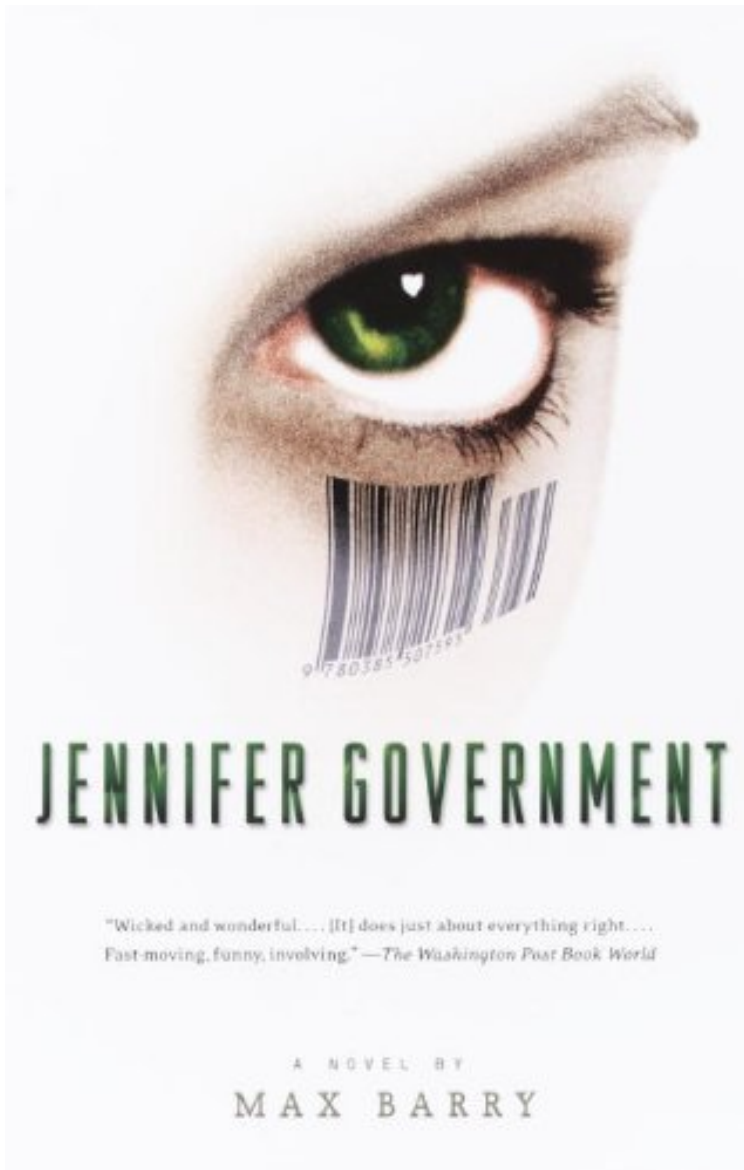


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Jennifer Government



Par Max Barry

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurA wickedly satirical and outrageous thriller about globalization and marketing hype,Jennifer Governmentis the best novel in the world ever."Funny and clever.... A kind of ad-world version of Dr. Strangelove.... [Barry] unleashes enough wit and surprise to make his story a total blast." --The New York Times Book "Wicked and wonderful.... [It] does just about everything right.... Fast-moving, funny, involving." --The Washington Post Book WorldTaxation has been abolished, the government has been privatized, and employees take the surname of the company they work for. It's a brave new corporate world, but you don't want to be caught without a platinum credit card--as lowly Merchandising Officer Hack Nike is about to find out. Trapped into building street cred for a new line of \$2500 sneakers by shooting

customers, Hack attracts the barcode-tattooed eye of the legendary Jennifer Government. A stressed-out single mom, corporate watchdog, and government agent who has to rustle up funding before she's allowed to fight crime, Jennifer Government is holding a closing down sale--and everything must go..comIn the horrifying, satirical near future of Max Barry's Jennifer Government, American corporations literally rule the world. Everyone takes his employer's name as his last name; once-autonomous nations as far-flung as Australia belong to the USA; and the National Rifle Association is not just a worldwide corporation, it's a hot, publicly traded stock. Hack Nike, a hapless employee seeking advancement, signs a multipage contract and then reads it. He discovers he's agreed to assassinate kids purchasing Nike's new line of athletic shoes, a stealth marketing maneuver designed to increase sales. And the dreaded government agent Jennifer Government is after him. Like Steve Aylett, Alexander Beshler, Douglas Coupland, Paul Di Filippo, Jim Munroe, Jeff Noon, and Chuck Palahniuk, Max Barry is an author of smartass, punky satire for the late capitalist era. It's a hip and happening field; before publication, Jennifer Government (Barry's second novel) was optioned by Stephen Soderbergh and George Clooney's Section 8 Films for a major motion picture. However, the level of literary accomplishment varies wildly among practitioners, from brilliant (Di Filippo and Palahniuk) to amateurish (Beshler). This field is so hot, its writers needn't be nearly as accomplished as they'd have to become to break into any other form of fiction. That said, like many of his fellow turn-of-the-millennium satirists, Barry is uneven. He has a lively imagination and a sharp eye for the absurdities and offenses of hypercorporate capitalism. But, with its sketchy characters and slow dialogue, Jennifer Government will disappoint anyone who believes the cover copy's grandiose claim that this is "a Catch-22 for the New World Order." --Cynthia Ward Extrait1 Nike Hack first heard about Jennifer Government at the watercooler. He was only there because the one on his floor was out; Legal was going to come down on Nature's Springs like a ton of shit, you could bet on that. Hack was a Merchandise Distribution Officer. This meant when Nike made up a bunch of posters, or caps, or beach towels, Hack had to send them to the right place. Also, if someone called up complaining about missing posters, or caps, or beach towels, Hack had to take the call. It wasn't as exciting as it used to be. "It's a calamity," a man at the watercooler said. "Four days away from launch and Jennifer Government's all over my ass." "Jee-sus," his companion said. "That's gotta suck." "It means we have to move fast." He looked at Hack, who was filling his cup. "Hi there." Hack looked up. They were smiling at him as if he was an equal--but of course, Hack was on the wrong floor. They didn't know he was just a Merc Officer. "Hi." "Haven't seen you around before," the calamity guy said. "You new?" "No. I work in Merc." "Oh." His nose wrinkled. "Our cooler's out," Hack said. He turned away quickly. "Hey, wait up," the suit said. "You ever do any marketing work?" "Uh," he said, not sure if this was a joke. "No." The suits looked at each other. The calamity guy shrugged. Then they stuck out their hands. "I'm John Nike, Guerrilla Marketing Operative, New Products." "And I'm John Nike, Guerrilla Marketing Vice-President, New Products," the other suit said. "Hack Nike," Hack said, shaking. "Hack, I'm empowered to make midrange labor-contracting decisions," Vice-President John said. "You interested in some work?" "Some . . ." He felt his throat thicken. "Marketing work?" "On a case-by-case basis, of course," the other John said. Hack started to cry. "There," a John said, handing him a handkerchief. "You feel better?" Hack nodded, shamed. "I'm sorry." "Hey, don't worry about it," Vice-President John said. "Career change can be very stressful. I read that somewhere." "Here's the paperwork." The other John handed him a pen and a sheaf of papers. The first page said CONTRACT TO PERFORM SERVICE, and the others were in type too small to read. Hack hesitated. "You want me to sign this now?" "It's nothing to worry about. Just the usual noncompetes and nondisclosure agreements." "Yeah, but . . ." Companies were getting a lot tougher on labor contracts these days; Hack had heard stories. At Adidas, if you quit your job and your replacement wasn't as competent, they sued you for lost profits. "Hack, we need someone who can make snap decisions. A fast mover." "Someone who can get things done. With a minimum of fucking around." "If that's not your style, well . . . let's forget we spoke. No harm done. You stick to Merchandising." Vice-President John reached for the contract. "I can sign it now," Hack said, tightening his grip. "It's totally up to you," the other John said. He took the chair beside Hack, crossed his legs, and rested his hands at the juncture, smiling. Both Johns had good smiles, Hack noticed. He guessed everyone in marketing did. They had pretty similar faces, too. "Just at the bottom there." Hack signed. "Also there," the John said. "And on the next page . . . and one there. And there." "Glad to have you on board, Hack." Vice-President John took the contract, opened a drawer, and dropped it inside. "Now. What do you know about Nike Mercurys?" Hack blinked. "They're our latest product. I haven't actually seen a pair, but . . . I heard they're great." The Johns smiled. "We started selling Mercurys six months ago. You know how many pairs we've shifted since then?" Hack shook his head. They

cost thousands of dollars each, but that wouldn't stop people from buying them. They were the hottest sneakers in the world. "A million?" "Two hundred." "Two hundred million?" "No. Two hundred pairs." "John here," the other John said, "pioneered the concept of marketing by refusing to sell any products. It drives the market insane." "And now it's time to cash in. On Friday we're gonna dump four hundred thousand pairs on the market at two and a half grand each." "Which, since they cost us--what was it?" "Eighty-five." "Since they cost us eighty-five cents to manufacture, gives us a gross margin of around one billion dollars." He looked at Vice-President John. "It's a brilliant campaign." "It's really just common sense," John said. "But here's the thing, Hack: if people realize every mall in the country's got Mercurys, we'll lose all that prestige we've worked so hard to build. Am I right?" "Yeah." Hack hoped he sounded confident. He didn't really understand marketing. "So you know what we're going to do?" He shook his head. "We're going to shoot them," Vice-President John said. "We're going to kill anyone who buys a pair." Silence. "What?" Hack said. The other John said, "Well, not everyone, obviously. We figure we only have to plug . . . what did we decide? Five?" "Ten," Vice-President John said. "To be safe." "Right. We take out ten customers, make it look like ghetto kids, and we've got street cred coming out our asses. I bet we shift our inventory within twenty-four hours." "I remember when you could always rely on those little street kids to pop a few people for the latest Nikes," Vice-President John said. "Now people get mugged for Reeboks, for Adidas--for generics, for Christ's sake." "The ghettos have no fashion sense anymore," the other John said. "I swear, they'll wear anything." "It's a disgrace. Anyway, Hack, I think you get the point. This is a groundbreaking campaign." "Talk about edgy," the other John said. "This defines edgy." "Um . . ." Hack said. He swallowed. "Isn't this kind of . . . illegal?" "He wants to know if it's illegal," the John said, amused. "You're a funny guy, Hack. Yes, it's illegal, killing people without their consent, that's very illegal." Vice-President John said, "But the question is: what does it cost? Even if we get found out, we burn a few million on legal fees, we get fined a few million more . . . bottom-line, we're still way out in front." Hack had a question he very much didn't want to ask. "So . . . this contract . . . what does it say I'll do?" The John beside him folded his hands. "Well, Hack, we've explained our business plan. What we want you to do is . . ." "Execute it," Vice-President John said.

2 McDonald's

Until she stood in front of them, Hayley didn't realize how many of her classmates were blond. It was like a beach out there. She'd missed the trend. Hayley would have to hotfoot it to a hairdresser after school. "When you're ready," the teacher said. She looked at her note cards and took a breath. "Why I Love America, by Hayley McDonald's. America is the greatest group of countries in the world because we have freedom. In countries like France, where the Government isn't privatized, they still have to pay tax and do whatever the Government says, which would really suck. In USA countries, we respect individual rights and let people do whatever they want." The teacher jotted something in his folder. McDonald's-sponsored schools were cheap like that: at Pepsi schools, everyone had notebook computers. Also their uniforms were much better. It was so hard to be cool with the Golden Arches on your back. "Before USA countries abolished tax, if you didn't have a job, the Government took money from working people and gave it to you. So, like, the more useless you were, the more money you got." No response from her classmates. Even the teacher didn't smile. Hayley was surprised: she'd thought that one was a crack-up. "But now America has all the best companies and all the money because everyone works and the Government can't spend money on stupid things like advertising and elections and making new laws. They just stop people stealing or hurting each other and everything else is taken care of by the private sector, which everyone knows is more efficient." She looked at her notes: yep, that was it. "Finally I would like to say that America is the greatest group of countries in the world and I am proud to live in the Australian Territories of the USA!" A smattering of applause. It was the eighth talk this period: she guessed it was getting harder to work up enthusiasm for capitalism. Hayley headed for her seat. "Hold it," the teacher said. "I have questions." "Oh," Hayley said. "Are there any positive aspects to tax?" She relaxed: a gimme question. "Some people say tax is good because it gives money to people who don't have any. But those people must be lazy or stupid, so why should they get other people's money? Obviously the answer is no." The teacher blinked. He made a note. That must have been an impressive answer, Hayley thought. "What about social justice?" "What?" "Is it fair that some people should be rich while others have nothing?" She shifted from one foot to the other. She was just remembering: this teacher had a thing about poor people. He was always bringing them up. "Um, yeah, it's fair. Because if I study really hard for a test and get an A and Emily doesn't and fails"--renewed interest from the class; Emily raised blond eyebrows--"then it's not fair to take some of my marks and give them to her, is it?" The teacher frowned. Hayley felt a flash of panic. "Another thing, in non-USA countries they want everyone to be the same, so if your sister is born blind, then

they blind you, too, to make it even. But how unfair is that? I would much rather be an American than a European Union . . . person." She gave the class a big smile. They clapped, much more enthusiastically than before. She added hopefully, "Is that all?" "Yes. Thank you." Relief! She started walking. A cute boy in the third row winked at her. The teacher said, "Although, Hayley, they don't really blind people in non-USA countries." Hayley stopped. "Well, that's kind of hypocritical, isn't it?" The class cheered. The teacher opened his mouth, then shut it. Hayley took her seat. Kick ass, she thought. She had aced this test. 3

The Police Hack sat in traffic, biting his nails. This had not been a good day. He was beginning to think that visiting the marketing floor for a cup of water was the worst mistake he'd ever made. He turned into a side street and parked his Toyota. It rattled angrily and let loose a puff of black smoke. Hack really needed a new car. Maybe if this job paid off, he could move out of St. Kilda. He could get an apartment with some space, maybe some natural light-- He shook his head angrily. What was he thinking? He wasn't going to shoot anyone. Not even for a better apartment. He climbed the stairs to the second floor and let himself in. Violet was sitting cross-legged on the living-room floor with her notebook computer in her lap. Violet was his girlfriend. She was the only unemployed person he'd had ever met, not counting homeless people who asked him for money. She was an entrepreneur. Violet was probably going to be rich one day: she was smart and determined. Sometimes Hack wasn't sure why they were together. He dropped his briefcase and shrugged off his jacket. The table was littered with bills. Hack hadn't bargained very well in his last performance evaluation and it was really biting him now. "Violet?" "Mmm?" "Can we talk?" She didn't look up. "Is it important?" "Yes." She frowned. Hack waited. Violet didn't like being disturbed during her work. She didn't like being disturbed at all. She was short and thin with long brown hair, which made her look much more fragile than she really was. "What's up?" He sat on the sofa. "I did something stupid." "Oh, Hack, not again." Hack had missed a couple of turnoffs on the way home lately: last Tuesday he'd gotten himself onto a premium road and eaten through eleven dollars in tolls before he found an exit. "No, something really stupid." "What happened?" "Well, I got offered some work . . . some marketing work--" "That's great! We could really use the extra money." "--and I signed a contract without reading it." Pause. "Oh," Violet said. "Well, it might be okay--" "It says I have to kill people. It's some kind of promotional campaign. I have to, um, kill ten people." For a moment she said nothing. He hoped she wasn't going to shout at him. "I'd better look at that contract." He dropped his head. "You don't have a copy?" "No." "Oh, Hack." "I'm sorry." Violet chewed her lip. "Well, you can't go through with it. The Government's not as pussy as people think. They'd get you for sure. But then, you don't know what the penalties in that contract are . . . I think you should go to the Police." "Really?" "There's a station on Chapel Street. When are you meant to . . . do it?" "Friday." "You should go. Right now." "Okay. You're right." He picked up his jacket. "Thanks, Violet." "Why does this kind of thing always happen to you, Hack?" "I don't know," he said. He felt emotional. He shut the door carefully behind him. The station was only a few blocks away, and as it came into view he began to feel hopeful. The building was lit up in blue neon, with THE POLICE in enormous letters and a swirling light above that. If anyone could help him out of this situation, Hack felt it would be someone who worked in a place like this. The doors slid open and he walked up to the reception desk. A woman in uniform--either a real cop or a receptionist dressed in theme, Hack didn't know which--smiled. Playing over the PA system was the song from their TV ads, "Every Breath You Take." "Good evening, how can I help you?" "I have a matter I'd like to discuss with an officer, please." "May I ask the nature of your problem?" "Um," he said. "I've been contracted to kill someone. Some people, actually." The receptionist's eyebrows rose a fraction, then settled. Hack felt relieved. He didn't want to be chastised by the receptionist. "Take a seat, sir. An officer will be right with you." Hack dropped into a soft, blue chair and waited. A few minutes later, a cop came out and stopped in front of him. Hack rose. "I'm Senior Sergeant Pearson Police," the man said. He shook Hack's hand firmly. He had a small, trim mustache but otherwise looked pretty capable. "Please accompany me."