

A Seattle cartoonist discovers he can read minds, but as he explores deeper and deeper, his intriguing new ability begins to affect his work, his relationships and how he views the world.

MIND AFTER MIND

By Eric E. Wallace

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MIND

A Novel

AFTER

Eric E. Wallace

MIND

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UNDERTOW

HOAR FROST

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EMPEROR'S REACH

THE IMPROVISER

Chapter 2

Pancakes. With bacon. Old Mrs. Garrity in 12C had her griddle in action again. The sinewy lilt of her Vermont maple syrup wouldn't be far behind. Sloane never understood how these aromas found their way into the hall and the elevator, but each time they did, he sniffed in groaning appreciation. His own granola and low-fat yogurt were already a pale memory. Emma and the habits she'd inflicted on him. Not all stuck, but many did. His stomach pleaded for a return to normalcy.

To begin his tests, Sloane needed to venture no further than the downstairs lobby. Vic Mason, the part-time concierge, stood behind his high desk, reading the newspaper. He looked up, nodded, rustled to another page.

Sloane unsnapped the loop enfolding his umbrella and pretended to retighten it, looked over at the concierge.

Vic's mental fizzle was easy to sense.

Goddam bunion...coffee, gotta...shit, last out and they blow it...what did Maryanne want?... not TP...pay what?...paper smells like cheese...congress sucks again, wear warmer pants tomorrow, gotta go to...why is Ferg...?

"You want something, Mr. Ferguson?"

"No. Sorry Vic, I'm fixing my funky umbrella. If I'm not careful, the damn thing springs open on its own. Other day, it almost clobbered a cop."

Vic chortled. "Kaboom! Hey SWAT city, Mr. F? You could put that into a cartoon, right?"

"Right." Sloane stepped to the door. "Already working on it. Take care of that bunion, Vic."

He felt Vic's puzzlement follow him out to the street.

Gray weather. Gray buildings. Gray pavement. *Gray is the color of my true-love's hair.* In Emma's case, not so: her hair was auburn.

As Sloane walked down toward the Queen Anne business district, his tendons tightening and protesting, his next victims were easy to find. *No, victim's not right. Subjects? Test cases?*

Whatever they were to be called, they included a skinny guy with a St. Bernard, a retiree sitting in front of the Emerald Café, a traffic warden writing a ticket, a spandex-wrapped cyclist adjusting her saddle, an elderly woman daydreaming on a bus bench.

Trying to be more careful than he'd been with Vic, in short order Sloane *intuited, perceived, read, saw, pictured*—he didn't yet have a satisfactory word for what he was doing—a *mélange* of bodily aches, iPod Mozart, a gay bar, Paris cafes, a mountain trail, a doctor's office, a cancer clinic, roses on a bush, loneliness. Cinnamon and burnt coffee grazed his taste buds.

He rummaged in his shoulder bag, took out the voice recorder, a sketch pad, a pencil. He made notes. He drew a quick image of the St. Bernard, exaggerating the sad eyes and the ridiculous jowls. He sketched the café front, blurring the outside table-sitters into gray anonymity.

Not for the first time, and not without envy, he thought of the *plen aire* painters of centuries past, drawing and painting outdoors in the French countryside or by the British seaside. The streets of Seattle would do for the outdoor part, he supposed, but his subject matter, his style and his medium didn't fit Monet or Turner. On the other hand, could those worthies do what he now apparently could?

And what is that again, Sloane, my lad? Intrude? Invade?

A few inevitable raindrops, fat, lazy, merely thinking about getting serious, landed on his shoulder, and their wet

companions slowly began dotting the sidewalk with fuzzy asterisks.

Sloane went along Lee Street to his gym. Not a place he ever yearned to visit, but he dragged himself there three times a week. Another touch of Emma goading, or as he called it, *gooding*: as in “it’s for your own good, you know,” one of her familiar refrains.

The gym also him Sloane a steady source of inspiration for one of his cartoon series, *The Moderns*. Readers loved the way he made fun of the sweating, the groaning, the oversized muscles, the showing off, the leotards, the tattoos, the panoply of ungainly bodies. His cartoons were funhouse mirrors.

Oddly, the members of his gym didn’t seem to mind being the object of Sloane’s disaffections. In fact, they seemed to crave appearing in his work, perspiring, grimacing, drooling—a cleverly-drawn parade of types, including the ridiculously-thin, the grotesquely-overweight, the obsessively-focused, the peculiarly-dressed and the many who strutted about alternately showing off and admiring themselves. *Peacocking*, Sloane called it.

Meantime, wincingly aware of his own less-than-perfect physique, he refused to let himself envy the buffest of the bodies he saw.

“Isn’t keeping my mind in shape enough?” he had one of his intellectual characters ask a dubious reflection in a mirror.

This morning, to continue testing his new ability, he selected three self-absorbed regulars. In a recent strip for *The Moderns*, he had referred to these gym frequenters as *studs* and *studdesses*.

Sloane looked at each of the three in turn, trying to pick up more of the kinds of signals he’d been finding.

Sure enough, there they were. Not at all hard to detect.

It was no surprise that all three radiated subterranean running commentaries of muscle aches and joint complaints.

But Stud Number 1, hauling on a pulley, also had fears of baldness, fear of failure, a nagging work project, an itch he couldn't stop to reach, the lingering taste of burned breakfast burritos, lustful fantasies of a nearby girl doing squats.

Stud Number 2, performing sit-ups, was suppressing cloying coconut oil odors, worrying about his job evaluation, trying to ignore a full bladder and a hangnail, fuming at his landlord for raising the rent, dreaming of a houseboat, tasting grains of donuts and sugar, feeling guilt for those indulgences.

The Studdess, in apparent good shape if no longer quite a goddess, was lifting weights with considerable energy. She was mad at her lazy husband, frustrated with a disobedient daughter, yearning for coffee, apprehensive about firing her assistant, looping a pop music phrase over and over. *I need to change, oh yeah. I need to change, oh yeah...*

Sloane backed away, sat on a leg press. He felt an overload and the beginnings of a headache, but these three people had provided an exhilarating confirmation.

It was working. By tilting his head slightly and looking, he could become aware—of what was rattling around in another person's... *Aura? Mind? Brain? Thoughts? Essence?*

The sudden intimacy of each visit had been startling, though he seemed to be rapidly adjusting. It even seemed to be turning into an extra little high, a note of excitement.

He realized he was also swiftly learning to suppress feelings of claustrophobia and the sense he was in an echo chamber.

Sloane took a few deep breaths.

All of it was a bit frightening, a little intimidating, much like when he was first learning to drive. Sitting stiffly beside him in the car, his father had shown zero patience, but young

Sloane somehow turned that around. Instead of cowering or fleeing he had forced himself—willed himself—to learn quickly. Maybe driving around in other minds might come easily too. *Ideally without a rigid parent present.*

“Hi, Mr. Ferguson.” A uniformed personal trainer stood in front of Sloane, flexing a green elastic strap between his hands.

Sloane looked up at him. “Hey, Shawn.”

The trainer let the elastic twang into one hand. “I loved that strip you did about the fat cats working out,” he said, grinning. “Boy, how I’d like to have a few sessions with some of those pols—mayor, governor, president, no matter—knock sense into them. Or put ‘em into cardiac arrest. How’dya come up with ideas like that? Must be hard.”

“It’s not hard at all.” Sloane stood, rolling his shoulders. “I just ask myself ‘what if?’”

“Huh?” The grin faded.

“Well, for instance, you could just ask yourself a ‘what if’ question like...oh, what would a gym trainer do if he suddenly had to work in a mannequin factory?” *Where’d that come from? But not bad.*

“Huh. I guess I’d...hm. I’d have to think about that one. But I see what you mean. Well, thanks, Mr. Ferguson.” The trainer moved on.

Sloane watched him go, muttered into his recorder. “Personal trainer working in mannequin factory. Or in a Vegas casino. What might happen?”

He went back out the street. The double set of glass doors kept the gym’s echoing racket from following. The air smelled of rain on dust, cigarette smoke and, even at this early hour, pizza. He started walking, not especially caring where he went.

So, it was confirmed. This little aberration of his was still here, maybe for keeps. Was that a good thing or not? He tried

to think it through. Was he some sort of sneak thief or a professional, detached observer? Surely the latter.

In his many wanderings, he always looked for strange people, oddities, peculiar traits. He noticed little physical deviations, weird habits, interesting attire. He picked up bits of conversations. He collected ideas.

Surely this newfound aptitude was just an extension of that, a bonus? Surely it could take his work, already known to be insightful, to a new level?

Or, he thought, suddenly craving coffee, would it only give him a series of miserable headaches?

Chapter 5

Saturday morning was surprisingly-warm, perfect weather for what Emma had said she wanted to do. Meet Sloane at the Ballard Locks. Stroll, talk, watch the boats traverse the canal, see the locks in action, look for late season salmon, maybe wander through the English gardens, walk part of the Burke Gilman Trail and settle down for beer and deep-fried shrimp at Ray's, talk some more.

"Deep-fried conversation," she had called it. Sloane wondered if she was again going to raise the touchy question of their living together. Not his favorite subject.

"I need to be a loner 80% of the time," he'd said when it last came up. "Right now, that's what I need, Em. Plenty of solitary."

"Could you drop it to 79%? I could live with that." Her great smile shone out to win him—and he liked the quick wit—but he shook his head, filing away the exchange for his popular *Uphill Battles* strip.

The Uber driver dropped Sloane off at a curb a few yards from the rack where Emma, right on time, was padlocking her bicycle.

Her back was to him. As she stood up, she fumbled to put a key in her jeans pocket. She released her long auburn hair from a silver clasp and shook out the tresses. She still hadn't turned.

Her tilt seemed more pronounced than usual. She always leaned very slightly to one side, a result of childhood scoliosis. Sloane had never told her it was a trait he found strangely endearing. This morning, as he stood watching her, he grinned, realizing her little tilt was an odd parallel to the way he leaned his head during his scans.

Emma finally saw him, smiled, waved and crossed to him. After a long hug and a slow, sweet kiss, they linked arms and started walking toward the observation areas.

The warm air held a distinctive odor: new-mown grass, roses, fish, kerosene and motor oil. Fortunately, Sloane realized, the balance tilted toward the more-pleasant elements.

Although Emma lived in Ballard, this was the first weekend, she told him, that she'd been down to the locks since early summer.

"Precious little time," she said. "You have your obsessions and your absurd periods of busy-ness, Sloane. I have mine."

Emma was the development director for an association of a dozen charities. They kept her on the go. "It's like have all these adopted children constantly clamoring for attention."

"Just like my characters," Sloane said. "Never give me a moment's peace."

She happily gave him a quick summary of her week at the conference. "And you?" she asked, her hazel eyes alive with the morning.

He rewarded her with his trademark shrug. He wanted to talk to her about what he'd really been most focused on, but he was waiting for the right moment. *Whenever that might be.*

And he was a tiny bit apprehensive about Emma's reaction. He liked it that she had strong opinions. He also feared her strong opinions.

"Gosh," she said lightly, "I wish you were more into using media. You're such an irredeemable Luddite, Sloane. I mean, when I was gone, you could've texted or emailed me or even just used a phone for a nice long catchup. Portland can get lonely of an evening. I missed you."

"I don't need all those electronic distractions, Em. But I missed you too."

They stopped by the eastern end of the larger lock. Water was churning in, lifting a crazy smorgasbord of flag-fluttering pleasure craft heading from the sound. In the lead was a large white-and-silver motor yacht and directly behind it, two long ocean kayaks, side by side.

A frowsy blonde woman in a black silk kimono was at the yacht's stern. She waved a cocktail glass about as she chattered down to the bobbing kayakers, two young men in green wetsuits. The color exactly matched the shade of the algae around the walls of the lock. As the kayakers squinted up at the woman, her glass sprinkled them with tiny moving gold reflections.

"Now there's a picture," Sloane said quietly. "The lazy ethic and the jock ethic. One rare, shared moment of togetherness."

"Don't be too harsh, Sloane." Emma pushed hair from her forehead. "That poor lady might be...on her last voyage, dying of a rare disease. And those men could be...well, her doctors, or a doctor and a priest sticking close in case they're needed. I'd say the black guy is the doctor, probably an oncologist, and the white dude is her priest, probably full-bore Catholic."

Sloane laughed. "And here I thought I had the wild imagination."

He wished he could try scanning one or more of the trio, but he wanted to discuss his new ability with Emma before demonstrating. *On the other hand...*

Emma was grasping the railing, intent on the action. She didn't seem aware that Sloane was studying her instead of watching the lock. He angled his head.

In the vibrant mix Sloane smelled garlic, heard rushing water, a baby crying, the word *daddy*; felt damp air, crumbs between molars, chafing shorts; saw nautical flags flying, a small girl watching a boat, a smiling man, silver fish scales, underwater bubbles, the soaring bow scene from the movie *Titanic*, himself staring...

“Earth to Sloane,” Emma was saying. “Do I have some French toast between my teeth?”

He hid his guilt with a grin. “Admiring you, that’s all.”

A gull screeched overhead.

“Hm. I think the lock’s a lot more interesting.” Emma looked again at the action. “Did you know they can raise or lower the water about 25 feet? In a pretty short time too. My father loved this stuff, tried to turn his little girl into a sailor. But...”

She turned to Sloane, tears in her eyes. “How crazy is that? As a hiker, Dad barely escapes the Mount St. Helen’s eruption, the next year survives a float plane flipover in Alaska and a year or two later a boating accident on Lake Washington. He settles into a more sedate life on account of his young family. Then out of the blue on a downtown sidewalk, a stupid, falling brick...” She wiped her eyes with a knuckle. “But I’ve told you about all that...”

Sloane nodded. “Yeah, but some things we can’t help replaying over and over. Especially bad things. Maybe we hope for a different outcome.”

“God,” she said, “I can’t help but remember your cartoon with the guy bending to pick up a quarter and saying ‘It’s my lucky day!’ and not seeing a big safe is hurtling down toward him...”

“I hope you know I didn’t draw that because of your...”

Emma touched his arm. “Of course you didn’t. You’ve got your sadistic streak, Sloane Ferguson, and sometimes you can be a son-of-a-bitch, but—”

“—only sometimes?”

“—but at other times you’re actually OK.” She laughed. “If a tad annoying. Let’s walk.”

She took his arm and led him along the embankment. “I know you view all of us as fodder for your creations, but you’re not one to intentionally hurt those you care about.”

“Hope not,” he said, kicking at a pebble. “Anyway, that cartoon was one of my more sophomoric efforts. It’s an oldie. In a *Mad Magazine* sort of vein.”

“Well, it was funny in its way, not tragic. But I have to say, in the last few months your work seems to have gotten a lot more intense, maybe a bit darker.”

“Could be. As I get older, I guess I’m learning more and more about the vagaries of the human psyche. Which reminds me...” *Here goes.* “You know, Em, there’s something important I need to—”

But Emma had picked up the pace, and she left his hesitant introduction dangling.

“Let’s go study fish psyches,” she said. “There should still be some action over there.”

She led him around to the fish ladder complex. Standing above the sluices, they leaned over to watch salmon wriggle-jumping from level to level, silver, gray and red flashing in relentless determination through the furious beads of glinting spay. Not surprisingly, the air smelled of wet fish, but it was tempered with the duller stink of sodden algae.

They clunked down the stairs to the underwater viewing room, found an unoccupied space and gazed through the glass at dozens of bulky salmon swimming in the murky jade water, stubbornly negotiating their way east to spawn.

“Coho, maybe,” Emma said, “or chinook. It’s past the peak of the season, but these guys are still determined to make it home.”

“Home, huh?” Sloane pressed his nose against the cold glass. His voice acquired a sepulchral resonance. “Well, they’ve certainly got more focus and drive than the average human.”

“Oh, I don’t agree,” Emma said. She moved closer to him. “We’ve all got pretty much the same homing and mating instincts. We’re not much different.”

Sloane pursed his lips. *Oh-oh.*

“How long we been seeing each other?” Emma asked.

Yep. He thought a moment. “Two years, give or take.” *Here it comes.*

Emma pulled on his arm and stepped back. “It’s a little chilly down here. How about going to the gardens? Should be nice there today, and I bet there will still be lots of flowers.”

“Flowers? Great.” *Maybe off the hook for now.* Sloane clattered back up the stairs.

On their walk to the nearby botanical gardens, Emma fell to reminiscing. “Remember Virginia DeMornay?”

“Wasn’t she the one who paid for a date with me at the bachelor auction? Then something fell through, and you got me by default. But boy, yes I remember her...” He licked his lips. “Tall, blonde, brainy, luscious, oozing with Southern charm and absolute feline—”

“--enough already, Sloane. Indeed, Ginny bought you, she paid big bucks to get ready to drag away the charming and famous cartoonist, and then to who knows what...well, I can guess what. But you never knew the whole story of why she reneged.”

“I thought she got sick or suddenly married or ran away to Houston or something? She and I never had our steamy liaison, darn it. I was stuck with you as second place, right?”

“Well, I sort of bought her off.”

“You what?”

“Before she could sail into the sunset with you, I cut her a deal. I got her a date with Ricky Branson of the Seahawks, threw in a week at my family’s timeshare in Cabo, and paid her back in cash for what she’d laid out for her winning bid.

She landed a celebrity bachelor without paying a cent. The charities made out fine. And so I got you.”

“And I was your tax write off?”

“Not mine. Virginia, that schemer, finagled getting the tax deduction too.”

Sloane laughed. “Us innocent men. You manipulating women. There’s a cartoon there. Nope, I’ve done that one. More than once.” He frowned. “But why’d you go to all that trouble, not to mention expense?”

“The point is,” Emma said, squeezing his arm. “I wanted you even before we met. And now...”

“...now you have me?”

“I hope so. I had to re-mortgage the house to buy you back from that damn woman.”

Side by side, they walked up the incline from the locks and started along the main path through the gardens.

Busy maritime technology and concrete waterways gave way to peaceful nature, an oasis of tall evergreens, wide shade trees and beds of colorful fall flowers. Every songbird in Seattle seemed ready to greet them.

Emma took a deep, appreciative breath. “You wouldn’t think the Corps of Engineers had this much imagination, or could even try to deal with a green thought in a green shade. But when they finished building the locks, they began on these gardens, and here we are, the lucky beneficiaries.”

She steered Sloane up a side path. They had it to themselves.

He glanced at her. *Try again.* “Em there’s something I wanted to tell you.”

She was gazing about. “I mean really, not just ferns and rhodies and most of the usual Northwest stuff. But palms, and Mexican pines, fuchsia and grand roses and all sorts of lilies...”

Sloane pointed at a small stone bench on the side of the path. “Emma, can we sit and talk?”

“Sure.” She pulled him to an abrupt stop. “You’re not dumping me for Ginny DeMornay, are you?” Her voice was light, but her eyes had widened.

He took her hand. “Christ, no. It’s nothing like that, Em.”

He took her over to the bench and they sat. “Something very unusual has been happening to me, and I want to get your feedback.”

Her shoulders tensed. “You’re not sick, are you?”

“No, don’t think so. Nutty, maybe, but that’s probably a good thing in my line of work.”

“Well, then get to it, would you?”

Sloane dove into all that had happened, taking her from his experiences on the ferry through his increasing number of experiments. He was a natural storyteller, dramatizing a little, adding touches of levity but remaining thorough and clear.

Emma listened with rapt interest, punctuated with small, puzzled frowns and wary astonishment.

By the time Sloane had finished, the morning had grown cooler. The bench was hard and chilly under his thin pants. He smelled damp earth and rotting leaves.

Across the path, two gardeners were raking a flower bed. Four geese waddled leisurely over the grass, their long necks curving and bobbing for grubs.

The breeze tugged at Emma’s hair. She thought for a moment. “So, somehow you can get into other people’s heads?”

“It seems so.”

“Is that a good thing to do? Ethical, I mean?”

“Jeez, Em. I’m just trying to explore this, figure out what it means, that sort of thing. I’m not ready to get philosophical about it.”

“OK, we’ll get back to that. When you’re *ready*.” She poked him in the ribs, but she showed no amusement.

She slowly zipped up her windbreaker. “So, how’re you accomplishing all this?”

“I’m trying to work it out. I suspect I’m tapping into a kind of electrical field which hovers about each of us. Something like a mental exosphere, you know, an outer layer paralleling or mirroring what’s inside. It’s chockablock full of sensory impressions, thoughts, memories, and so on.”

“And what, you use your Superman X-ray vision to go in there and read people’s minds? If I didn’t know you to be relatively sane—and only crazy in the small ways I love you for—I’d say you were crazy.”

He puffed out his cheeks. “Well, take it or leave it. I just know I can slide my cosmic X-ray eyebeam underneath someone’s aura, aim at the notch of their clavicle, as in right here”—he pushed gently on Emma’s chest—“insert my Fisher-Price mental probe and, *shazam!* I suck out their thoughts.”

Emma laughed. “See how silly it sounds? Not to mention that you’re mixing up your comic book heroes.”

Her features darkened. “I get that you’re really able to do something, Sloane. It just seems a little dodgy, not quite right.”

She stood and moved onto the path. “Let’s head to the restaurant. I need a Bloody Mary.” She began to walk away.

“Dodgy?” Sloane jumped up and trotted after her.

“Em, I’m not doing anything with what I—jeez, see, read, envision, sense: I’m not what sure to call it—and maybe down the road it’ll provide a whole new twist for my work, but it’ll always stay private, anonymous. Anyway, right now I’m just practicing.”

“Practicing?” Emma stopped. Her eyes widened. Her voice shrilled. “Shit! Did you read me earlier? Did you invade my mind, thoughts, whatever?”

One of the gardeners looked toward them. The geese honked and flapped further away.

Sloane tried a little Stan Laurel sheepishness, including scratching the top of his head. “Gosh, now you’re reading *my* mind, Ollie. I was just about to tell you—”

“I don’t find it funny.” She looked away.

They watched a fat woman struggling to tow a fat white poodle which in turn was trying to tug her toward the geese. Band music oompahed through the trees. Sunlight flared brightly across the gardens and rapidly dimmed.

Emma turned back to Sloane. “OK, so I’m mad, but I’m also curious. What did you...see?” Her shift to coyness was as sudden as the change in light.

He gave a little shrug. “So, I didn’t get much. You know, images of downtown Portland, a cute guy licking his lips...um, garlic, French toast, the DeMornay woman in a Stetson...uh, lots of boats, me giving you a massage, hangnail worries, a brass band...”

“Great, you’re making it all up. Except the cute guy. He was a knockout.” Emma’s voice rose. “But I turned down his offer because”—she thumped Sloane on the chest—“because I love you, dammit, and it’s past time we got serious about taking the next step. And there, that’s what I bet you saw in my mind, Sloane.”

He reached out to hug her. “Make that two Bloody Marys,” he said.

She curled into his arms. “I’m serious, Sloane,” she murmured. “I’m tired of seeing you mostly on weekends.”

“I know. We can talk about it again.”

From behind them came a distinct harrumph.

They were blocking the return of the poodle lady. Smiling apologetically, they let her and the dog pass, then, hand in hand, they walked the other way.

“OK. I’ve made up a word for what you’re doing,” Emma said. “It’s *envading*. It’s envisioning what’s in other minds but also a big emphasis on invading. *Envading*.”

“*Envading*, huh? You want to become my caption writer?”

“Whatever you call it—and fascinating as it might be, Sloane—should you be doing this? That’s a question you might ask yourself before you take it any further.”

She stopped, leaned on his arm and removed her sockless sneakers. “How ‘bout a shortcut to the Gilman?” She nodded at his feet. “You too, big boy. Take them off.”

She supported him as he slipped off his loafers and his socks.

They left the path and wandered barefoot through the soft cool grass, ignoring the few tentative drops of rain.

“Well,” said Sloane, “there’s gotta be at least one cartoon in all of this.”

About the Author

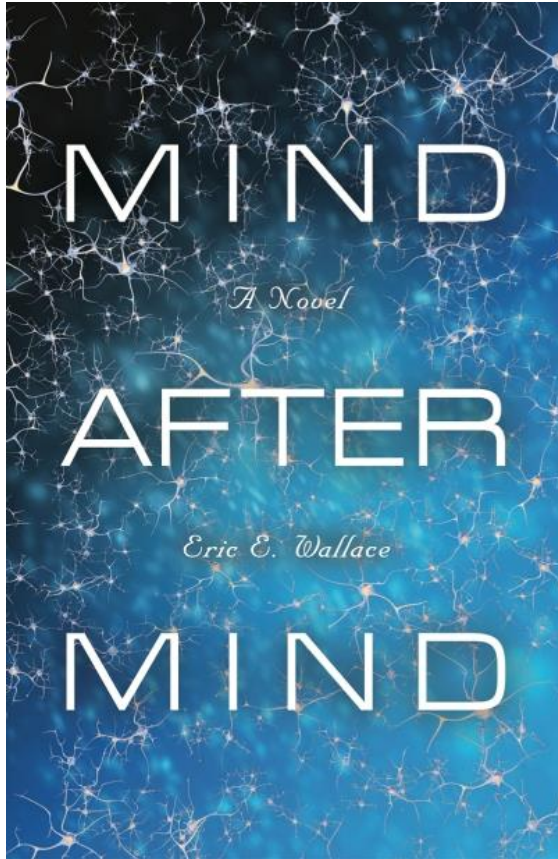
Eric E. Wallace writes fiction, poetry, plays and humor.

His work has been published in many literary journals and periodicals, including *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *The First Line*, *Rosebud* and *Writer's Digest*, in more than a dozen print anthologies and online at *Writers Weekly*, *Idaho Magazine*, *Toasted Cheese Literary Journal* and elsewhere.

Eric's five previous books, published by BookLocker.com, are *Undertow*, a collection of eighteen of his short stories; *Hoar Frost*, containing seven of his stories; *Stonerise*, with nine stories; and two novels, *Emperor's Reach* and *The Improviser*.

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A Seattle cartoonist discovers he can read minds, but as he explores deeper and deeper, his intriguing new ability begins to affect his work, his relationships and how he views the world.

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