mark at the few events that we had in Cape Town during the 1990s, but I avoided them. The rest of the folks were just incredibly fun to be around, all student types, and we had really good times.

What I got from The Elfish Gene is mostly Mark's bitterness, suggestive of deep-rooted self-loathing, that he had to dig deep and bring up all that was ugly. And, yes, it's easy to see how games like D&D can create festering little dick-measuring contests among folks, but FFS, there's more it than what he states.

Yes, there are bits that are genuinely laugh-out-loud funny, like Mark's Ninja escapades, but most of the time I felt I was laughing *at* him for being such a sad puppy, and I was really glad to be done with the book. Yes, also to the fact that Mark pokes sticks at valid issues with the social interaction with *some* gamers, but yikes… I needed to read something uplifting and joy-making after this. As a snapshot into a particular era, however, and the mentality of the people at the time, this book is fascinating, in the same way as one is sometimes compelled to rubberneck at the scene of a gruesome motor vehicle accident involving a drunk pedestrian, errant livestock and a lorry transporting manure.

Josh says

Not badly written, but not a very fun read. Barrowcliffe treats his subject (himself and other adolescent D&D players) with disdain, which makes what should be an entertaining read much less enjoyable.

John Fletcher says

I picked this book up because I, like the author, starting playing D&D at an early age. (I think I was 14 instead of 12 when I started). Unlike the author however, I still play D&D about twice a month with a group of co-workers and friends.

My feeling for this book is that the author, while on the one hand fondly reminisces about the game and credits the game for many aspects of his adult personality, on the other he clearly holds and demonstrates a certain amount of disdain and ridicule for the game. This disdain in my opinion detracts from the book. It was like he was once a deep insider to the subculture of fantasy role-playing, but has since adopted the general public's point of view of the game, and towards the people who play it, as something to make fun of, ridicule and to be ashamed of if you had once played it yourself.

I had such high hopes for this book and was sorely and severely let down.

Matt says

It takes a particular type of person to wallow in one's misspent youth, to trot it out, warts and all, for all the world to see. Having escaped the embarrassments of adolescence, most people to some degree disavow their younger selves. This is usually accomplished through mere omission. Life goes on, we meet new people, and we conveniently forget to tell them about those horrid moments that define our adolescence. We recreate ourselves, we leave our pasts behind. Not so with Mark Barrowcliffe, author of The Elfish Gene: Dungeons, Dragons and Growing Up Strange (Soho Press, 2008). Barrowcliffe's memoir goes into excruciating--and comic--detail regarding his fantasy life as a Coventry lad growing up in the '70s and '80s.

Barrowcliffe was 11 years old when he discovered Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) one afternoon at his school's wargaming club. (For those who don't know, wargaming involves the recreation of historical battles

using miniatures and lots and lots of rules.) D&D immediately changed his life. By his own admission, Barrowcliffe spent the next five years gaming, reading about gaming, talking about gaming, reading fantasy novels, or listening to music at least tangentially inspired by fantasy. He pursued this not as a hobby, but as an obsession, an addiction that twisted his perception of himself and his place in the world. If that seems like a harsh assessment, know that it is his own. His enthusiasm only begins to wane when, at the age of 16, and dressed in a cloak, a gang of soccer hooligans toss him into a fountain, to the amusement of other people in the area. Just as finding D&D was a transformative moment for Barrowcliffe, so too was that moment of public humiliation, an embarrassment that taught him to more circumspect in his enthusiasms.

Some reviewers have criticized Barrowcliffe for looking down on players of roleplaying games, and it's true that he takes his shots at them. Some of this is sensitivity to Barrowcliffe's sense of humor, which is sardonic and tends to the cruel, although, it should be noted, that he is himself the target of many of his barbs. I believe the English would refer to this as "taking the piss" out of his subjects of mockery. In other words, his jokes are pointed; they reveal an essential reality about their victims, most often himself. There is personal psychology at work here, too. It's been said that people hate most in others that which they hate most in themselves. Given that Barrowcliffe fled D&D (quite literally after an attempt to play as an adult), it's not unsafe to assume that he is projecting onto others his feelings about himself.

And Barrowcliffe is certainly conflicted. He borrows the title of his book from Richard Dawkins's The Selfish Gene, which posits that altruism is an evolutionary adaptation by which individuals with similar DNA are more likely to help each other, thus preserving their DNA. In other words, selfishness is "good" for individuals. Perhaps Barrowcliffe intended his title to be merely a play on words, but it is better fitting than just that. Barrowcliffe's wholesale absorption in his fantasy world is indicative of a level of selfishness beyond that of the average teenager. He relates with remarkable clarity, it must be said, that he was, to use his language, a "twat," taking sides against his best friend in an argument merely in order to curry favor with another boy who despised him. He doesn't see his friend again for 25 years.

Despite all the scorn Barrowcliffe heaps on the game, and himself, and his fellow gamers, though, it's clear that he is nostalgic for his childhood. He considers playing the game as an adult, even tries, only to run back to "reality." And even though most of his childhood friends sound like horrible human beings, it must be said that they were teenage males--a particular breed with a specific sense of humor. There are individuals, too, who stand out in a good way, for instance, the painfully shy Dave, whose only character is "a man in a cloak." Oh, could he be a ranger? "No, just a man in a cloak." Special attention is given to Billy, Barrowcliffe's best friend for two years of his life. Barrowcliffe paints him as a figure larger than life, releasing a fountain of rakish wit when he wasn't smoking or eating (which was often).

Barrowcliffe has a fine sense of humor, and if a reader wonders, "why would anyone publish a book about someone's obsession with D&D," it's for the comedy. Barrowcliffe's is a sense of humor that demonstrates genuine insight, whether it's into England during the '70s, the plight of "nerds," or universal truths about teenage boys. There is a particularly funny chapter in which Billy and Barrowcliffe, bored, and at wit's end, decide to create incendiary devices from balloons and lighter fluid. Just when you think the story can't get any better--it does, with a joke about "wanking." That the story includes a two paragraph interlude in which Barrowcliffe muses on the differences between genders when it comes to risk only indicates his insight and timing. I admit that I laughed, not something I do often when reading.

In The Elfish Gene, Barrowcliffe lovingly recreates the England of his youth, giving attention both to the setting, Coventry and Birmingham, but also to the "characters" who populated his life. Barrowcliffe is a gifted storyteller with an intuitive sense of character, dialog, and pacing. Dyed-in-the wool gamers may complain about Barrowcliffe's superficial treatment of D&D, but, as a nongamer, I found it sufficient, and, it

should be noted, the book is less about D&D than it is his need for an outlet for his adolescent fantasies. A well-told, amusing, and surprisingly affecting memoir hampered only by the author's occasionally condescending attitude. Recommended.

Thermalsatsuma says

The late 70s was a particularly grim time. Economic crisis, terrorism, unemployment, an unpopular labour government - is this all starting to sound familiar? What more natural response than to turn your back on the whole mess and escape into the world of fantasy? That is exactly what author Mark Barrowcliffe did when he discovered Dungeons and Dragons, and threw himself headlong into for most of his teenaged years.

In much the same way as Andrew Collins mirrored my life of late 60s and early 70s suburbia, Barrowcliffe seems to have had the same experiences as me in the world of D&D. Obsessive collections of books, fanzines and lead figures, trips to games shops to spend carefully hoarded pocket money, games sessions spent in pedantic arguments about whether characters can run faster than monsters or some other badly phrased rule, and even dressing up in silver spray painted, knitted chain mail to run around the local woods doing live action role playing.

This book is almost painfully funny in places, although it is the humour of recognising acute embarrassment at the extreme lack of any social skills displayed by the typical D&D fan. Worth reading if you have ever shaken a D20 in anger, or if you haven't and always wondered what the spoddy kids were doing in the corner with the lead figures and the funny shaped dice.

Melody Randolph says

As many of you know, I am a Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) enthusiast; so was Mark Barrowcliffe until he decided that it was the cause of all his problems. This book really should have been called, Gaming Obsession and How Not To Play.

Basically, the book is a memoir of his awkward early years spent lost in his own reality, obsessing over the one outlet he found for his intelligence and imagination: D&D. Some of the anecdotes included are hilarious, for example the time he nearly sets his friend's house on fire while trying to re-create a fireball spell with a balloon and lighter fluid. However, between the heady rush of yeah-me-too and no-shit-there-I-was tales is the story of a self-described addict who played a game with a bunch of, a'hem, wankers and became one himself.

Written in a psuedo-self-depricating style (ala look-how-bad-I-was-but-now-I'm-all-better), he is like a tiresome Born Again who believes that all trappings of his previous life are childish at best and evil at worst. Yes, Mr. Barrowcliffe, there are crazy, maladjusted, immature gamers in this world, some of whom have gone down the path to drugs and the occult. But there are far more of us who treat D&D like what it is, a game of the imagination to be played with friends and then put away when we return to our real lives.

Steve Kimmins says

I read this book several years ago. I rarely review books on this site that I've read 'historically' but after discussing it with a friend on this site I thought I would as I enjoyed it, and I'd be interested in what fellow Fantasy reading friends to myself think about it.

The biographical story focuses on the author as an adolescent boy who discovers Dungeons and Dragons, and becomes increasingly obsessed with it, in the company of like minded friends. I have never played D&D, and much of what I know about it comes from this book. For me, the enjoyment of the book was in rediscovering the coming of age stages of a teenager, and particularly developing a world of his own to play and socialise in, his 'space' rather than the game itself. His desired isolation from his parents. The author has a fondness for the game, maybe a love/hate thing, even though part of the story is his discovered need to break away from the obsessive stage he'd reached with D&D. Of course, girlfriends play a role.

I can't remember details about the plot line but it certainly rang a few bells by analogy with me, given the geeky hobbies (and career!) I developed.

Nothing deep, but it made me laugh. I'd be interested to know what D&D enthusiasts thought of it. I was a little disappointed to see some reviews on the site that give it a low rating because they think the author is taking shots at the game itself. In my view it is really more an amusing coming of age biography with a geeky backdrop provided by obsessive D&D gaming.

Edward ott says

His problem wasn't table top RPGs . His problem was an all boys school, where all the boys were apparently @$$holes.

Toshi says

I picked this book up in an airport while traveling and thought it would be a fun, humorous look back on life as a gamer. I played RPGs in middle and high school, though I apparently wasn't as hard core as the author was. By the end of chapter 1 I found that the only humor the author included was mean spirited and belittling. As I said before, I expected some self effacing humor, and humor at the sake of gamers he played with, but this book amounted to a prolonged bitchfest where the author does nothing but whine about how he could have/should have grown up "normal" and how playing RPGs isn't as useful as dating or learning to play the guitar. I have a problem with that opinion.

I am still a pretty nerdy guy. I play video games a lot, watch the occasional Anime, geek out over comic books, and zombies, but (and this is impossible according the the author) I have a wife and kid who I love, and am loved by. I didn't do anything social in high school, my wife did everything in high school, but once you enter the real world and grow out of the limited perspective you have in high school it's possible to not fit into stereotypes and still exist.

From the portions of the book I was able to tolerate reading before ultimately giving up, it seems that the author's friends are at least partially to blame for his damaged perspective on gaming, and reality. All are either petty, backstabbing, little weasels, or power tripping assholes with massive inferiority complexes they mask with god complexes. If this type of person is the only type he ever role played with I can see why he might look down on it with the level of disdain that he does, but to do so overlooks the fact that you pick your friends/role playing companions. If I played with someone who spent the whole time acting like a douchebag he'd either be kicked out, or not allowed back to the next session.

The last gripe I have (and this may be due to the period he was playing in) is that every RPG I've played (and that's a lot) has been story and character driven. The GM usually has a story drawn up, but 90% of the time one of us would do something unexpected and he'd have to work with it. If you're GM ever said "no you can't do that because I need you to do ___" he'd have been fired for being unable to do his job. Sure he's god in that world, but without freewill why play? When done right playing an RPG should be almost like a battle of wits between the players and the GM/DM. The players constantly trying to act in accordance with their characters (admittedly some better than others), while trying to simultaneously figure out what the GM's goals are, and do something else to screw with him. Meanwhile the GM has to tell a compelling and interesting story and handle the shenanigans of the players without power tripping and either killing people off out of annoyance or removing player's options. If done like this the experience is deep, fun, and massively encourages creativity, problem solving, and teamwork (to piss off the GM). All are more useful that being able to play kumbaya around a camp fire.

Kari Mathias says

This book is ridiculous. Barrowcliffe spends half of the book telling us that being a geek is pathetic and sad, and the other half... trying to prove some kind of point to the people who made fun of him in high school, I think. "I was a TOTAL geek in high school and I grew up to be successful AND married. But I'm not a geek anymore, don't worry, guys."

I picked it up because I wanted to love it, being a D&D player myself, but I ended up sorely disappointed. Mark Barrowcliffe can repress his inner geek all he wants to, but he doesn't need to make the rest of us look bad in order to soothe his childhood scars. I'm sure that all of the married, successful people who still play Dungeons and Dragons (and enjoy it) would agree with me.

Seth says

(Note, read the authors comments in the comments section, he points out a few factual errors in this review that I think are worth noting before taking my review seriously.)

Hahahaha...no.

I picked this book up because I was a huge dork in high school and middle school - the dorkiest, and hung out with some fairly damaged individuals. I was looking at a book to wince at my own memories as I share someone elses, and also in a way celebrate that time.

Barrowcliffe has...issues, though. He has a tendency to write sweeping generalizations he shouldn't ("Women don't play Dungeons and Dragons") or talk about his high school being worse than Abu Ghraib (really? You fucking went there, pal?). It's filled with tons of amusing stories, and really gets alive when he talks about gaming - you can tell that, despite all of it, he really loved playing - but in the end, this is the story about a writer with a fantastic ego twisting in his own insecurities.

There's a post-script at the end about how he went to a modern game with strangers, that feels tacked on because it probably was. I can just imagine an editor forcing him to try things out to give readers an idea what things are like today, and him resisting all the while. As it is read, Barrowcliffe starts off having to

remind the reader yet again he is successful and has a wife and a kid. He goes into the game with every intent to dislike it, and does, and lets the players know he has a wife and a kid, and more importantly, he's a writer! He writes things. The players are not impressed or try to impress him back, and he is horrified they don't give him proper respect. He ends the book with a pity condemenation of these poor, poor souls, and retreats to the safety of...you guessed it...his wife and his kid.

Yeah.

Stuart Nachbar says

The Elfish Gene was a fun story that made me think about the question: what is a nerd? Webster's dictionary equates a nerd with a gearhead, a person who is extremely interested and knowledgeable about computers, electronics, technology, and gadgets. But Dungeons and Dragons is a card and board game; it has absolutely nothing to do with modern technology and computers.

And I must add that people who bury themselves in other interests, including role-playing games, politics and football statistics, to the exclusion of outside social interactions, and sometimes personal hygiene, are also nerds. And that's Barrowcliffe's point too. This does not make them bad people; it just means that their social circles are drawn almost exclusively around their interests. That's fine for young children, when they're safe in someone's living room playing a board game, but as Barrowcliffe reminisces, it becomes a strange obsession for adults, an odd deviation from what he calls a "normal" path of a child life, school, work, and death.

But Barrowcliffe takes the obsession further, by saying that his infatuation with Dungeons and Dragons was equal to a drug addiction. Not that role playing is an illegal or illicit act, but the game, like drugs has the highest highs and lowest lows, and those highs and lows drive the rest of your life. Even a knock at a front door becomes an exercise in a demonstration of role-playing bravado. And like drugs, these games provide an escape from a less pleasant reality.

Barrowcliffe described himself as socially awkward and in his words "un-cool," but he did not know how to get the keys to the kingdom of "coolness" in his working class neighborhood. But he is cool in the role playing world, for instance, when his parents allow their home to be a host dungeon for thirty gamers fueled by Mom's sandwiches and scones. He tries to fit in with the best of the gamers, even allowing them to call him Spaz, hardly a flattering nickname. But he is also clever, for instance, when his mother knits him a stuffed Kermit the Frog, he later realizes that the figure more resembles a powerful mythical lizard, and therefore, tries to make the un-cool cool.

I recommend this book to parents who are raising game-playing nerds. And caution them. An obsession with a role-playing game is far from a measure of intelligence. It is an activity that might stimulate some learning, but an obsession can take one away from life lessons, such as those learned in school or at work. Even the brightest of nerds have to earn a living one day and they have to interact outside their own social circles.

Paula Lyle says

I would have liked it a lot more if the author had not felt the need to tell us how different his adolescence

would have been, if only he had been grown-up at the time.