

Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore by Robin Sloan

Summary

A gleeful and exhilarating tale of global conspiracy, complex code-breaking, high-tech data visualization, young love, rollicking adventure, and the secret to eternal life—mostly set in a hole-in-the-wall San Francisco bookstore.

The Great Recession has shuffled Clay Jannon out of his life as a San Francisco Web-design drone—and serendipity, sheer curiosity, and the ability to climb a ladder like a monkey has landed him a new gig working the night shift at Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore. But after just a few days on the job, Clay begins to realize that this store is even more curious than the name suggests.

There are only a few customers, but they come in repeatedly and never seem to actually buy anything, instead "checking out" impossibly obscure volumes from strange corners of the store, all according to some elaborate, long-standing arrangement with the gnomish Mr. Penumbra.

The store must be a front for something larger, Clay concludes, and soon he's embarked on a complex analysis of the customers' behavior and roped his friends into helping to figure out just what's going on. But once they bring their findings to Mr. Penumbra, it turns out the secrets extend far outside the walls of the bookstore.

With irresistible brio and dazzling intelligence, Robin Sloan has crafted a literary adventure story for the twenty-first century, evoking both the fairy-tale charm of Haruki Murakami and the enthusiastic novel-of-ideas wizardry of Neal Stephenson or a young Umberto Eco, but with a unique and feisty sensibility that's rare to the world of literary fiction.

Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore is exactly what it sounds like: an establishment you have to enter and will never want to leave, a modern-day cabinet of wonders ready to give a jolt of energy to every curious reader, no matter the time of day. (*From the publisher.*)

Discussion Questions

1. Related to the word "umbrella," Mr. Penumbra's last name can refer to an area of partial illumination (especially in astronomy) or something that serves as a shroud. What makes his bookstore a source of light, even though it operates in the shadows?
2. What were your initial theories about the bookstore's mysterious patrons and their project? What did you predict Manutius's message would be?
3. At the heart of the novel is the collision of old-world handwork and the automated digital age. How do Clay and Mat build a bridge between these two worlds?
4. Discuss Clay's pursuit of love. What makes Kat attractive to him? What does it take to win her over?
5. The characters remind us that fifteenth-century technologies of the book—from punch-cutting to typesetting—were met with fear and resistance, as well as with entrepreneurial competition and the need to teach new skills. How does this compare to the launch of e-books? If you try to picture what literacy will look like five hundred years from now, what do you see?
6. If you were to file a *codex vitae*, capturing all you've learned throughout your life, what would it contain?
7. As Clay and the team of Google decoders take on the same challenge, what do they discover about the relative strengths of the human brain and technology?

8. Neel's financial backing makes it possible for Clay to outwit Corvina and the Festina Lente Company, despite its many lucrative enterprises. In this novel, what can money buy, and what are the limitations of wealth?

9. Clay's literary idol, Clark Moffat, was forced to make a choice between the Unbroken Spine project and his commercially successful fiction. If you had been Moffat, which path would you have chosen?

10. Are Penumbra and his colleagues motivated only by a quest for immortality? If not, what are the other rewards of their labor-intensive work? Can books give their authors immortality?

11. How did you react to Gerritszoon's "message to eternity," revealed in the closing passages? How can his wisdom apply to your life?

12. Discuss the physical traits of your copy of *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore*. Do you have a hard copy or an e-book, and where did you buy it? How does the design of the book enhance your reading experience?

(Questions issued by publisher.)

Reviews

Irresistible.

Newsweek

Wonderful.... I had a great time reading [*Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore*], flew through it in one sitting.... The reader gets that deeply satisfying feeling of entering a wholly created world, and looking on in wonder as that world gets created by the author's fearlessness and disregard for convention.... It's a lot of fun, a real tour de force.

George Saunders - Blip Magazine

Sloan's debut novel takes the reader on a dazzling and flat-out fun adventure, winding through the interstices between the literary and the digital realms.... Clay needs a job. One day, he stumbles into Mr. Penumbra's store and...lands himself a job as the night clerk. The bookstore is an odd place.... Clay is forbidden to open the books yet required to describe the borrowers in great detail. Late-night boredom catalyzes curiosity, and soon Clay discovers that the books are part of a vast code.... From the shadows of Penumbra's bookshelves to the brightly lit constellation of cyberspace to the depths of a subterranean library, Sloan deftly wields the magicks (definitely with a "k") of the electronic and the literary in this intricate mystery.

Kirk Reviews