

# Feed for Thought:

## M. T. Anderson's *Smart*, Savage Satire Takes On Consumerism

**"Feed is highly original, beautifully written, very moving, and vividly done. It's a stunner."**

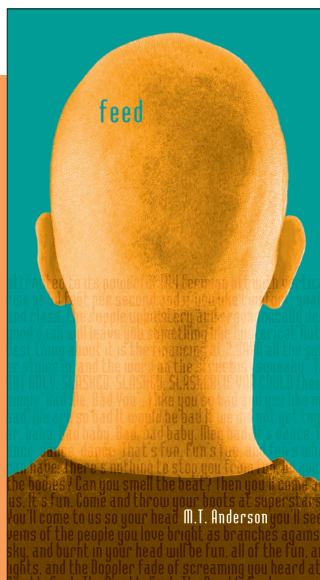
—Melvin Burgess, author of *Smack*, winner of the Carnegie Medal and the Guardian Prize for Fiction

**"I have never read a novel that compares to this: *Feed* is a mind-boggling work of the imagination, meg inventive, meg amusing, and meg ominous."**

—Sonya Hartnett, author of *Sleeping Dogs* and *Thursday's Child*

The phrase "Carpe diem: Seize the day" has been trademarked to sell breakfast cereal. A teen magazine cover screams, "Is That My Butt?" TV commercials urge viewers to buy, spend, and waste just "because you can." To most of us, these media messages are background noise to be flipped past, tuned out, and paid little mind. To the author of *Feed*, however, a novel about a world where consumerism runs amok—and where the Internet and advertising banners are fed directly into people's heads via computer chip—such media hype is an insidious sign that his cautionary tale is not so far from reality. "I think we all have, at this point, a direct connection to the media in our brains," M. T. Anderson says. "It's impossible for us to conceive of our lives without conceiving of them in images taken from movies, from songs, from ads—all of which challenge us to be better consumers rather than better people."

First imagined as a short story for a collection about literacy, *Feed* ultimately grew "too big" for that format. "My original idea was to write a story about a future time in which we had become so connected to a fast-paced world of media images that no one could read anymore," the author explains. "But I realized that if I made it a short piece, it would have been purely satirical.



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Whereas if I made it into a novel, there was a human dimension, characters who one cares about, who could be fleshed out, as they say." Those characters include Titus, a teenager whose ability to read, write, and even think for himself has been almost completely obliterated by the "feed" implanted in his brain, and Violet, a bright, independent-minded girl who cares about what's happening to the world and challenges everything Titus and his friends hold dear. The result is not only a sharp satire, but also a poignant story about human connection and loss that leaves an unforgettable emotional impact.

### Targeting Teens

Teenagers seemed the natural audience for *Feed*, the author says, because advertisers so voraciously market to them. "Teenagers are searching for an identity," he notes, "and companies such as clothing chains—one in *Feed* is called 'Wetherbee & Crotch'—offer them one. At the same time, among teens you find an incredible spirit of anger

and resistance, because they know that someone's trying to manipulate them." As advances in technology make it easier for marketers to target their audience, media messages become ever harder to avoid. "The danger is not that someone will make a precise marketing model of us that they can use to sell to us," the author says. "We can take or leave that. The danger is that once a basic model has been made, they try to produce young consumers who will fit that model."

Teenagers are especially vulnerable to media hype, the author believes, but all of us are affected. "There is a theme running through the book about how this is a culture that is trying to forget its own past," he says. "It has always been important for Americans to think

of themselves as a young nation and an innocent nation. The cult of youth has become part of the whole marketing thing, where products are sold by making people feel that they're going to be young and hip. And what gets left behind is a sense of history, or the sense of our own past mistakes, that we might learn from."

The author hastens to add, "But it's not like I'm criticizing the system from the outside. We're all part of the same system. More and more people are feeling like this: We're tired of being sold to, tired of being patted on the head, tired of missing so much that's going on in the world."

## Resisting the Feed

M. T. Anderson says that *Feed* was partly inspired by his experiences tutoring high school kids in California, and by many conversations he's had with friends who are long-time teachers. "It's teachers who are out there on the front lines, teaching kids how to think in complicated ways and how to see around the edges of the culture," he observes. But "seeing around" an all-pervasive media culture isn't easy for any of us, he admits—especially teenagers. He recalls his own teenage years in the '80s, when out of sheer perversity he favored an eclectic range of everything from harpsichord music to "industrial noise" over the popular music of the decade, a preference that sometimes proved isolating. "Teens tend to watch each other and engage each other on questions of taste, very, very harshly," he points out. "Yeah, especially when it comes to the harpsichord."

So is there any hope? Are we doomed to end up in a *Feed*-like state, manipulated by the media conglomerates and utterly unable to think for ourselves? All satire aside, M. T. Anderson does see some hope for the future. "I believe in extending our knowledge into areas that are obscure and eccentric as a way of exploring ourselves and our place in the world," he says. "I feel that's the best thing teens can do early on, to say to themselves, 'I am going to ignore what the media is telling me to care about.' Instead of responding to it by becoming anxious—that we need to get some piece of clothing that suddenly comes into fashion, or that we need to lose weight or gain weight or change our musculature so we look more like Hollywood romantic leads, whatever it is—instead, teens can start exploring all the peculiar corners of the world that are out there. Because that is one thing the media does not encourage: a real sense of curiosity."

Ironically, technology has provided one tool the author sees as beneficial to this endeavor: the Internet. "On the Web, one stumbles onto all kinds of eccentric resistance—which is every bit as much an American

*"Everything we've grown up with—the stories on the feed, the games, all of that—it's all streamlining our personalities so we're easier to sell to. . . . It's like a spiral: They keep making everything more basic so it will appeal to everyone. And gradually, everyone gets used to everything being basic, so we get less and less varied as people, more simple. So the corps. make everything even simpler. And it goes on and on."*

—From *Feed*, a novel by M. T. Anderson

tradition as consumerism," he says. "Kids are doing amazing things, cultivating the most obscure enthusiasms and areas of knowledge. They're compiling lists of their favorite recordings of Indian ragas, comparing notes on different mountain bikes, tracking banalities on prime-time shows, telling their stories, writing scripts, setting up sites for protests. It has given them an amazing platform on which they can explore and demonstrate their interests.

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