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# The Normals: A Novel

*David Gilbert*

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**The Normals: A Novel** David Gilbert

With the millennium fast approaching, twenty-eight-year-old Harvard-educated Billy Schine finds himself without prospects, a balled-up bit of litter riding the boom of New York in the nineties. His classmates make millions on Wall Street and the Internet while Billy makes do with a series of temp jobs. He has a girlfriend, Sally Hu, but they're more of a couple by romantic default, sex the only commodity they're willing to trade in. Time flows by without consequence until one day Billy receives a letter from Ragnar & Sons, a collection agency seeking some satisfaction on three years of unpaid student loans. Death is mentioned as an alternative to payment. Now every passerby is a potential hitman, and Billy has to flee. But where? Not home to his unwell parents. Providence delivers Hargrove Anderson Medical, a pharmaceutical company looking for perfectly healthy "normals" to participate in Phase I studies of their latest experimental drugs. Billy signs up for a fourteen-day trial of Allevatrox, a new atypical antipsychotic for the treatment of schizophrenia.

At first, little happens in the research center, the boredom punctuated only by twice-daily appointments with pills and needles. Within the group, battle stories are told from the healing fields of guinea pig, and Billy is pleased. He's rested and well-fed and possibly in love with the lone female in the study. Then the messy side effects hit, and everything changes. The normal world is turned upside-down, the real and unreal merging until spilled blood becomes the only proof of a beating heart.

Through the sharp-eyed, self-doubting Billy Schine, David Gilbert exposes the crisis of the contemporary human condition: how to connect? As funny as it is profound, The Normals is a tour de force from a writer of astonishing intelligence and imagination.

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