The Great American Internet Novel Is Here

Joshua Cohen's 'Book of Numbers' is a fascinating look at the dark heart of the Web

THE MAN WHO JUST PUBLISHED one of the best novels ever written about the Internet has spent less time online than almost anyone else his age. After graduating from college in 2001, Joshua Cohen lived in Eastern Europe for six years, writing fiction, filing overseas dispatches for *The*

THE FOSTER WALLACE OF RED HOOK
Cohen at his home in Brooklyn

Jewish Daily Forward and generally avoiding the Web – he didn't even have a dial-up connection. When Cohen returned to New York in 2007, everyone suddenly had smartphones and Facebook accounts. He found the Web's unrelenting creep so unnerving that he considered going back to Europe. "I realized I didn't have enough money to buy a ticket," says Cohen, 34, drinking whiskey and smoking cigarettes at a bar near his home in Red Hook, Brooklyn, one recent afternoon, "and I had shipped all my stuff home on a boat."

Cohen still avoids social media, and his wariness of the Web suffuses *Book of*

Numbers, about a failed novelist-turned-ghostwriter named Joshua Cohen who's working on the memoirs of *another* Joshua Cohen, the founder of a Google-like company called Tetration. (Cohen himself worked as a ghostwriter for two Holocaust survivors.)

The novel wears its postmodernism lightly. It's a page turner about life under the veil of digital surveillance, complete with a plotline about Tetration helping the government spy on citizens. Cohen came up with that idea even before Edward Snowden made headlines. If WikiLeaks allowed citizens to see what the government was up to, Cohen reasoned, the government can also see everything we do. "It's a law of the Internet," Cohen says. "Transparency cuts both ways."

For the Tetration founder, who's referred to as "Principal" by his ghostwriter, Cohen invented a frequently hilarious voice full of Web-friendly slang: "msg," "brogrammer," "algy" for algorithm. "I took a little piece of Jobs, took a little piece of Bezos, took a little piece of Zuckerberg," Cohen says.

With a signature pair of thin-rimmed round glasses and a tendency to speak in numerically ordered bullet points, Cohen sometimes comes off like a particularly devout tech CEO, despite a pedigree that would suggest anything but. He grew up in Atlantic City and got a degree in composition from the Manhattan School of Music before heading abroad. Cohen's early fiction touched on creative frustration and religious conflict, as well as his dark view of the Web: In one short story, a journalist investigates the lives of his favorite porn stars, only to discover they're somehow less real in person than onscreen.

At its heart, *Book of Numbers* is an attempt to reclaim a sense of humanity in the digital age, as the Internet becomes less an anonymous playground and more a tool for the surveillance state. "We're still the generation that realizes that it's a transition," he says. "The next doesn't even think it's a change." **KYLE CHAYKA**
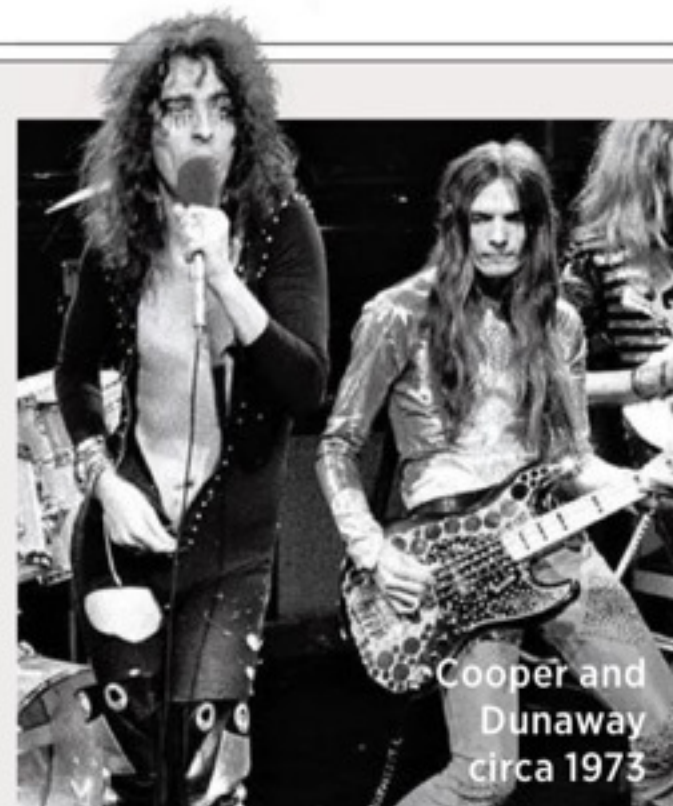
Cooper and Dunaway circa 1973

HIGH TIMES WITH ALICE COOPER

Dennis Dunaway – bassist for the Alice Cooper band from 1968 until Cooper became a solo act in 1975 – has collected his wildest tales for a new memoir, *Snakes! Guillotines! Electric Chairs! My Adventures in the Alice Cooper Group,* written with ROLLING STONE contributor Chris Hodenfield. Here are five things we learned.

Early on, the band's management team paid the bills by selling Dylan bootlegs.
Cooper's managers allegedly got the tapes through a source at Columbia Records and sold them to record stores as the band toured. "They had carloads of them," writes Dunaway.

Cooper's famous boa constrictor fell into his lap – almost literally.
The snake, featured with Alice on the cover of ROLLING STONE in 1972, became a signature after a fan threw it onstage one night.

Salvador Dalí was a fan.
The artist spent time with the group in order to create a 360-degree hologram of Cooper. "With the tips of his mustache curled and his giraffe-hide vest…he was every bit as surrealistic as his paintings," writes Dunaway.

The bandmates thought Kiss ripped them off.
"Just as we had borrowed elements from our hero bands," writes Dunaway, "now it was happening to us – the makeup, the glitter, the theatrics."

Dunaway still isn't sure why the original group broke up in 1975.
"Friends…suggested that reducing the size of the band also reduced the number of profit splits," he writes. "One day I was a rock star. The next day I was uninvited. Boom. Deal out. Gone." **ANDY GREENE**