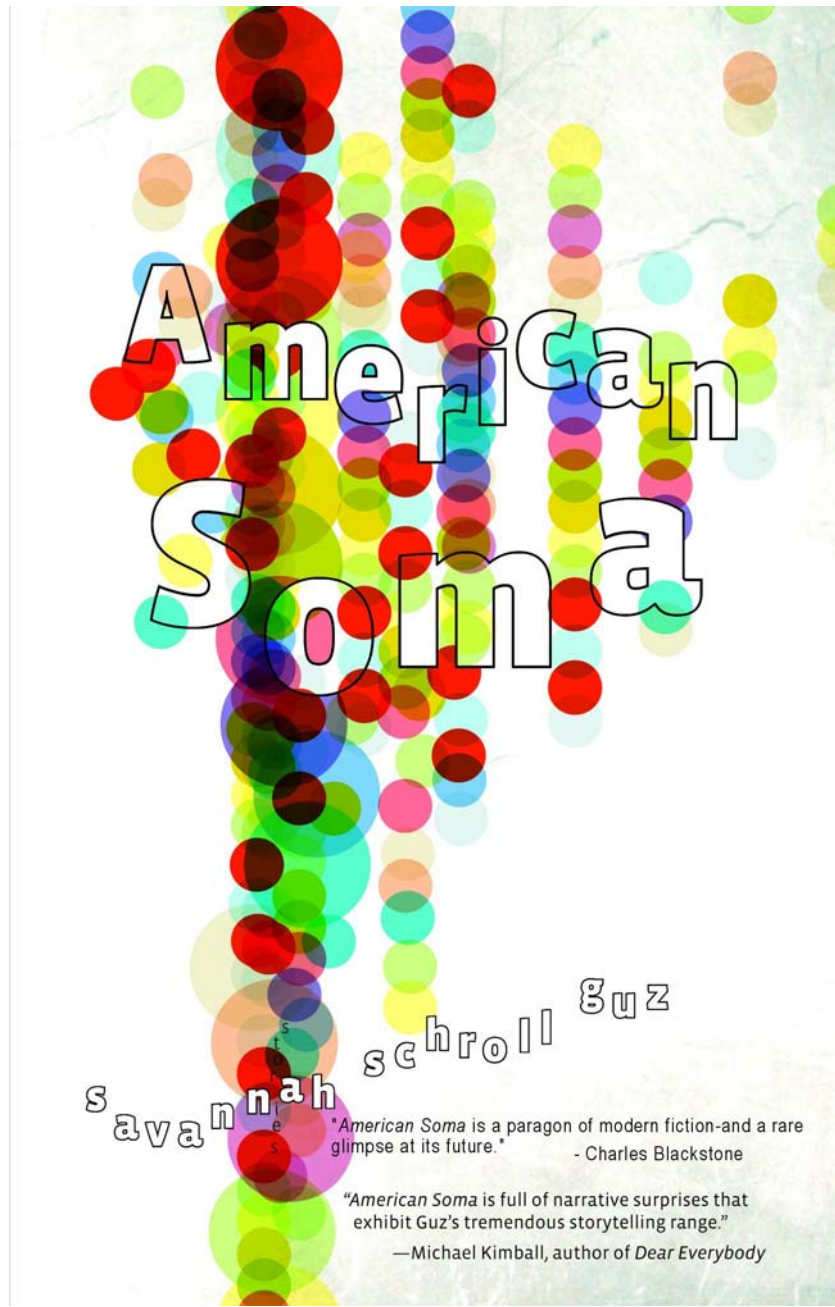


# A READER'S GUIDE TO AMERICAN SOMA

Savannah Schroll Guz



### **AMERICAN SOMA SYNOPSIS:**

With a nod to the chemically-induced contentment of Huxley's *Brave New World*, "American Soma" explains how a friction-filled democratic system is lubricated by a collusion of partisan politicians and commercial interests. "Evolution", written during the Dover Area School District's Intelligent Design Trials, describes the adaptations caused by mankind's heavy reliance on synthetic hormones and toxic polymers. Twenty other fables and letters explore alternate histories, the colonial nature of late capitalism, pained yet comic souls, the obsessions of lucid maniacs, and an imagined advance towards the Apocalypse. Concerned and politically aware, Guz examines the lurking evils of contemporary society and the darker corners of human nature.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- 1) "American Soma" discusses the drugging of an entire population for political ends. What does a story like this tell us about the American political consciousness? Do you feel it reflects a significant change in citizens' attitude towards government? Towards our government, in particular?
- 2) "David Dreams of Australopithecines" follows closely on the heels of "American Soma" and makes an allusion to cloning as part of the human evolutionary line. Soma and reproductive issues are at the crux Aldous Huxley's work *Brave New World*. What kind of narrative extension does this create for Huxley's imagined universe?
- 3) The author has described "Patent Leather Sidewalk Evangelist" as an allegory. How is the story allegorical? Despite its religious veneer, does it have political and social underpinnings? Who or what do you feel the characters represent?
- 4) What dichotomies exist in "A Secret History"? Does the author also illuminate a divide between Marie Antoniette's public and private persona? Why call it a 'secret' history?
- 5) What motivates many of the characters in "The Fountain"? What seems to drive Larry? What kind of man is he? Does his response to the occupation of his bar cause you to believe he is a static or dynamic character?
- 6) What relationship can be intuited between "Evolution" and "Battlehof's Secrets"? What kind of figure is Battlehof, who does he resemble, and what kind of political ideology appears to grow out of the gender and identity crisis? What broader admonitory message does this bear?
- 7) What is the symbolic significance of Frank McMaster's choice to plant flower bulbs as a method of covering up Glenda's murder in "Justly Desired and

- Inspiring Awe”? What motivates his dire actions? How is Glenda both victim and tyrant and does her description reveal these two sides?
- 8) Describe the guide book reviewer in “Armand’s” and define his many troubles. How does the ending add insult to injury?
  - 9) Some academic circles claim that our current movement towards a global economy has sent us into a ‘post-colonial’ era. With this in mind, what is the significance of the title “Post-modern Colonialism”? How much truth is there in the author’s depiction? What effect does the comparison of McCarthy’s illustrative maps to the mechanisms of consumer culture have, and the further comparison to botulism spores? How does this contribute to the overall message?
  - 10) In “North American Twilight”, what does the Angel of Death mean when she calls Boone her ‘partner?’ What allegorical roles do Jeliza and Boone play?
  - 11) In “A Horizontal Plane”, how does the switch to the mother’s point of view impact your experience of the crisis? What does this sudden shift in narrative focus tell us about the mother? About the daughter? What emotive power does this have?
  - 12) In “An August Night in Paris” the human body plays an important role. Describe the main character’s relationship with her own and with others’. How would you characterize these interactions? How do these relationships change by the end of the story?
  - 13) How is the main character in “December 15, 2012” symbolic of our current preoccupations? What significance does the fact that the speaker is not a foreigner hold? What underlying message might this bear? What allusion does the title make?
  - 14) The author has compared her collection to the drawings of German social satirist George Grosz, whose 1923 compendium *Ecce Homo* explicitly depicted (and derided) mankind’s immorality. What similar commentaries can be found in *American Soma*? Which stories resemble satirical sketches and what makes them satirical? Are there morals to these stories?

**PRE-RELEASE CRITICAL ACCLAIM:**

"*American Soma* is a paragon of modern fiction—and a rare glimpse at its future. Savannah Schroll Guz’s trenchant wit and uncompromising candor fuel every sentence, propelling these stories with revitalizing, visceral language that is not just evocative in the contextual reading moment, but transcends the limits of the page, by virtue of its abounding strength. Quirky, yet

accessible short fiction that's at once serious and hilarious, raw and refined, *American Soma* is a provocative collection I know we'll be talking about for a long time to come."

--Charles Blackstone, author and Chicago Public Radio contributor

"*American Soma* is full of narrative surprises that exhibit Guz's tremendous storytelling range."

--Michael Kimball, author of *Dear Everybody*