



Expiration Date

Tim Powers

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Los Angeles is filled with ghosts -- and half-ghosts, and ghost hunters, and ghost junkies -- chasing each other in a mad quest for immortality. As a series of disasters strikes Los Angeles, a young boy inhales the last breath of Thomas Edison, and becomes a precious prize in a deadly hunt for the elusive vital spark. Brimming with the wild imagination and heart-stopping escapades that won Tim Powers the World Fantasy Award, *Expiration Date* is an exuberant and inventive tale from one of fantasy's most original talents.

Expiration Date Details

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From Reader Review Expiration Date for online ebook

Jason Pettus says

Regular readers will remember that I'm in the middle this year of reading the complete oeuvre of cross-genre author Tim Powers for the first time; I started with his award-winning *The Anubis Gates*, then jumped back to his very first book, the mediocre traditional space opera *The Skies Discrowned*, then decided to jump to his much-loved '90s "Fault Line" trilogy that made me want to read him in the first place, starting with the flabbergasting 1992 *Last Call*. Today's book, written four years later, is the second title of the trilogy, and like most trilogies' second volumes falls a little flat compared to the first, although I've been trying to pinpoint the reason but seemingly can't.

Like *Last Call*, it's a contemporary story about a secret history of magic that exists "hidden in plain sight" in the broken-down back alleys of Los Angeles; but while the first volume deals with a complex invented mythology concerning magicians, tarot cards, ancient Egypt and the Holy Grail, this second volume deals pretty exclusively with just the subject of ghosts, which I suppose is part of the reason it's a letdown over the previous book. Also, even though it deploys Powers' usual storytelling technique of following several disconnected sets of characters and their own individual struggles, with them slowly coalescing as a group more and more as the manuscript continues, here it felt like it took forever for that to happen; and some of those individual storylines, such as the one concerning a preteen Indian kid whose body is being inhabited by the spirit of a wisecracking, cigar-smoking Thomas Edison, were threads that I got tired of quickly, making it difficult to stay fully engaged as long as they continued to take place in their own hermetically sealed environment.

I mean, it's not a bad book by any means, with even so-so Powers easily rising above most of the other dreck in the "urban fantasy" genre -- any book that can tie together Edison, Harry Houdini, the permanently docked steamship *The Queen Mary*, the history of 1950s television, and the hippie cults of '60s southern California is an all-right book in my view -- but I feel that one can convincingly argue that *Last Call* is better, making it a bit disappointing when you read them back-to-back, as people often will when wanting to read this trilogy. The third book, 1997's *Earthquake Weather*, supposedly ties together all the sets of characters from both unrelated first two volumes, and details a secret magical history to the Napa Valley wine industry, so I'm definitely looking forward to taking that on next; so please keep an eye out for my review of that here in the next few weeks.

Greg Zink says

I tried to like this book, I really did. It seemed to have all sorts of things going for it that I usually like - strange supernatural/fantasy events taking place within the ordinary real world, and a bunch of different story threads that eventually tie together into a cohesive tale. Both of those usually lend themselves to books that I enjoy, but I think both of them were a little overdone in this case. After a while I started to get frustrated, and I decided it just wasn't worth sticking it out for things to start happening and make sense, so I gave up.

I thought this was a standalone book, but looking at some of the summaries, I now see that it takes place in a world introduced in Powers' *Last Call*. This may explain some of my initial confusion with this novel, as perhaps some of the concepts are detailed in that book first. The main idea is that people have ways of hunting ghosts and that they like to ingest them as a sort of drug. Not that it needs a lot of explanation, but

it's brushed off in this book like an "oh yeah, everybody eats ghosts. You knew that, right?"

The downside is that the ghost-eating is really the only thing that goes on in this book. There are what feel like a dozen characters and they all go about chasing ghosts. The kid accidentally ingests one, the mysterious antagonist is chasing after some, the guy who's a natural ghost chaser is hiding so he doesn't have to go get them, etc. Of course, by the time I quit, there was nothing connecting these people, so it was just a bunch of truncated separate storylines about eating ghosts.

And there do seem to be a lot of separate storylines. I thought there were probably too many characters, some of which are introduced for a snippet that doesn't relate at all to the other threads and then we move on to something else. Without much to differentiate all the ancillary characters, they started to blur together to me and become less interesting. It was a neat idea, but I almost felt I needed to keep notes on who everyone was and how they interrelated.

I did enjoy parts of this book, which is why I gave it two stars even without finishing it. It was written fairly well, but I just didn't want to keep reading without something happening to somehow connect all these vague characters. Perhaps if you stick with it to the end there's some payoff, but for a book I was reading just for fun it didn't seem worth my time. A decent book, it seems, but there are better out there.

Erin says

I liked this, but not as much as *Last Call*. It took a little too long to get into the action of the story, there were too many narrators at the beginning (a few of which we never hear from again) and I felt that it didn't gel as a story until well after page 100 or so. That's a lot of pages for a reader to be wondering "I'm not exactly sure what's going on here and how it relates to the other threads of the story being told." Powers does a lot of the old "write about something that your readers don't know the details of yet, but that the author reveals later", which seems common in sci fi and speculative fiction and is a technique that I like, but in *Expiration Date*, I felt the lag between when Powers caught you up with the needed details was just too long. You just kind of flounder as a reader in this one a lot, to be honest. It also seemed weird to me that this was billed as a companion novel to *Last Call* when frankly, I don't see how the two novels are linked at all. However, the story was imaginative and fun, and it was a good read overall.

Conor says

I'm going to have to agree with one of my buddies on this one.

He said

Having recently read "On Stranger Tides" this one suffers by comparison. I like its hallucinatory quality and the writing is interesting, but it felt flabby and weak compared to his previous effort "Last Call."

I like it and I would recommend it, but it isn't Powers' best.

I haven't read "On Stranger Tides" but this one was just OK compared to *Last Call*, which I've read about four times, and loaned with care to people I know would love it.

Kristen says

Tim Powers does a great job with the secret history concept, especially with L.A. as a backdrop. *Expiration Date* is a love letter to the seedier side of the city, encompassing abandoned apartment complexes, Latino herbalists, and the deteriorating Queen Mary. But while the novel is pretty fast and entertaining, I found it slightly disappointing. There were a lot of confusing concepts related to real electrical engineering (Thomas Edison is a character) and a complex underworld of ghosts and ghost hunters. Too many times, I had no idea what people were talking about. I also thought the novel went from having too many characters and perspectives to not enough. Toward the end, Powers abandoned almost all of his characters, including some of the interesting ones, and collapsed the narration into the single POV of the chief protagonist. *Expiration Date* has a lot of intriguing ideas and is certainly readable, but it's definitely not the strongest of Powers' novels.

Jerry says

The sea breeze was suddenly chillier on his immobile face, and he realized that he was crying. He couldn't taste the tears, but he knew that if he could, they would taste like cinnamon.

Where *Last Call* was about the magic of gambling and chance, and set in Las Vegas, *Expiration Date* is about the magic of ghosts and masks, and is set in Los Angeles. Because that, after all, is where such a story belongs.

Both stories have a brother-sister dynamic for the main character(s). And both use the history of their city as background for the story. Real events have a magical explanation—that probably makes as much sense as their real explanation, if they even have one. The occasional spontaneous combustion of a human body is explained as a ghostly chain reaction, much like a nuclear bomb but more localized.

Back in 1982, Alan Perlis wrote that “The best book on programming for the layman is Alice in Wonderland, but that's because it's the best book on anything for the layman.” I tend to agree with that; perhaps Tim Powers does as well, because in this book Alice in Wonderland is the best book on ghostly magic for the layman. Most chapters are preceded by a quote from one of the Alice books, and ghosts, when they ramble, tend to quote from Alice.

There isn't much except tone to connect *Expiration Date* to *Last Call*; however, if I remember right characters from both books appear in the third book of the series, *Earthquake Weather*.

In the opening chapters, a kid whose parents are grooming him to be a spiritual powerhouse ends up inhaling the ghost of Thomas Edison. Edison himself was wise in the ways of ghosts and I think for that reason is a powerful ghost himself. People in this book *eat* ghosts, and the more powerful the better, so everyone is after Edison's. Even people who don't know they're after Edison's ghost are after it, because when Edison is initially freed his loosing is felt throughout the Los Angeles area.

Which is how Pete Sullivan ends up losing his sister and heading back to LA despite his fear that he will be used in a plot to eat his father's ghost.

The way Powers deals with famous ghosts is extraordinarily well-handled (pun somewhat intended, see book for details) as is the way he weaves the history of the film industry into the story.

Matthew says

So the payoff is definitely worth it. And if you've read Powers before, you'll know what to expect with obscure historical references, human heroes against disturbing (but somewhat badass) magical villains, and incredibly interesting magic that draws deeply from the human experience. Some of the ideas here are so fascinating that I'm very proud I managed to finish it.

Unfortunately, "managed to" is the correct way to phrase it.

The first third of the novel totally fails; based on a combination of too many disparate plotlines, basic plot and backstory details being kept overly obscure for the sake of "suspense," and a not-so-great introduction to the story's supernatural elements. There's very little to latch onto in order to understand what's going on. The second third is more readable, and a lot of exposition that SHOULD have been presented earlier shows Powers' fascinating ideas. It's over 60% of the way through when the plot finally comes together. But once it does, the payoff is great. I'm glad I got through it. I do still feel like I've missed some things and I'm tempted to re-read it.

If you haven't read *Last Call*, read that instead. It's excellent. If you read *Last Call*, loved it, and absolutely need more of Powers writing in a modern setting, then this offers worthwhile rewards for the patient.

Melissa McShane says

I love Tim Powers' novels, and what I love about this one is the intersection of Thomas Edison's life with the secret world of ghost-hunters. This book is far too complicated to summarize in a few words, or even more than a few, but the core of the story is that a boy with the unfortunate name of Koot Hoomie Parganas has accidentally freed the ghost of Thomas Edison, and several people want to kill him and consume Edison's ghost. That's right, consume; in this secret history, ghosts can be eaten, inhaled, smoked, absorbed by anyone who knows how. Consuming a ghost gives a person a sort of high, and the quest for strong ghosts pits users against each other--and Edison, who protected himself his whole life against such people, is one of the most powerful of all.

Powers' narrative intertwines three major storylines and a handful of lesser ones that, grouped together, forms its own story (these are the various individuals trying to capture and kill Kootie. The poor kid doesn't even have a good nickname). Pete and Angelica, the other two main characters, have solid histories of their own. They start off flawed--Pete's been hiding from the past for fifteen years, Angelica bears the guilt of having caused the deaths of three people--and have to overcome the consequences of those flaws to help and protect Kootie. A host of secondary characters fills out the novel to give it the unique Powers flair, and the background of how ghosts are created and what happens when they're eaten rounds it all off.

Though technically *Expiration Date* could be considered part of a series (the first being *Last Call* and the third being *Earthquake Weather*), I prefer to think of it as being a standalone book that intersects with the story and characters of *Last Call* in *Earthquake Weather*. In any case, it works very well on its own and doesn't require any extra reading to enjoy.

Danica says

Somehow manages to be expertly written yet completely unengaging at the same time? Points for the creativity and vivacity of the language, but minus 100000 for glacial plot movement and the endless carousel of superficially-quirky-but-actually-cookie-cutter characters, most of whom I couldn't bring myself to give two hoots about. Plus, the whole "thomas edison's ghost is on the loose and spiritually piggybacking a prepubescent boy and all the ghost junkies wanna piece of him! OH LOOK RANDOM ACTS OF HORRIFIC VIOLENCE AND EXPLODING DOG BOMBS LOLZ" bit just gets kinda "..." after awhile.

Johnny says

Tim Powers is one of the most creative writers of modern fantasy that I have ever read. *Expiration Date* touches on so many original ideas that it is hard to describe them without giving away spoilers. Powers has created his own pneumatology in terms of ghosts, undead (I know they aren't "spirits," but they are supernatural), and existence beyond material life. Imagine a capitalistic economy based on ghosts but handled much like drug deals of the present day. That is the crux of this novel. And, imagine that ingesting another's "ghost" is like adding his/her soul to one's psychic and physical inventory along with trying to digest said phantoms and use them to "live" forever.

I will also contradict myself in some fashion my usual objection to changing point-of-view at a quick pace. Powers restricts the number of characters involved in this brain transplant chain of perspectives. It wasn't a matter of such quick-takes that I found myself getting lost. There is a juvenile protagonist, a female protagonist who happens to be a mental health professional with a twist, a fraternal twin who becomes a major protagonist, a celebrity ghost supporting character, a soul-ingesting vampire antagonist, and a zombie antagonist with another twist. Early on, it looks like the juvenile has stumbled into a *Topper*-style comedy with sophisticated ghosts in tuxedos, but the plot turns dark and ugly almost immediately. This is no *Topper* or any other of the sexy, sophisticated, supernatural comedies of Thorne Smith.

Indeed, *Expiration Date* is a fast-moving adventure which uses the imagination to challenge the pure materialistic world-view (Yes, I know it's a "fantasy" but fantasies often touch on archetypes and beliefs with which even modern humanity struggles!). As such, they symbolically place brush strokes about the nature of addiction, and deal with the altruistic "release" which comes from self-sacrifice and a sense of moving one's own life forward. It also takes advantage of the physical descriptions of Los Angeles, Long Beach, and Santa Monica to describe some of the conditions of the homeless. It may be fantasy, but those descriptions are gritty enough to feel real.

Expiration Date is also a parable on love, family, and the quest for meaning. Its scenes cover the idea of facing up to past mistakes, as well as getting beyond those mistakes and trying to guarantee that those same mistakes aren't made in future, new relationships. It describes the idea of commitment and risk within relationships in a rather bold way. Readers who like to have a fascinating milieu for their fantasy yet long for

very human (in every sense) stories will enjoy *Expiration Date*, another Tim Powers masterpiece akin to the unforgettable *Last Call*. *Expiration Date* simply exceeded my high expectations.

William says

Tim Powers is one of my favorite writers, but EXPIRATION DATE isn't among my favorite of his books.

I've started and stopped it several times in the past, but this time I have the next in the loose series, EARTHQUAKE WEATHER to read and I was determined to push through and get to the end. But to be honest, I found it a bit of a slog.

It's as well written as any of Powers' books, but I don't think the central idea of ghosts being able to be caught and sniffed as a kind of psychic cocaine is strong enough to hold this rather rambling plot together. That, and the fact that the main protagonist is an eleven year old kid who gets a ton of shit thrown at him in the story rather turned me against the whole thing from an early stage.

There are some of the great visual touches and dexterity with a sentence that we expect from Powers but too much of the story consists of people going somewhere to get something, then going somewhere else to get something else, then meeting someone who will tell them where to go to get the next thing. It's like a modern L.A. version of a rather dull Dungeons and Dragons adventure and as such I found myself flicking pages to get to the good bits.

I think the main problem is one of too many point of view characters. We could have lost the lawyer completely from the story and it wouldn't change it a bit, and likewise the female psychiatrist was often just hanging around to be someone for one of the protagonists to talk to.

Still, even second rate Powers is better than most other things, and there was enough to entertain me to make sure I made it to the end this time.

Onward to EARTHQUAKE WEATHER...

Natalie says

So freaking good!

Jacob says

If Atwood was ghost writing Pynchon and they managed to get William Gibson as their editor, then maybe, just maybe, there would be another book as uncannily brilliant as this.

One could list the topics (life, death and afterlife; recreational drug culture; mercenary telephone exchange

operators; palindromes; Thomas Alva Edison's lost years and peculiar relationship with Henry Ford; the time-space continuum; Harry Houdini and more), or observe that it has provided a reading of Carroll's Alice books that makes them appear to be a straightforward biography, but that would all miss the mark. I haven't even mentioned the Queen Mary, after all, nor touched on the incredible characterization of the incredible characters.

Anyway, this kind of book is why science fiction matters.

Lynne Collins says

Doh! I read the first, and then the third in the Trilogy (dang ex-hub steering me wrong! but Right in the first place). Now, I am reading the second. Powers is muy lyrical, complex, mystical, and intense. Good stuff.

Andy Goldman says

Whew. That was a tougher read for me. Maybe I wasn't mentally focused enough for it, because I had a hell of a time keeping all the characters in place in the beginning of the book. I stuck with it because I trust in Powers' writing, but it wasn't until about 300 pages in that the book finally had me hooked and I was swept along for the rest of the way. I'd probably appreciate this one more on a second read than I did this first time around.
