



Flex

Ferrett Steinmetz

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FLEX: Distilled magic in crystal form. The most dangerous drug in the world. Snort it, and you can create incredible coincidences to live the life of your dreams.

FLUX: The backlash from snorting Flex. The universe hates magic and tries to rebalance the odds; maybe you survive the horrendous accidents the Flex inflicts, maybe you don't.

PAUL TSABO: The obsessed bureaucromancer who's turned paperwork into a magical Beast that can rewrite rental agreements, conjure rented cars from nowhere, track down anyone who's ever filled out a form.

But when all of his formulaic magic can't save his burned daughter, Paul must enter the dangerous world of Flex dealers to heal her. Except he's never done this before – and the punishment for brewing Flex is army conscription and a total brain-wipe.

File Under: Urban Fantasy

[Magic Pill | Firestarter | Bureaucramancy | The Flex & the Flux]

Flex Details

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Author : Ferrett Steinmetz

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From Reader Review Flex for online ebook

carol. says

Dear Ferrett,

Don't take the rating personally. It's not you--it's me. Really, there's a lot to like in your book; a parallel world with 'mancers, magic that comes out of passion, distilled magic as part of the drug trade...

Wait, not that last bit. Because while it makes absolute sense, I just *don't*. I don't do sloppy drug trade setting, and prefer to avoid the realistic setting in anything but Serious Movies. Maybe its because the memory of the last kid I took care of whose 'buddies' dropped him off not breathing and a lovely shade of light blue at the ER. The night was capped off by calling Security when he was ripping out the IV, ready to walk out the door, and his helpless, frustrated mom who walked out before he did. I don't like playing in that world during my free time, because I live in it at work. It is heartbreaking and maddening-- there are too many assholes, a lot of sad stories, a truckload of lies--both unintentional and purposeful--and no happy endings. I suppose you might have reached that message somewhere in *Flex*, perhaps with the concept of Flux coming back to bite the magician in the butt, but what I mostly got was the idea that Paul would deal with the devil to achieve his goal, and if he could make ~~drugs~~ magic without cost, he would. The extreme characterization of a drug dealer who chains his source to a radiator didn't really help your cause.

Let's talk characters, particularly Paul, underdog hero. His endless guilt trips, particularly the self-flagellation about his daughter, Aliyah, and his directionless wandering in his own life did not build a character I cared about. Again, I'm willing to take blame here. I don't have children and don't understand the endless guilt trip Paul has about *saving his kid's life* and his obsession about getting her plastic surgery. Maybe because his character doesn't have any balance; there's the ex-relationship, the daughter issues, the work issues. His history comes in context of an unhappy divorce and previously unhappy job. Whatever it is, I have a hard time identifying with him or even rooting for him as I watched him run on his mental gerbil wheel. The best parts were the times that Paul delved into his magic and his joy in creating order from chaos was able to shine. For the rest, well... congratulations on being able to bring a whiny, self-centered six-year-old to life (I know, I know; they all are). Your villain, not so much. If we didn't have you switching to the villain's perspective, I don't think I'd know much at all.

Although, if we're being honest, I'd have to say you should share a tad bit of the blame. The storytelling was choppy. I appreciate an experimental narrative structure in the hands of a practitioner, but chapter installments drew attention to the lack of transitions instead of facilitating them. Sometimes the chapter ended and picked up one second later. Sometimes it ended, and the next began in the future, then flashed back to the middle. It's not a bad idea, but you need a story and style that can use the sophistication of that technique. I suppose the underdog, concealed-power plot is based on the superhero tradition, but could you have classed it up a bit? Apparently Paul is able to identify the villain through magical nausea, but lines like **"focusing on her magic was like pushing his head deeper into a barf bag"** isn't going to win you much love.

The ending pulled it together in a decent way, and your writing finally had a chance to shine. I wish you luck with your series, I really do, but I have doubts I'll continue. It's got the underdog-double life superhero thing going for it, so I'm sure you'll find an audience. I think it'll especially appeal to fans of Wendig's *Miriam Black* series. Which I also disliked, so you're in fabulous company.

Really.

Two and a half ~~snorts~~ stars

Mogsy (MMOGC) says

4.5 of 5 stars at The BiblioSanctum <http://bibliosanctum.com/2015/08/24/a...>

Okay, I loved Flex. And not least because there was some of this:

And this:

And this:

And this:

Oh and also throw in a bit of this to boot:

But wait, maybe I should back up a bit. You want to know what the story is actually about. Well, welcome to the world of Flex, where it's actually possible to love a thing so much, the power of your obsession can kick the laws of physics in the ass so hard that reality literally comes undone. This is what gives rise to the many different kinds of magic users. You get illustromancers. Deathmetalmancers. Collectomancers! Or even videogamemancers. In the case of Flex protagonist Paul Tsabo, he loves his job as a number-cruncher at his insurance company SO MUCH that he's turned paperwork into more than just an art. He's become a bureaucromancer, and this means he can work magic on anything in the world, as long as what he needs is logged somewhere on paper.

Thing is, if you're not a 'mancer, you can still use magic. Distilled magic can come in the form of crystallized Flex, a powerful drug brewed by 'mancers. But working 'mancy and using Flex can cause one hell of a blowback. Maybe with the power of Flex you can twist reality to match your vision – but only for a time. After the effects wear off, the backlash called Flux will hit. Because if there's one thing the universe hates more than anything, it's being bent to a magic user's will. It will fight back with a vengeance, and you can bet the universe always wins.

So there's a good reason why the general public doesn't trust 'mancers; the effects of their magic defy normality and prediction, and chaos typically follows where they go. For this reason, Paul has gone to great lengths to hide his bureaucromancy. But now there's a dangerous 'mancer known as Anathema out there,

brewing some very powerful Flex. It's causing a lot of accidents, a lot of deaths. One night, Paul and his daughter Aliyah become Anathema's victims when a Flex user in his apartment causes a gas main to blow up. Paul's 'mancy saves his daughter's life, but the little girl still ends up badly burned. To come up with the money for Aliyah's reconstructive surgery, Paul must find a way to use his bureaucromancy without causing the Flux that will make things worse. And to do that, he must find a mentor.

Enter Valentine. The gamemancer. My heroine.

First I have to tell you that I'm a sucker for any book or story that has to do with video games. When I discovered what Valentine's power meant, I had myself a squee moment. Flex is one of those books that worked perfectly for me, because it hit that special sweet spot balancing a complex magic system with all-out fun. The world of 'mancy is full of potential and the possibility of pretty much any kind of 'mancer you can think of, but all of it still works within the confines of rules that make sense.

Flex is also a book that's full of heart. After all, so much of 'mancy and becoming a 'mancer has its roots in emotion. It's about love and obsession, both the healthy and unhealthy kind. It's the idea that you can want or believe in something so hard that the sheer force of that power will make it happen. For that reason, 'mancers aren't always happy people. Some are lonely. Some are angry. Some are lost and afraid. When push comes to shove, their obsessions and resulting 'mancy are literally their ways to escape from the real world. And when it comes to Valentine, video games as escapism is something I can sympathize with and understand. More often than not though, the magic just makes 'mancers feel even more alone and marginalized.

And also, who can blame Paul, the father who only wants the best for his daughter, even if it means seeking out a killer to help him give Aliyah the chance for a normal life? Flex is a thrilling journey through the dark underbelly of the drug trade, but it's also about friendship and devotion and finding acceptance. It's also a story about the desperate hunt for an evil villain, but one that will also allow you to geek out big time.

And geek out I did. I also laughed. And screamed. No doubt about it, Flex is the most fun I've had with a book in a long time. I was so glad when the audiobook finally released, because I had been wanting to read it forever, in part due to the amazing things I've heard from other reviewers. Now I understand what everyone was raving about. I'm a bit in love with this book. Can't wait for the next one! Highly recommended.

Bradley says

Before I started reading this, I was struck by how much it appeared to be like Michael Underwood's Geekomancy, and after reading it, of course there were a few similarities, but where Geekomancy was all delightful snark and nostalgia wrapped into a wonderfully magical system, Flex was a lot more dark and serious, and...

Shall I say it? Yeah. I have to say this was the better novel of the two. Sorry, Michael! I love your stuff, but this was just too sharp!

We can scratch out most of the nostalgia and jump right into a well-crafted tale. The hero is a damn surprising hero, too. Just hearing about what he did, I honestly wanted to cringe and go... "How is that going to be fun?" And then after reading him in action, all my fears fluttered away as I began to realize that this is the freaking Breaking Bad of urban fantasy. Just being a clever and unique magic system is fantastic, too, but

my god, we jumped, wonderfully, from a guy who uses magic to do paperwork into a brilliant drug dealer. And not only does it work, but it's far from being the best aspect of the book.

Look. We've got an ex-cop who was branded a hero for accidentally killing a 'Mancer even as he respected what he saw, turned his badge in, as well as losing a foot, to become an insurance agent. If that sounds boring, then stuff it. Mr. Steinmetz makes it work well. The core of the book is about people who focus so much on what they love that they become travelling black holes of universe-changing power that comes with it's own built-in correction system.

For those of us who've played and loved the Mage storytelling system, you're right on target. Mr. Steinmetz acknowledges his debts here and to Mr. Underwood.

MC Paul's arch-enemy was fantastic. Paul was fantastic. Valentine was fantastic. And my heart-strings were so thoroughly manhandled by his poor burned daughter that I wasn't sure I was going to get out of this novel alive.

Sure, it might just be another novel set to destroy NYC, but on the other hand, I felt utter joy in the reading. I literally couldn't put this title down for the life of me. It was magical.

It's true I probably wouldn't have picked this novel up in the first place if I hadn't received an invitation to read its sequel in Netgalley, but that's my own damn problem. I'm leashed to be proved an idiot. Never judge a book by either its cover or its blurb. Flex is no sophomore addition to a crappy UF collection. It's serious and it's brilliant.

All you peeps who want magic systems and UF and seriously excellent character progressions need to go out and pick up this title. It's pretty close to perfect.

K.J. Charles says

Loved the idea, wolfed down the first few chapters at a sitting, started to feel the drag in the middle, DNF at 83% because I don't feel any urge to know how it ends, which ain't good. Plot's gone completely static. A good dev edit could have fixed this, but TBH it also suffers from Ready Player One syndrome (ie if you aren't completely immersed in the videogames one character uses for her magic, you just sit there looking blankly at pages of incomprehensibility. If you like videogames a lot it may be brilliant and hilarious of course.). Pity, the start was great.

Hanzel says

Magic comes with a price!!!

With that, time to throw the dice, Paul Tsabo an unassuming man, an everyday man, nothing to make him stand up in a crowd, and yet a married man, but soon to be divorced with a beautiful child named Aliyah Tsabo.....

They are the primary and secondary characters in this novel, in a universe where a person's obsession turns

into magic or mancer as they call the person. So in this world you can become a bookmancer obsessed with books, and maybe be seen walking around with Tarzan, Conan and etc, or a pistolmancer with the ability to fire anyone, anywhere or maybe a pornomancer with great big.....ummmmm you know the picture, this universe should be the best anywhere in the multiverse of books(we should have a map of the whole fantasy universe, from Dragonlance's niche at the lefthandmost corner to Clive Barker's Imajica in the lowermost right hand corner), except with the magic comes a serious drawback called FLUX, that is this universe's way to balance what you do with your magic.....and it is always comes out negative, the bookmancer wants to travel with the aforementioned trio, FLUX comes in and those three starts fighting one another, killing a score of bystanders, the pistolmancer shoots an unbelievable shot to halt a sniper, and in doing so the recoil hits him in the head, accidentally breaking his nose and etc.....in short the larger the magic, the stronger the FLUX and it can kill, that is why the 'mancers in this universe are abhorred!!

In comes the unassuming Paul Tsabo, with the wierdest obsession/mancy.....and well you have to read the story, as for world building, well same earth, different magic system.....this sounds like karma.....wonder if others will see it as it is.....

Ok time to go.....in the end, what really drove me is the interaction between Paul and his daughter the mancy and the hope of seeing how they portray an exhibitomancer.....hihihihi.....

Book Riot Community says

I can honestly say I've never quite read a book like this. I read a lot of good stuff in March, but this is the book that's stuck with me, for its originality, its insanity, its hilarity, and most importantly, its heart. In the world of Flex, when you love a thing with all your heart, so much so that the universe bends to that love, you can do magic through it. Paul Tsabo, a knight of the pen and a king of the manila folder, has just found out he's a bureaucromancer, and can do magic fueled from his love of paperwork and order. When a terrorist 'mancer causes his daughter to suffer terrible burns, Paul has to come up with money for her recovery, and quick. The only way to do it? Find a teacher to help him control his magic, edge in on the magic drug-trade of Flex (distilled 'mancy), and learn how to control the backlash of magic: the Flux.

Many have said that Flex is Breaking Bad with magic, and while that's a good indicator of the flavor of story you're in store for, it barely scratches the surface. Flex is a story about broken people filling the holes in their lives with love. It's about supposed second-stringers getting a chance to get up off the bench and show the world they're just as worthy, just as strong. It's a novel that had me rolling on the floor laughing, flipping pages with anticipation, losing hours at a time trying to figure out what would happen next, because I honestly had no freakin' clue. Steinmetz puts his prose together like a runaway roller coaster, full of emotional peaks and valleys, swerving from heartbreaking to funny to terrifying in mere moments, with characters so full of life, you can't help but root for them. If Flex has taught me anything, it's that magic is nothing but joy. And Flex is pure magic. Highly recommended. — Martin Cahill

From The Best Books We Read In March: <https://bookriot.com/2015/04/01/riot-...>

Molly says

“the world was hurting us. And instead of dying inside, or hurting others, we opened up new worlds within us. And this gift... yeah, it’s scary. Yeah, it’s dangerous. But to leave it unexplored would be to throw the greatest gift anyone ever got right in the garbage.”

Rating, 3.5

You think *Merlin* was cool?

Forget Merlin ...

... magic has never had so many shapes and forms.

Bureaucromancy, vdeogamemancey, musclemancy, illustromancy, tell me your obsession, the possibilities are endless.... magic has never been so beautiful, cool, dangerous and explosive!

Paul Tsabo, ex cop, works as an insurance claims investigator at the *Samaritan Mutual*, specializing in cases involving 'mancers he is great at what he does partially because he is one ... **a bureaucromancer**. He can find or bend or modify or produce anything linked with a single paper form
.....hnh.....*cricket*.....*cricket*,

hnh, **that's one handy power** (I have to hunt down a bunch of forms and permits and whatnot the next few weeks),..... aaaanywaay, let's go back to Paul Tsabo.

Killing by accident an *illustromancer* and losing his foot during an investigation, Paul refuses a desk job with the police and leaves the force. His marriage crumbles up and his wife **Imani** cheats on him and leaves him taking with her their daughter **Aliyah**. Finding employment with Samaritan, Paul soon discovers that now he can do 'mancy bureaucromancy.

'Mancy is illegal. 'Mancers are hunted down and reprogrammed ... brainwashed, and used in the Unimancy unit SMASH, to hunt other 'mancers. 'Mancers are born through their obsessions and passions in moments of great stress and traumas. Every each of them is unique, and the reprogramming is in a way a small death. The erasing of everything that differentiates them from the rest of the world, it's dehumanizing. There are not many 'mancers around but the rest of the world fears them. Nobody wants "a second Europe" to happen. 'Mancers were used (and made) during World War II, and **as a result, Europe is no more... Ouch!**

“Mancers believed so thoroughly in their obsessions that their belief wore a hole through the law of physics.”

'Mancy can be distilled/transformed in drug form **FLEX**, and it is still another ugly face of 'mancy. FLEX can give magical powers to an ordinary person for a limited time and as every drug has it's backlash a

magical one - the **FLUX**, always with unpredictable, disastrous consequences not exclusively for the user of FLEX.

Anathema, a mancer-terrorist enters the game and Paul's young daughter Aliyah gets hit with a FLUX backlash by accident and gets severely burned. Paul is out for vengeance. Searching for the terrorist finds in **Valentine DiGriz, videogamemancer**, an unlikely ally.

“Oh. My. God.” Her voice rose to a fanboy squee – a cheerful gushing that sounded nothing like a murderer.

“What’s *your* obsession?”

Loved her snark...

“Next time this happens, Paul, give yourself a fake name. A cool one. I mean, ‘Paul’? You could have said, ‘Call me the Whisperer in the Darkness.’ ‘My friends call me Agent Steel.’ ‘I’m Batman.’ Anything. It sort of breaks the mystique when you finally get your lurker and he’s named Paul.”

Get ready for the action.

Paul will battle Unimancers, and greedy drug lords trying to use him, struggling to hide his powers from the people around him in his attempt to stop Anathema and help his daughter.

I must admit I struggled with the all the FLUX, FLEX and 'mancy for a while and that the flow of the story was a little bumpy through the first half but. hey, I enjoyed it ... it was something new. I must confess that my favorite parts involved Aliyah and Valentine. Those girls kick ass!

“You – hurt – my – Daddy!” Aliyah shrieked, her voice thrumming in several dimensions.”

(view spoiler)

Oh, and get ready for book two!

Armina says

FLEX: Distilled magic in crystal form. The most dangerous drug in the world. Snort it, and you can create incredible coincidences to live the life of your dreams.

So, basically it's **Breaking Bad** but with MAGIC!!! Like hell I'm gonna miss this! Of course, I'm in.

Sunil says

Paul Tsabo is the bureaucrat's bureaucrat, like Hermes from *Futurama*. He loves the order of forms, the power of a signature.

He loves bureaucracy so much, it turns out, that he's a fucking *bureaucromancer*.

That's right, folks: *Flex* is about a man who does MAGIC BUREAUCRACY. And it's way more awesome than it sounds, thanks to Ferrett Steinmetz's incredibly clever take on magic.

In the world of *Flex*, magic takes on all forms, and it's very personal and individual. But it always comes with a price: the Flux, a dangerous blowback that balances out any use of magic with a comparable negative consequence. And again, Steinmetz's clever and creative take on this concept make this book stand out.

What drew my attention to the book was the description of it as "*Breaking Bad* but with magic," and that description is surprisingly apt, though it is, of course, mostly on the superficial level, as marketing hooks tend to be. Paul hooks up with a lowlife to make drugs—Flex, distilled magic for the mundanes—for the sake of his family (in this case, his daughter, badly burned in an accident [note the cover]), but he's also excited by just doing magic. 'Mancy is illegal, and he faces brainwashing and reconditioning if he's caught, and his favorite co-worker goes after 'mancers like it's his job. Whether intentional or not, I did enjoy mapping various characters to their *Breaking Bad* counterparts (Hank! Tuco! Gus!), but I didn't feel like the story was derivative, especially because it really breaks out of that mold in the second half.

There is so much to like about this book. The chapter titles, which frequently have cute and appropriate pop culture references. The pop culture references in general, thanks to the aforementioned lowlife's powers of *videogamemancy*, which allows her to manipulate reality into videogames, leading to things I never thought I would see in a book. (For a gamer, this book is as fun as *Ready Player One* in the whizzbang cool sense; I do wonder how all those scenes play to someone who hasn't played any of those games.) Paul's relationship with his daughter, Aliyah: Aliyah feels like a real six-year-old girl, and Steinmetz complicates their relationship beautifully by making Aliyah extremely hateful toward 'mancers without knowing her dad is one. The villain. The plotting. The use of the word "motherfuckress."

I found myself handwaving most of the magic, though, as the rules kept evolving throughout the book. I couldn't quite visualize a lot of what was going on, but I got the general *gist*, and Steinmetz justified what any character was doing enough for me to go along with it. Lots of little neat bits of worldbuilding, like the fact that 'mancy offends physics so much that it can open rifts in reality, don't get explored fully in this book, but I hope they will be in the future.

Flex is a fun read, but as I got more and more into the book, I was impressed with how well crafted it was. The sequel is called *The Flux*, as if it's the price we have to pay for a book this good. I'll take it!

Michael Hicks says

[Note: I received an advanced reader's copy of this title from the publisher, via NetGalley, for review.]

Flex is a novel that grabbed me right off the bat, from its evocative cover art to the intense magic-as-a-drug fueled prologue, and sucked me in with Paul's struggles to cope with and help his tragically burned daughter.

Ferrett Steinmetz is able to quickly construct a familiar world, one where not only is magic real and rightfully dangerous, but which can also be synthesized into a drug called Flex. Needless to say, magic is illegal, with its wielders forced into military service. In the book's opening pages, Paul learns that he is gifted with 'mancy, but that its use has very real, very serious repercussions. Magic flexes the universe, but that's not something to simply toy around with because the universe flexes back. And while magic may break the physics that shape our world, it remains true that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. And karma, well, she's a bitch.

After learning that a terrorist named Anathema, who uses the Flex blowback to target her victims, is responsible for nearly killing his daughter, and that the insurance company, who Paul works for, is refusing to cover her treatments, Paul goes into the Flex making business. This is where Steinmetz earns his Breaking Bad comparison, and it's well-earned. If you're going to put a magical spin on recent pop culture phenomena, you could do a lot worse than look to that drug dealing drama for inspiration.

One thing that I really appreciated in this title, though, is just how mundane it can be, and that really helps to ground the story. For instance, although magic is dangerous, it's not exactly sexy. Paul's powers stem from his love of bureaucracy and filing paperwork, and he's able to tap into top-secret CIA documents and police reports by magically filing requisition forms. His partner-in-crime, Valentine, is a gamemancer – she's a video game addict, and her love of Wii and 3DS fuels her magical abilities, along with some healthy inspiration from the Metal Gear Solid series.

It helps, too, that Steinmetz casts his characters as real people, first and foremost. These aren't part-time models who strut around on the catwalk and then fight crime at night. Paul's a paper-pusher for an insurance company. An ex-cop, he lost a foot in the line of duty and has a robotic prosthetic that can be a bit ungainly. Valentine is a wonderfully natural heroine, a bit chubby, a bit geeky, a bit sarcastic, and she adopts Paul's mission as her own out of sincere compassion. They make for a dynamic team, and their relationship shows wonderful growth.

I have to give Steinmetz a lot of credit for inserting as much realism and humanity into the story as he does, and this is a large part of the reason for why the book works as well as it does. It's clear that a lot of effort went into making the fantastic as relatable as possible, and there's a terrific amount of world building constructed around the disruption that magic, and its rules, brings to the table. Flex was an absolute delight to read, and my only real lament is that I can't cast some bureaucromancy of my own to conjure up the sequel right friggin' now.

Frank Errington says

Review copy

Flex is distilled magic in crystallized form, gifted to ordinary people by 'mancers. Along with the Flex, and the powers it bestows, comes the Flux. Think newton's Third law, "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction."

In his debut novel, Ferrett Steinmetz has created an amazing world where 'mancy is considered evil (after the

annihilation of Europe, I'm not surprised).

Paul Tsabo works as an insurance claims investigator, specializing in sorting out instances involving magic which will void a claim.

As much as I found the story to be fanciful, imaginative, and fun, there were elements that went well beyond my ability to suspend my disbelief. Kind of like Disney's, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" on acid.

The characters were well written and clearly developed. I particular liked the little things, like Paul's co-worker, and friend, Kit, who makes character judgments based on a person's choice of donuts. A nice touch.

The writing style is different, similar to cyberpunk, but in more of an urban-fantasy genre. Not exactly horror, but with elements of that form as well.

Flex is a self-contained novel, but there is more story that could be told should the writer decide to return to this world for a follow-up. If there is ever a sequel, I'd go out of my way to read it and for that reason I give this one 4 Stars.

Flex is published by Angry Robot and is available as a Trade Paperback, Mass Market paperback, as well as, ebub and mobi formats.

Recommended.

Carly says

There's something about urban fantasy. While scifi looks to the future and high fantasy escapes to a different realm, urban fantasy finds enchantment in the everyday and transforms it into pure magic.

And *Flex* takes it to a new level.

In the world that Steinmetz creates, magic is born of single-minded passion:

“Mancers believed so thoroughly in their obsessions that their belief wore a hole through the law of physics.”

As a result, there are gamemancers. Musclemancers. Illustromancers. Collectomancers. Huntomancers. Junkomancers. As one of the characters points out, somewhere out in the world, there are probably even polkamancers. But as harmless as all those reclusive cat-hair-covered felismancers might seem, they're explosions just waiting for the match. 'Mancers have the ability to "flex" reality, but reality can only be bent so far before it bends back. And when the "flux"--the reaction to flexing reality too far-- hits, disaster inevitably follows. After Europe melted down in an apocalyptic breach in the folds of reality, America cracked down on its 'mancers, capturing them and forcing them to join their creepy troop of brain-burned Unimancers.

Now that he's left the police for the Samaritan insurance company, Paul Tsabo spends his days doing paperwork. Since insurance doesn't usually cover magic-related injuries, much of his work involves linking disasters to 'mancers or to sales of the 'mancy-made drug Flex. But even paperwork has its perils: Paul's obsession with his holy grail, the "Universal Unified Form," has turned him into a bureaucromancer. His magic allows him to rearrange schedules, magic cars out of rental agreements, and find almost anyone--as long as he has an identifier to start with. He even has magic desk drawers: one gives him access to every type

of form; the other, once he submits the right documentation, allows him to access any paperwork, no matter how secret.

Paul himself, “the guy who turned DMV into an art,” is a likeable character, a nerd who wants to be a superhero without the spandex. He’s adorably uptight and usually doesn’t even realize it:

“Not that Paul ever dressed down. He liked suits. And crisp ties. They were armor for the civilized man. At best, he’d roll up his sleeves, and that only because it looked totally badass.”

At the same time, Paul is complex and flawed; as one of his friends tells him, he tends to think up “*good reasons to justify the things you want to do anyway*.”(view spoiler)

One of my favourite Paul moments was when he started yelling at the Broach and the buzzsects, and his bullheaded beliefs warp reality yet again.

“You,” Paul said to the buzzsects, “are not aerodynamic.” They dropped from the air, twitching helplessness.

(hide spoiler)] Paul’s belief in a predictable, organized, reasonable world is so strong that it is enough to bend reality. What could be more deliciously ironic than that?(view spoiler)

(hide spoiler)]

This is one of those books that just hit me perfectly, and it’s really hard to explain precisely why. I loved the idea of ‘mancy, even though the apostrophe drove me nuts. One of the most interesting parts of magical systems is the cost, and in this case, the consequences of magic are fully explored. The world was a little like a cross between Myke Cole and Kate Griffin; I know that’s a rather bizarre mix, but then so is the book. There are a lot of action-packed moments, many of them involving gamemancy. As a non-gamer, most of the references flew right by me, but I loved that part where they pull out a Portal gun. (The cake is a lie.)

But the book isn’t just about drug-filled magical escapades; it’s also about Paul’s struggles to balance being a mancer and a father:

“That was the stupid thing about parenting: the mundane stuff took up so much of your life, you forgot all this pointed towards the future. You spent your days strapping your kids into backseats, reading them bedtime stories, making them bowls of cereal. That’s what you did as a parent: create routines to make the world seem safer.
If you weren’t paying attention, you’d forget the tasks were not the job.”

It’s also about dealing with pain and loss. It’s about the struggle to not be defined by a disability or deformity, to be a person rather than a victim.(view spoiler)

(hide spoiler)]

I delayed writing this review for a couple of weeks because I just can’t really explain why I enjoyed the book so much. I loved the idea of bureaucromancy, the burgeoning relationship between Paul and the other main character, the humor and the absurdity. I can’t wait to find out more about the world. It’s not a perfect fit for

everyone, and I'd have a hard time figuring out the right audience, but for those it fits, *Flex* is pure magic. Make that pure 'mancy.

I received an advanced reader copy ebook through Netgalley from the publisher, Angry Robot Books, in exchange for my honest review. Thank you! While the included quotes may not reflect the final phrasing, I believe they speak to the nature of the novel as a whole.

Cross-posted on BookLikes. I also interviewed the author [here](#).

Stephanie Swint says

I have no complaints for this book and several compliments. There is action, humor, and it's smart. Steinmetz created an alternate reality that includes both magic and the Affordable Health Care Act. ...an interesting choice. His magic is 'mancy. Power born from obsession and escapism. If what you love and respect above all else is rules and paperwork you become a Bureaucromancer like Paul Tsabo. A man who believes in the justice paperwork provides. Steinmetz main character is a skinny ex-cop who decided, by choice, to quit and work for an insurance company, Samaritan Mutual. His job has been to catch 'Mancers. The people who distort the fabric of reality for their wishes, and it makes them dangerous because reality has to bend back. This process is called Flux. As the universe tries to make up for the imbalance you get earthquakes or storms raining frogs. ... It's quite the day when he becomes one. In 'Flex,' Paul is searching for a 'Mancer by the name of Anathema. She uses her 'mancy to create Flex, a drug, that gives mundanes the abilities of a 'Mancer for limited time. They, however, have no idea how to handle their flux and it is creating havoc in Manhattan. It created a gas fire that burned Paul's daughter, and the Bureaucromancer will do what he has to in order to stop her.

Paul is great character. He's a divorced father, ex-cop, hero, and insurance claim investigator. He was disabled after his foot was crushed in his fight with 'the Illustromancer.' It led to stress in his marriage and escapism in work. He believed if he couldn't fix his own problems at least he could work on his claims and fix other people's. The focus and passion for it led to his work becoming 'mancy. This kind-hearted and loyal man is an unlikely hero. Yes, he was a cop, but not because he had physical aptitude for it. Clothes hang on him like a hanger. It is his determination that got him on the police force and what drives him in his fight with Anathema. He's a good man, and a good caring father, despite the fact he is not a perfect one. There is no such thing as a perfect parent. What drives Paul is his essential goodness. Steinmetz did well in his creation along with other characters like Valentine. She is described as a sunny, pudgy, goth girl. She's pretty despite being fifty pounds overweight. She's messy in how she lives, but when the flux from your 'mancy takes all you care about away, how else would you live? She's a solid and flawed character. She cares for Paul's daughter with the ferocity of someone who hasn't received the same. You start to see a pattern. Steinmetz characters are kind, well-intentioned, and realistic. They aren't perfect. Life has dealt them some tragedy that instigated their motivations. There is also diversity without simplifying the characters into tokens. I highly recommend this book from character study alone.

I both read and listened to 'Flex' and enjoyed it both ways. I don't think you can go wrong with either decision. Peter Brooke's narration is delightful. My attention didn't stray. Brooke's interpretation of Steinmetz humor was perfect. It fit. The more I pay attention to a narrator's ability to differentiate characters the more I am impressed with those who do it well. It isn't easy and Brooke is successful. When I got interrupted and neglected to pause 'Flex' I knew exactly who was speaking in the story. I wasn't lost. I went back solely because I didn't want to miss anything.

The second book is 'Flux' and I can't wait to read it. I'm forcing myself to wait a bit because I haven't fallen in love this way with a book since Wesley Chu's Tao series. This isn't to say I haven't loved and enjoyed other books/series. I most certainly have. The attachment for it comes from the feeling I am left with after reading it. It's one of goodness, one of hope in an admittedly imperfect world. I love the ridiculousness of the magic system because it feels right. Magic created out of obsession and escapism makes sense to me. Beurocromancy, Videogamemancy, etc. is so preposterous and harebrained it literally rings of reality. I buy Steinmetz alternate universe, and if you are in the proper mood I am betting you will too. If you are looking for something beautiful or grim this isn't it, however, if you like some humor and bizarre reality in your magic system/fantasy pick this up.

Lisa says

Review from Tenacious Reader: <http://www.tenaciousreader.com/2015/0...>

Reading Flex is like ingesting a solid dose of some seriously bad-ass magic. The world comes to life, possibilities that you hadn't thought of suddenly present themselves, you find yourself immersed in words that portray a familiar, but yet much more magical world. Flex is in some ways, reminiscent of Breaking Bad with a Ready Player One slant but with an added twist all it's own.

Our protagonist, Paul, is an interesting character. He is a rule abiding, ex-cop who was injured in the line of duty against a 'mancer. There are definite shades of grey morality as he is forced to make some very hard choices and re-evaluate his previously black and white view of the world.

I debated about how much plot detail to go into with this. There are some stories that I think are much better experienced straight from the author, and I suspect this is one of them. So, I am going to focus on the world and magic in this review and hope you get a good enough feel for what makes this story such a great read.

Imagine magic that that does not go to a predetermined set within the population, but a magic that stems from the pain of being isolated and the obsessions that people take on to cope with it. Magic that centers around whatever a person focuses on most to ground themselves, magic that comes from that one thing they have found to immerse themselves in to find some level of joy or sanity in their otherwise lonely or painful life. It creates a fascinating world where magic can stem from anything, and each users abilities and limitations are determined by what brings them magic.

These individuals that manifest these powers are called 'mancers. The first part of it is determined by their unique ability (obsession). There are videogamemancers, deathmetalmancers, crazy cat ladies can become catmancers (or something like that). You get the idea. A videogamemancer's capabilities must follow the rules from a video game. The only catch is that there are two sides to the magic. The flex (the good stuff you want to happen) and the flux (the bad stuff that is the price of the flex). So, you can't just magic yourself something great, like winning the lottery, without something horrible happening (like getting run over by a bus) to balance it out. Karma is a bitch, and so is Flux.

The Flux has put people on high alert to fear all 'mancers. When they are found, they are sent to be Refactored, where they are pretty much brainwashed to operate within a hive mind of other 'mancers. They work for the government, and are really just shells of their old selves. They seem like brainwashed zombies, just taking orders.

It makes you wonder why anyone would want to do it, but greed and lack of foresight often wins out in life, this world is no different. But then there is motivation that can sometimes make you take the risk of flux, a motivation that is not at all selfish but comes from a need to help, like the love a parent has for a child that is in dire need of medical help. It's hard to imagine someone with the ability not trying to help (and just cross your fingers that the Flux doesn't come back and bite you in the ass, undo all the good, plus).

Now, to make it even more interesting, imagine being able to channel this magic into a material that can be sold, distributed and used like a drug. Anyone can experience the thrill of Flex. Seriously, some very cool things going on in Flex.

Just don't make the mistake of thinking this is a shallow, just for thrills book. There is more there than just a surface level action story. The very nature of how abilities manifest, the fact that 'mancers tend to be lonely people with some sort of problems in their life, the cost of the magic, the balance of flex and flux, and the stigma of being 'mancer in a society where magic is feared and loathed, all of these things speak at a deeper level if the reader chooses to go there. Flex is raw magic with a deep soul. Highly recommend.

Laura says

| ARC kindly provided by Angry Robot via NetGalley in exchange for an honest review. Thank you a lot! |

Flex es la historia de un padre en búsqueda de la salvación de su pequeña hija de 6 años en un mundo donde la magia puede aspirarse, causando reacciones fuertes, extremas, violentas y totalmente bizarras.

Lo cierto es que éste libro pudo haber sido *muy* bueno, pero la narración mató, a mi parecer, el potencial del libro. Es decir, teníamos a este personaje, Paul, al borde de la locura, metiéndose en pelea tras pelea, amasando poder a través del Flex para poder hacer cualquier cosa que significara ayudar a su hija pero Steimmetz logró que cada párrafo fuese un mundo diferente que no coincidían entre ellos.

La historia logró atraparme durante el prólogo y luego siguió así pero pienso que llegó a su cúspide muy pronto (capítulo 2) y desde allí sólo me sentí perdida y con ganas de abandonar el libro.

Y es que realmente estoy molesta porque la premisa era tan buena y la historia tan genial y pudo haber sido épico, pero ésa jodida narración. Tal vez estoy siendo muy dura con el libro, pero esperaba más de el luego de la idea tan maravillosa que me había hecho en mi cabeza.
