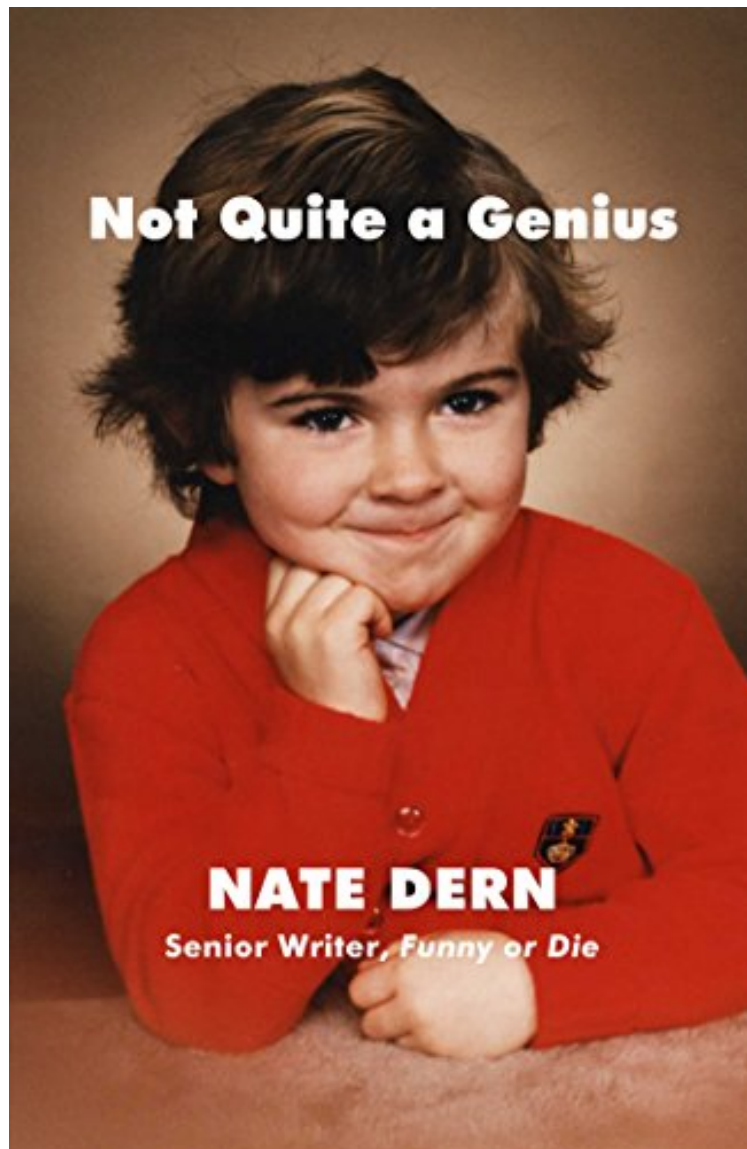


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Not Quite a Genius

Nate Dern

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Nate Dern : Not Quite a Genius before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Not Quite a Genius:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A Fantastic Read!By Jon NormanBy far the funniest and most enjoyable book I have read all year!5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Comedy + Life = An excellent, inspiring readBy Travis MacyCouldn't put it down! I bought the book for comedy, but it turns out there's a ton of good stuff for living, loving, and just being a better person.5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. but he uses it

with enough grace that you never feel stupid. Plus you can read it while pooping. By Dashiell D. Dern effortless oscillates between the surreal world of his imagination and the relatable universe of his life experience. He's got a vocabulary that lets you know he's no a dummy, but he uses it with enough grace that you never feel stupid. Plus you can read it while pooping, which is a fantastic experience depending on your diet.

From the senior writer at Funny or Die and former artistic director at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theater, a collection of absurdist, hilarious stories and essays on relationships, technology, and contemporary society. This collection of essays and stories spans a wide variety of topics. There's the open letter to Charles Manson, the report of a brave archeologist's journey into a suburban man cave, and a long overdue missive from Leif Erikson to Christopher Columbus. Walt Whitman even teaches a spin class. Nate Dern's razor-sharp eye examines modern society and technology, man buns, dating apps, and juicing crazes. Anyone who's ever scrunched their eyes at WiFi Terms Conditions, listened to the reasons that led a vegetarian to give up meat, or looked on in horror at the evolving audacity of reality TV will appreciate Dern's wicked and funny take on modern life.

"Nate Dern's brain is a VitaMix that chops up Kafka, the Internet, Republicans and thousands of other cultural ingredients and blends them into hilarious little treats. The results are not just funny—which they are—but they're even kind of profound. Highly recommended reading for those hungry for surprise."—A.J. Jacobs, New York Times bestselling author of *The Know-it-All* and *Drop Dead Healthy* "Nate is one of those writers and performers that is constantly morphing and changing, always impressing and exceeding my expectations. His book is no different—you never know where it's going to go next, what genre, what format, what unique new take on an old idea. It's a breath of fresh air that you can eat up bit by bit or all at once like a huge hoagie. His book is, in a lot of ways, like a really wonderful sandwich."—Abbi Jacobson, co-creator and star of Comedy Central's *Broad City* About the Author Nate Dern grew up in the mountains of Evergreen, Colorado, where he enjoyed running on dirt trails and reading Kurt Vonnegut. Formerly the artistic director at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theater, Dern is the current news editor at Funny or Die. He lives in Brooklyn with his wife and their cat, Renly Baratheon. *Not Quite a Genius* is his first book. Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. *Not Quite a Genius Which One Are You? Which one are you?* "an acquaintance of an acquaintance asks me at a party. This is a joke he has made after finding out that I was a contestant on a reality TV show called *Beauty and the Geek*. This is the joke that everyone makes when they find out this information about me. Usually it comes after the conversation turns to whatever reality TV show is currently in the zeitgeist, which leads the acquaintance to mention that, funnily enough, we have a reality TV star in our midst. Namely, me, Nate Dern. Reality TV "star" is a bit too generous, but ten years ago I was a reality TV contestant on the CW's *Beauty and the Geek*. The joke teller usually has a happy, sneaky look in his eye, like he is offering me a second piece of cake when everyone was supposed to get only one. Since the show aired ten years ago, I conservatively estimate I've heard this joke over thirty-seven thousand times. The logic of the joke is that everyone within earshot will agree that Nate Dern, the human standing there, is so obviously not the titular *Beauty* that feigning uncertainty as to whether he was the *Beauty* or the *Geek* is laughable. There was no actual confusion on the part of the joker as to which role Nate Dern—this guy with glasses and the slight lisp and who just moments ago was telling us about a science podcast—fulfilled on the show, since clearly Nate Dern—I mean, come on, just look at him—was obviously the *Geek*. Get it? I don't get mad when I hear the joke, though. I like it because it means the conversation is now about me, and I like attention. That's why, at the age of twenty-one, I chose to be on a reality show in the first place. I'm not proud of it, but as I ease into my thirties I'm able to admit that my affection for attention is a part of me that isn't going anywhere, just like the asymmetrical patch of Brillo-thick hair I have on my left shoulder but not my right, or my tendency to say, "It's easier to stay warm than to get warm," when someone is about to go outside on a cold day without enough layers on. When I was twenty-one, my itch for attention was acute. It was more of an attention rash than an itch, to be honest, and some days it flared up to full-blown attention hives that could be soothed only by the sweet ointment of the gaze of others. Once when hanging out with my friends Jonah and Carlton, while they weren't looking I inserted all but one of a pack of matches in between my pursed lips, pincushion style, a row of red phosphorus heads facing out. "Dare me to light these on fire?" I mumbled with my lips closed tightly. "No," Jonah and Carlton said in unison. I proceeded to light the remaining match not in my mouth anyway. I raised the lit match to my mouth and, for dramatic effect, paused just before touching it to the match on the left corner of my mouth. I thought what would happen was an amusing, and slow-paced, contained burn from one side of my mouth to the other, much like a miniature Las Vegas fountain light show. What actually happened was a facial conflagration that burned off all of my eyelashes. For a brief second my face became a fireball. My eyelashes melted together, so for a moment I couldn't open my eyes. I thought I was blind. A second later I managed to blink the singed lashes apart. For the next few weeks I had stubby eyelashes. There is an "uncanny valley" effect that happens when a person's face is missing eyelashes, like the android manufacturer forgot one last detail before their humanoid left the factory. I didn't mind the strange looks I got, of course, because it led to people asking me why my face looked off, and for a few moments I got to be the center of attention as I told a story. And again, I like attention. I like it too much, so I do dumb things to get

it. The dumb act in pursuit of attention begets further attention in the retelling of the initial dumb act, all of which contributes to me feeling like I am important, which I call the Principle of Doing Dumb Things While Others Watch to, Paradoxically, Make Me Feel Good About Myself, and which Princeton neuroscientist Barry Jacobs calls “unhealthy attention-seeking behaviors” that are “a cry for what serotonin provides” in a “depressed person.” Whatever you call this personality trait, when I was offered the opportunity to be on a reality TV show, I said yes. My reality TV show opportunity presented itself like a fully plumed peacock in mating season during my junior year of college. While I was handing out flyers for my improv team, the Immediate Gratification Players, with my friend Chris on a crisp spring day, two Hollywood Types walked up to us. Chris and I were flyering in front of the Harvard Science Center when they approached. I was wearing our team’s signature red-and-yellow-striped tie. I was also sporting a foam and mesh trucker hat that originally said NANTUCKET but that I’d altered with Wite-Out to say NA_T__E_. On my face I had a wispy beard that I didn’t think was wispy, and an overeager smile that I thought was just eager enough. Chris was wearing a ratty leather jacket over a Motörhead T-shirt. In short, while I thought we looked fucking great, I could see how a Hollywood Type could have seen us as reading as “Geek” to a network television audience. I say Hollywood Types because they were taller, tanner, more attractive, and generally happier-looking than any of our fellow Harvard students walking past us. He wore aviator sunglasses. She was smiling. They didn’t fit in. “Wassup guys!” said the tall, smiley woman. “Hello,” said Chris. “You’ll be great for this TV show we’re casting,” said the happy, tan man. “You guys have a great look!” said the tall, smiley woman. “What’s the show called?” I asked. “Beauty and the Geek,” the happy, tan man replied. “Oh yeah? Which one am I?” I joked. “Hah! Great joke!” said the tall, smiley woman. “You guys want to come to a comedy show tonight?” asked Chris. For the first time, their enthusiasm wavered. They took the flyer from Chris’s hand with details about our show and they handed me a flyer with information about how to apply to be on theirs. The offer to apply to be on the show was for both of us, but Chris wasn’t interested. I was hooked from the moment they said, “You’ll be great . . .” If you’re sitting on a park bench and a bird poops on your pant leg, yes, while it would be true to say that the avian feces fell in your lap, most reasonable people would take a napkin and wipe it away. I scooped up their shiny peacock shit and swallowed it. Near as I can tell, my craving for attention goes back to the age of three. My younger sister, Courtney, was born, and for the first time in my life I had to compete for my parents’ attention. The earliest home video footage we have of my sister shows her sleeping after returning from the hospital, an angelic infant swaddled and in my mother’s arm as my father’s voice narrates from behind the camera. Moments later, I pop into frame from behind the couch making silly faces; I stomp around in front of my baby sister as I pretend to speak to her in a cartoon gibberish; and, at the climax of my performance, I pull the camera directly to my face. “Nathan, don’t touch the lens,” my father says softly offscreen as the image goes to a blurry close-up of my tongue swishing around in undulating figure eights in tune with a chant I make from the back of my throat. I release the lens and take a step back. “But look at me!” I shout as I produce a yo-yo from my pocket, allowing the string to unfurl without making any attempt to pull the disk back up. As the clip comes to an end, I stand beaming, my hand above my head and the yo-yo dangling below. I stand awaiting praise as the video cuts to black. My need for attention continued into elementary school. For a science fair project on moray eels, I did my presentation as a character I made up named Mrs. Ham and Cheese Sandwich. I wore an old purple dress and a sombrero, painted red lipstick in expanding concentric circles around my lips, and spoke in a high falsetto voice. There was no justification for the character’s culinary name, nor was she particularly knowledgeable about marine life. The presentation ended with me walking into a wall and then, in the fullest throes of theatrical pain my budding thespian heart could muster, writhing on the floor crying, “Oh, my nose! My beautiful nose!” In contrast, my classmates’ presentations all consisted of them standing next to a poster board and calmly reading facts about their assigned topic out loud. In middle school, my attention hunger was tamped down. Growing up in the small, mountain town of Evergreen, Colorado, it didn’t take much time at Evergreen Middle School for me to learn that Attention’s cousin Ridicule was not my carton of chocolate milk. The same bright red sweatpants that a year before had gone unnoticed were now cause for derision. “Do you even own any jeans?” my classmate Eric asked, his wide-legged JNCOs sagging and his boxer shorts billowing out, as was the fashion. Eighth graders smoked cigarettes behind the school, and some of them—it was rumored—had even drunk alcohol and had sex, activities that all sounded terrifying and a million years away from being something I’d ever do. I kept my head down and the three years passed. Slowly, as my two hundred classmates and I emerged from the icy thaw of middle school cruelty, the sweet aroma of attention enticed me again. A few weeks into high school, I was introduced to Attention’s cousin on the other side of the family tree: Popularity. The popular kids didn’t have to wear sombreros or walk into walls to get attention. They got attention just for being themselves. When the popular kids weren’t around, their names still came up in conversation. My friend and longtime neighbor Sam Warren emerged as a popular kid. He was attractive, friendly, athletic, and fun. But it was more than that. While I engaged in dumb antics like painting my shoes in bright acrylics of blue and gold, our school colors, and wrote a new message on them each week, like GO COUGARS! or KISS ME, I’M NATE, to get noticed, Sam just was Popular. He exuded it like I exuded sweat when I was overcome with panic whenever I saw a poster for an upcoming school dance. I didn’t have Sam’s natural charisma, so I sought out a way to frequently receive the attention of my classmates in a structured setting: student government. The school’s theater

department did only one sparsely attended play a year, but the student government held multiple assemblies each semester, and attendance was mandatory. I ran for class president on a platform of saying silly things in my speeches, writing goofy things on my posters, and the promise of doing hilarious skits during assemblies. I won. My happiest high school memory might be of doing a skit at an assembly with my student body copresident Scott Sweeney. We wore black and blond wigs, respectively, and recited a scene from Wayne's World with Evergreen High School specifics substituted in. In college, the attention junkie in me continued to seek out newer and better thrills, but it was harder to get noticed. While I managed to make waves at Evergreen High School, at Harvard I wasn't a big deal. Everyone had been class president and gotten a perfect score on their SAT math section like I had, but, unlike me, it felt like most were also fluent in Arabic and JavaScript, friends with the crown prince of Thailand, and flautists. Seriously, there were so many flautists at Harvard, and none of them were hobbyist flautists: They were all flautist prodigies. I wasn't a flautist prodigy or an anything prodigy. I wasn't special and I wasn't popular. I suffered from the Formerly Big Fish in a Small Pond Now Finds Himself in a Much Bigger Pond and So Relatively Isn't Such a Big Fish and Actually Is the Sort of Puny Fish a Fisherman or Fisherwoman Would Throw Back if They Caught It syndrome. Or, as Princeton neuroscientist Barry Jacobs would put it, I was a "depressed person." My first college winter I saw a chance to distinguish myself. I learned of a tradition called Primal Scream. The night before final exams began, undergraduates congregated naked in the freshman yard and ran laps nude in the freezing Boston winter. Around two hundred participated, but thousands of spectators gathered to ogle, lining the quarter-mile loop. The day of the Scream, the dean sent out an email suggesting, but not demanding, students not participate in the tradition this year, since it was expected to be one of the coldest nights in Boston history. I began to formulate a plan to set myself apart from the other streakers: I would run barefoot. "Looks like I'm the only person doing this completely naked," I said loudly among the gathering nude coeds as I handed my shoes to my roommate and friend Joe, who'd come along for moral support. At the start of the semester Joe had done a backpacking orientation trip, during which he'd learned about the different ways our bodies can lose heat. "I don't think you should take your shoes off," Joe said to me, pointedly keeping his eyes on my face and not the growing sea of naked bodies around us. "See, the convection heat loss that occurs through being outside in the cold air won't be made much worse by taking off your shoes, but the conduction heat loss that will happen with each footstep on the frozen ground will—" "Fully naked over here!" I said, cutting Joe off. "Yep, looks like I'm the only person running FULLY NAKED, so I guess—" "Holy shit, Doug's got a huge dick," someone said next to me. I turned and saw Doug, another freshman who lived in our dorm, with his large penis in tow. Given how cold it was outside, it really was quite impressive. My bare feet were being overshadowed, literally and physically, by Doug's dick. I had to do something more. Not only would I run barefoot, I'd keep running even after everyone else stopped. So, as everyone else stopped at two loops as per tradition, I kept running. I felt more eyes on me and me alone. In an evening of debauchery, I had debauched the most. As I finished my third lap, Joe waved me down, holding my clothes up in the air. I ran past him. During my fourth lap, the crowd had mostly dispersed. I felt myself transition from a participant in a college tradition to just a solitary, weird naked guy, the thin line between stalker and flasher becoming uncomfortably clear. I finished my nude mile alone and with no fanfare. Back at my dorm, Joe handed me my clothes. "Hey, not to be weird, but did you see Doug's, um, you know?" Joe said as I dressed. "It was really something." My choice to run barefoot and the additional laps resulted in frostbite on eight of my toes. I first knew something was wrong when I took a hot shower to warm up. Our dorm's scalding water was too hot for the rest of my body, but I could direct the stream onto my feet without pain. (I'd later learn this "temperature shock" probably exacerbated the tissue damage.) The numbness didn't last. A throbbing pain in my toes woke me up early the next morning. I pulled the sheet off and, like I was in a gross-out horror movie, saw that eight of my toes had been replaced with golf ball-size blisters. I looked like the recipient of a double foot donation from a mutant gecko. Not knowing what to do, and with my first college final in less than an hour, I pulled socks over my toes and strapped my feet into a pair of sandals, since the blisters were too large to fit into any of my shoes. I hobbled out into the morning cold and struggled through a Western Civilization history test, my feet throbbing in pain for the entire two hours of the exam. I turned in my blue book and went to Harvard University Health Services. I was on crutches for the next few weeks as the tissue healed. I considered the night a success. The frostbite wasn't ideal, but I had made the school paper. Harvard Crimson staff writer Nicole Urken reported: For others, the mere survival of their extremities through the frigid run was enough cause for celebration. Nathan J. Dern '07 visited UHS on Sunday to find that he had suffered from first- and second-degree burns on eight of his toes. . . . Despite the blisters and bandages, Dern said that he did not regret the experience. "Without rival, it was the greatest night of my life," he said. "I'm planning on doing seven more." ••••• Small-time antics, such as the aforementioned eyelash pyre, continued through my sophomore and junior years. The attention from my peers felt great, but the good feeling it produced was fleeting and I yearned for more. So, when the Hollywood Peacocks offered me not only attention from my peers for doing something dumb, but also possibly the attention of millions of strangers, the more rational part of my decision-making brain didn't stand a chance. ••••• I flew to Los Angeles at the end of the semester for a week of final-round interviews. I was sequestered in a hotel and wasn't allowed to leave. I watched a lot of TV. The week culminated with the final final-round interview with the show's cocreator Ashton Kutcher, Mr. Punk'd himself. When I walked into the

room for the taped interview, Ashton stood up from behind the camera and shook my hand. I felt unexpectedly starstruck, and for the first time it felt like I was actually going to be on TV. Ashton had a handlebar mustache. From behind the camera, he shot me a series of questions designed to test my Geek pedigree. “Was Darth Maul a Jedi or a Sith?” he asked. “Sith. So is Darth Sidious, aka Emperor Palpatine,” I said. “What’s a stiletto?” “Let me think,” I said. I knew it was a high-heeled shoe of some sort, but I wasn’t sure if even that limited knowledge would make me seem too savvy. “Maybe a citrus fruit of some kind?” Ashton smiled. I think he knew I was playing dumb. That might have even counted in my favor. Shooting started the next day. I waited in a hotel conference room with seven other nerds. We all had glasses and conspicuously unhip clothing. We sat in silence as we filled out bushels of paperwork. Under no circumstances were we to speak or interact with one another when the cameras weren’t on us, so that the show wouldn’t “miss any part of the experience.” For our entrance scene, we rode motorized scooters up a steep driveway to an old mansion that would be our home for the next six weeks during the summer of 2006. None of us had ridden scooters before. A Geek from MIT named Matt fell on his first attempt up the sharp grade. His fall didn’t make the final edit of the premiere episode, nor did the PA running over to his still-crumpled body to get him to sign a release form saying he wasn’t seriously injured (and he wasn’t) and that he was declining additional medical services. Another PA arrived a few moments later with a first-aid kit. Once we were inside the house, our season’s eight Beauties arrived. If you didn’t watch *Beauty and the Geek* yourself, you might be surprised to learn that the show consisted of eight Beauties and eight Geeks. It was not a Bachelor(ette)-style dating show with a member of one sex choosing from among a group of the other sex. It was an elimination, partner-based, competitive transformation show. Not sure what that means? All eight hour-long episodes are on YouTube last time I checked. Go binge it. I’ll wait. You’re not going to do it? Fine, I’ll describe what “an elimination, partner-based, competitive transformation show” means. According to its IMDb page (as I write this, 6.1 out of 10 rating from 1,165 users), fans of *Beauty and the Geek* will also enjoy *The Biggest Loser* and *Hoarders*, shows that feature flawed individuals—“Too much fat!” and “Too much stuff!” respectively—and then follow a “journey” of self-improvement. *Beauty and the Geek* was structured similarly, except the flaws in need of fixing were the deficiencies of the stereotypes of Beauties and Geeks as determined by the show’s producers: Hot girls need book smarts, and smart boys need social skills. The promise of the show was that if paired together and forced to compete in a series of contrived challenges designed to exploit the weaknesses of each person, the Beauty and the Geek can each learn and grow. An example of the challenges designed to inspire learning and growing: Space Museum/Nude Model Challenge, episode 303. The challenge required the Beauties to give an impromptu tour of an aeronautical history museum and the Geeks to draw a charcoal portrait of a nude model. The twist was that the naked model was talking the entire time, and that after we were done drawing, the host came out and quizzed us on what the model said. During the challenge I zoned her out, thinking she was trying to distract us from drawing. They did not tell us how our drawings would be judged, they only told us to draw. I thought maybe the model would, I don’t know, pick the drawing that most represented her soul or something? Look, I was nervous. There was a naked model ten feet away from me and six cameras and a crew of forty people looking at me looking at her. I didn’t think I’d get an erection, but at that age just having the thought This would be a bad time to get an erection was usually enough to give me one. It wasn’t the first time I’d seen a naked woman in person, but it was the first time in person I’d seen artificially augmented breasts or an artificially hairless mons pubis. It was a high-stakes situation. As soon as the host explained the real challenge—the listening quiz—he asked us the first question: “What was the model’s name?” I knew I wasn’t going to look good in that episode’s edit. I guessed Heather. It was Sophia. More important, though, as the challenges are designed to do, I learned a valuable life lesson: If a naked woman is speaking while you draw her, pay attention to what she is saying, because you might be surprised with a quiz about it later. Despite that strategic misstep, my team managed to avoid elimination that week and in the weeks to come, making it all the way to the last episode. We were one of two teams going head-to-head in the season finale. The winning team split a \$250,000 prize. We lost. As the runner-up team, we were awarded zero dollars. Zero dollars and all that learning and growing, of course. It was not the Act Dumb to Get Attention experience I’d thought it would be. I had pictured that once the cameras started rolling, I’d be a clown who didn’t take it seriously, and that later when it aired on television I’d get to sit with my friends and listen to them laugh at how silly I was being. I’d dance in the background, make funny faces, get the camera to pay attention to me. Instead, I ended up taking the whole silly affair of being on a reality TV show seriously. I became friends with the other contestants. They cared about the show, to varying degrees, so I cared about it, too. The money for the winners wasn’t just an abstractedly large figure you hear on a TV game show to make the half-hour viewing experience have more drama, but a potentially giant sum that would materially change the lives of two people on the show. Whenever the cameras weren’t rolling, the producers repeated over and over that those of us who took the experience (always “the experience,” never “the show”) the most seriously would look the best on camera. “We can make people who try their best look good, and we can make people who don’t try look bad,” I remember one of the producers telling us early on as they were setting up a shot. It might have been meant as an encouragement, but most of us took it as a warning. So, to my surprise, I took being on a reality TV show seriously, so seriously that later, when watching the first episode with my friends, instead of laughing at how silly I was being, I was embarrassed at my televised earnestness. After the premiere, I watched the rest of the episodes

alone. It was like summer sleepaway camp. When you're at camp, a sort of magic happens where every experience has heightened meaning. Only the people in your bunk understand why it is of the utmost importance that your bunk beat Bunk 7 at the ice cream-eating contest and that if you do, it will change all of your lives for the better forever. Like at camp, I was confined with people I'd just met in a living situation strikingly outside of our usual routines. There was no internet, no newspapers, no television. We were allowed one monitored phone call a week on Sundays to check in with family—if the shooting schedule allowed—but we signed intimidating nondisclosure agreements that made it clear we could not discuss the show. I believe the exact figure we could be sued for if we gave away anything was \$5 million. Each week, two of us were eliminated, and through drama-inducing mechanics of the show, we ourselves had to nominate the pairs to be up for elimination. Selecting who had to leave was at first stressful and was by the end, as we grew closer, devastating. We were deprived of our regular diets and at irregular intervals supplied with alcohol. We were put on a yacht. A yacht! Say what you will about the dumb stuff that you've seen people do on reality TV, but you don't know what kind of stupid person you'll turn into until you yourself have been put on a yacht with an open bar. If I'm still embarrassed by my participation in a reality TV show, why do I bring it up at all? If I know I have a problem with desiring attention, instead of writing an essay about it, wouldn't it be better to, say, live in a cave by myself in Tibet? The word exorcism comes to mind as one reason to write about it, but there is also the practical concern that so far the show itself has showed no signs of fading from my life. Here's a message I received online last week: Hi Nate! How are you? Nice to meet you. My name is Vanessa, I have 17 years old and I from Brazil. Probably you don't go to read this message, but I want you know watched all episodes of The Beauty and the Geek end of 2015 and I enjoyed meeting you. I followed your transformation and I was curious to know what happened to you after reality, because the reality was way around 2007, correct? Now in Brazil, the reality which was broadcast on television over and I will not watch over you. But I want you know that I loved watching you, you are and incredible person and I stayed very happy to know that you won many things. Congratulations! With love, his new fan of Brazil. I replied to Vanessa. Evidently, the show is in syndication in Brazil. I've gotten similar messages from Canada, England, Israel, Germany, and Australia. It happens in person sometimes, too, but not that often anymore. It happened last month for the first time in a while when I was waiting in line for a broccoli taco at No. 7 Sub in the Flatiron District of Manhattan. "I'm so sorry to do this, but you're Nate, right?" a blond woman in her late thirties says to me. "I am," I say. "I thought so! My roommate and I watched your season of Beauty and the Geek. Would it be okay if I sent her a photo?" "No problem," I say. She takes out her phone and puts her arm around me for a selfie. "She'll love that!" she says, adding, "But don't worry, I won't put it on Facebook or anything, I'm just going to send it to her." "You can put it on Facebook if you want," I say. "Oh. No. I don't want to do that . . . Thanks though." Then we wait for our food in silence. "Once you've been on TV, nothing else matters," pop-culture critic at large Chuck Klosterman writes in an essay on reality television. "You will be the kind of person who suddenly gets recognized at places like Burger King, but you will still be the kind of person who eats at places like Burger King." It was broccoli tacos, not burgers, but point taken. After a decade of this sort of attention, I've grown a tolerance for it. The serotonin boost just isn't there anymore. Beauty and the Geek aired during my final semester of college. That same semester, I found out that I was the recipient of a fellowship to attend Cambridge University in England. The show had not yet aired in syndication in the United Kingdom. Once in Cambridge, I walked down the streets without getting recognized. My classmates did not know I was on a reality TV show, or anything else about me. For the first time in my life, I lived alone without roommates or family. I traveled by myself to countries where I didn't speak the language. I flaneured. For the first time ever, I didn't try to be the center of attention. It was the most solitary year of my life, like a twelve-month attention-addict rehab. It was a good year. I often think back on a lackadaisical Sunday afternoon conversation I had with two of my Cambridge classmates, Alice and Micah. Lying on a blanket in the middle of a manicured grass field, each of us a few daytime pints of Old Speckled Hen deep, looking up at clouds drifting past, we took turns asking questions. What's your desert island band? What's your dream job? Would you rather be 10 percent smarter or 10 percent more attractive? At some point, fame came up. "Okay, I've got one. I've always found that there's two types of people: those who want to be famous and those who don't," Micah said, rolling over on one arm to face Alice and me. "If you could, would you want to be famous?" "Yes," I said without hesitation. Alice thought about her answer a few moments longer. At last, in her faint Welsh accent, she said, "No. I can't imagine a worse type of hell." "Interesting," Micah said, lying back down. "That's what I would have guessed each of your answers would be. Like, Nate, you're so obviously the want-to-be-famous type." This exchange hit me in the solar plexus with unexpected force. I envied Alice for her answer. Alice was the don't-want-to-be-famous type and I wasn't. She had the right idea. Performing dumb acts and waiting for external validation was no way to live: We should humbly do meaningful work and be satisfied with the intrinsic value therein. The problem with the world today was too many of the want-to-be-famous types, and I was a part of that problem. I resolved to change my ways. That resolution lasted until I moved back to New York City at the end of the school year and started pursuing comedy as an actor and a writer, which meant once again seeking the eyeballs of others. That's what I've been doing the decade since I appeared on a reality TV show, and this book contains some of what I've been up to. Some of the pieces, like this one, are nonfiction essays about my life. Some of the pieces, like the next one, are humorous fiction. Some are dumb. Some are sad. They're all

different ways of me raising my yo-yo in the air and shouting, "Look at me!"