

DISPATCHES FROM ELSEWHERE

In the early days of the COVID-19 threat and subsequent global shutdowns, a smart, quirky, and socially relevant television show premiered on the AMC network called *Dispatches from Elsewhere*. The program, based on the 2013 documentary film *The Institute*, received positive reviews, but viewership was rather low. Let's look at *Dispatches'* basic premise: a quartet of ordinary, but seemingly mismatched, folks are selected for what is essentially an urban scavenger hunt set in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

First, we meet Peter. He is around 40 years old and attractive, but his lack of confidence is evident in his face. Peter lives his life repeating a dull routine: he walks to his job at a music streaming service, grabs sushi for one at a convenience store on his way home and eats dinner alone while watching TV. He doesn't take risks and prefers the safety of the mundane. One day, while walking his usual route to and from work, he notices several lamppost flyers with phone number tabs cut at the bottom. The flyers are seeking volunteers to participate in unusual experiments. That evening, he chooses to take a phone number slip from a sign he sees posted by a mysterious figure dressed in black. The company logo on the sign reads "Jejune Institute." Peter calls the number when he gets home but hangs up after a couple rings. He immediately receives a return call from a woman at Jejune, inviting him to attend an "orientation session." He accepts the invitation, and the woman gives Peter an address, day, and time for this perplexing orientation.

The day of his appointment, Peter arrives at an upscale office building. The stunning lobby is decorated in black and white marble with a beautiful water fountain placed near the circular check-in desk. The woman he spoke with on the phone hands him a key attached to a large round keychain imprinted with directions leading him to an Art Deco-style room. A concealed recording instructs Peter to sit in a green armchair facing a small television shaped like a rounded square. Immediately, a film starts playing; a man introducing himself as Octavio Coleman, Esq. explains to Peter he's a "rare soul" and belongs with the "special ones." In tears, Peter asks himself aloud, "what does that mean?" Octavio tells him to find induction cards in the drawer beside the chair. The writing on the

cards imply that he has been deceived and must leave quickly. On his way out, Octavio calls Peter demanding that he answer his phone upon leaving the building. Moments later, Octavio texts Peter with the address of his next destination.

Peter is lead to a shop full of unusual objects, mostly antique lamps, and meets an attractive, young, enthusiastic transgender woman named Simone. She believes they are part of something extraordinary and shows Peter an envelope that was given to her.

Peter returns home and receives yet another frantic call from Octavio, urging him to continue this strange adventure. A text message leads Peter to a solitary payphone mounted on a plain exterior wall. The phone seems out of place, as it doesn't appear to be in a high-traffic area where passersby may be searching for it. The payphone rings and Peter answers. Octavio's voice demands he immediately start dancing. Peter hangs up and awkwardly shuffles towards the source of the music he hears, where he finds a small group of dancers waiting for him. A man he nicknames Bigfoot hands him an envelope. He encounters Simone, to whom he presents the envelope. A recorded message from Octavio instructs the duo to go to a park with the light blue paddles contained in their envelopes and locate others holding identical paddles. Peter and Simone encounter Janice and Fredwynn, who had also attended orientations at JeJune. The four are now a team, pursuing JeJune's enigmatic quest together.

Next, we see a snapshot of Simone's life, starting with her unintentional encounter with an LGBT+ pride celebration in progress while she is taking a walk. She gets anxious and runs away, avoiding a potential opportunity to find her tribe. Simone is generally pleasant to others but expects to simply wake up one day feeling less isolated, as she doesn't have the courage to make positive changes in her life by herself. The day following the team's formation in the park, she abruptly leaves her job at an art museum to visit Peter at work so they can discuss the new clue received for the JeJune game. A recorded message instructs them to find a young woman named Clara. A series of riddles lead them to a rooftop where Clara's recorded voice encourages them to discover her own art instillation made up of partial murals painted on multiple buildings that can only be seen in

its entirety while viewing it from the rooftop. Clara suggests they look for the beauty and magic around them.

The third member of the team to whom we gain insight is 60-something empty nester, Janice. Janice shared a long, happy marriage with her husband, Lev, and gave birth to a son. She never imagined she'd have to face life alone until her husband became incapacitated after a stroke. The only identity she had ever known was that of a wife and mother, but her son lives in another city and Lev is comatose. What's her purpose in life now? Who is she without Lev and their son?

The last teammate at whom we get a closer look is Fredwynn, an extremely intelligent, independently wealthy black man in his early 40s. He comes across as over-analytical, perhaps one who buys into imagined conspiracy theories. His goal is to always find the truth, even if it entirely consumes him (he is prone to frequent insomnia.) Like Peter and Simone, he experiences isolation of his own making. His paranoid tendencies can make him an unpleasant companion, but he accepts his solitary lifestyle.

Peter, Simone, Janice, and Fredwynn may come across as an unlikely group of individuals to be assembled for the Jejune adventure, but that's undoubtedly intentional by the show's creator, Jason Segel (who plays Peter.) Clearly, one of the show's themes is the commonality we can find with people different from ourselves, gaining valuable insight from their reality. Are we as unique as we think we are?

Another valuable lesson for the team is the idea of being an active participant in writing your own life story. They are trapped in prisons of their own making and need to break free to discover what they *want* to do instead of being subjected to others' expectations. During their search for the young artist Clara, the group learns to recognize and contribute to the beauty around them. Upon the one-year anniversary of their meeting, most of the quartet have taken steps to find enjoyment in their lives.

This summary is by no means a complete description of *Dispatches from Elsewhere*. There are many layers to Clara's story. The surface of the emotional connection between the four principal characters is barely scratched. If excessive content was revealed, the reader wouldn't have incentive to watch the

imaginative twists and turns of the Jejune experiment, or see part of themselves in Peter, Simone, Janice, and Fredwynn's life-changing journey.

Dispatches from Elsewhere is available on DVD and can be streamed on AMC+ (subscription required.)