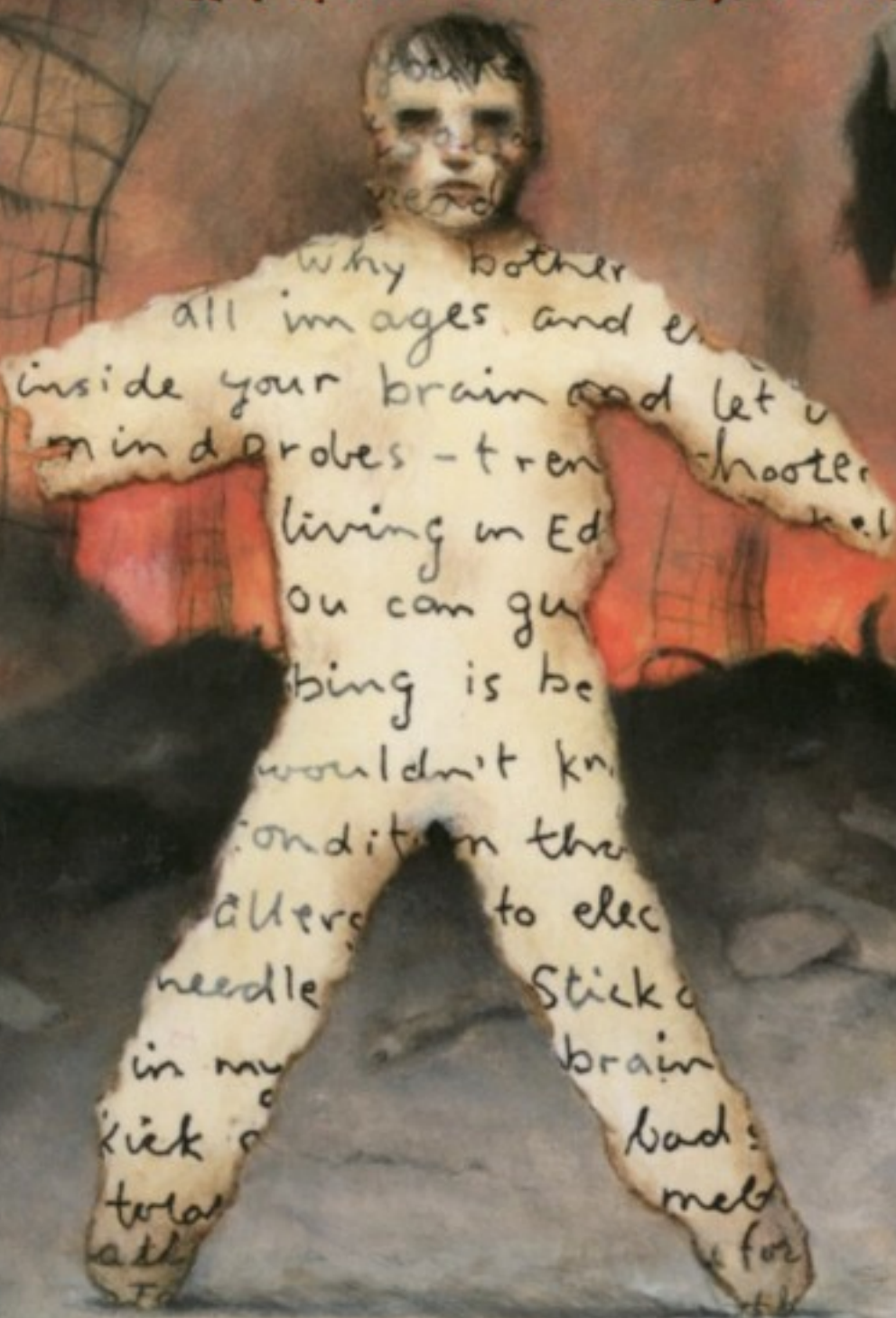


THE LAST BOOK IN THE UNIVERSE

Rodman Philbrick



Includes AFTER WORDS™ bonus features

 SCHOLASTIC

CHAPTER ONE

They Call Me Spaz

IF YOU'RE READING this, it must be a thousand years from now. Because nobody around here reads anymore. Why bother, when you can just probe it? Put all the images and excitement right inside your brain and let it rip. There are all kinds of mind-probes — trendies, shooters, sexbos, whatever you want to experience. Shooters are violent, and trendies are about living in Eden, and sexbos, well you can guess what sexbos are about. They say probing is better than anything. I wouldn't know because I've got this serious medical condition that means I'm allergic to electrode needles. Stick one of those in my brain and it'll kick off a really bad seizure and then — total mind melt, lights out, that's all, folks.

They call me Spaz, which is kind of a mope name, but I don't mind, not anymore. I'm talking into an old voicewriter program that prints out my words

because I was there when the Bully Bangers went to wheel the Ryter for his sins, and I saw what they saw, and I heard what they heard, and it kind of turned my brain around.

The Bangers have the latch on my part of the Urb, which means they control everybody and everything between Eastie and the Pipe. A million people, maybe more. Nobody really knows how many, because nobody can count that high. Why bother? All you gotta know is, if you live here you're either down with the Bangers or you might as well be dead. There's no escape because every part of the Urb is latched by one gang or another. The only escape is Eden, and you can't get in there unless you're a proov, and if you're genetically improved you'd never leave in the first place, so forget about Eden.

I used to belong to a family unit, with a foster mom and dad and my little sister, Bean, but that's over, and I don't want to talk about what happened, or how unfair it was. Not yet. The less said about that the better, because if there's one thing I learned from Ryter it's that you can't always be looking backward or something will hit you from the front.

Ryter was this gummy that changed my life, and if you're reading this, maybe he changed the world, too. Gummies are what we call old people, and the Ryter was so ancient, the hair on his chin beard was

as white as bone, and most of his teeth were gone. Even his skin was old and worn out and so thin, it looked like if you held him up to the light you'd see right through him.

The way I got to know Ryter is this: The Bangers sent me to bust him down. As far as I was concerned at the time, he was just another gummy scheduled for cancellation, so why not rip him off?

And that's exactly what I did.

"IF YOU'RE READING THIS, IT MUST BE A THOUSAND YEARS FROM NOW."

Nobody around here reads anymore. Why bother, when you can just use a mindprobe needle and shoot all the images and excitement straight into your brain? I've heard of books, but they were long before I was born, in the backtimes before the Big Shake, when everything supposedly was perfect, and everybody lived rich.

Personally, I doubt the backtimes ever existed. It's like a story you tell to make yourself feel better. As if having a past makes the future somehow worth believing in.

In real life, nobody comes to your rescue. Believe me, I know. But then I met Ryter, this old gummy who had a lot of crazy ideas. Together we tried to change the world. . . .

"Philbrick . . . has again created a compelling set of characters that engage the reader with their courage and kindness in a painful world that offers hope . . ."
—*Kirkus Reviews*

"This fast-paced adventure . . . will leave readers musing over humanity's future."
—*Booklist*

"Enthralling, thought-provoking, and unsettling . . ."
—*VOYA*

An ALA Best Book for Young Adults

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