

### Meet John Trow: A Novel

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## Review

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**Dyja, Thomas** *Meet John Trow: A Novel*. Penguin Books, \$24.95 ISBN 670030996

### Rapt in Reenactment

Portrayal of historical figure transforms modern "everyman"

Steven Armour is a middle-aged man in the contemporary world who possesses all the ingredients necessary for happiness, but is discontented with the mixture he has concocted. Steven Armour is a modern Everyman, for his malaise is a common complaint among middle-aged men in our society. His advertising career is in the doldrums. His company has changed hands and the new managers ignore Steven's ideas. His marriage bores him, and the traits that once attracted him to his wife now repel him. He is alienated from his children. Twelve-year old Nate is going through the changes of puberty, and Steven sees him as pimply, awkward, and smelly. Five-year old Emily is withdrawn and spends her time staring at the television. Steven keeps his distance from his emotionally needy elderly father.

One day Steven happens upon three pairs of costumed dancers performing an old reel in the town center. The women wear dresses with tight bodices and hoop skirts, and the men wear Civil War army uniforms. Steven is suddenly overcome by erotic longing for one of the dancers, a redhead who reminds him of an early lover. Someone hands him a flyer advertising a Civil War reenactment at nearby Mt. Riga Furnace National Park. The Armour family attends the reenactment, and Steven is abruptly launched on a trip into the past, a trip he seemingly cannot control.

Spurred on by lust for the redheaded dancer, Mrs. Polly Kellogg, Steven Armour joins the 2nd Connecticut Regiment of reenactors under Colonel Elisha Kellogg. Each member of the unit researches the life of the man he is impersonating in order to play the part convincingly. Steven Armour is assigned

the role of John Trow, and he throws himself headlong into the character.

Becoming John Trow marks the beginning of a transformation in Steven Armour's life. Steven Armour *embraces* John Trow and his simple life. He slowly withdraws from the modern world and his family as he slides ever deeper into his role. He grows a beard and he wears his uniform more than necessary. He neglects his job and his family, living for the moments when he is up on the mountain with Polly Kellogg and the men of the regiment. The line dividing Steven Armour and John Trow becomes blurred. Steven learns to hate Col. Elisha Kellogg, a petty tyrant and a martinet. And he finds a deep vein of anger and guilty pleasure in changing into a different man.

**Meet John Trow** is the story of a man in turmoil. The problems that he faces are common troubles that affect people when they reach a crossroads in the lives. Steven Armour is an appealing character who finds himself beset from every side. His family and his job cause him problems that he cannot solve alone. His modern self is in moral conflict with the historical person who takes over his body and mind. The story provides a fresh and interesting look at midlife crisis, so readers of general novels will enjoy the book. The conflict between modern man and historical man and the approach that each takes to solve problems is fascinating. Readers of specialized novels about the Civil War will appreciate the details of acquiring the correct period uniform, weapon and accouterments for the historical reenactments. However, **Meet John Trow** does not feature any battle scenes or brushes with famous generals, so the Civil War fan who looks for these details might be disappointed in the novel.

*Margaret C. Harrison is a librarian at the State Library of Louisiana.*