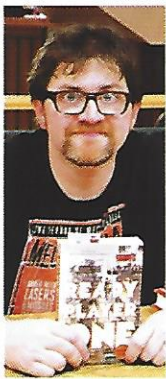# READY PLAYER ONE

By **Ernest Cline**
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Book review by
Aisa Valenzuela
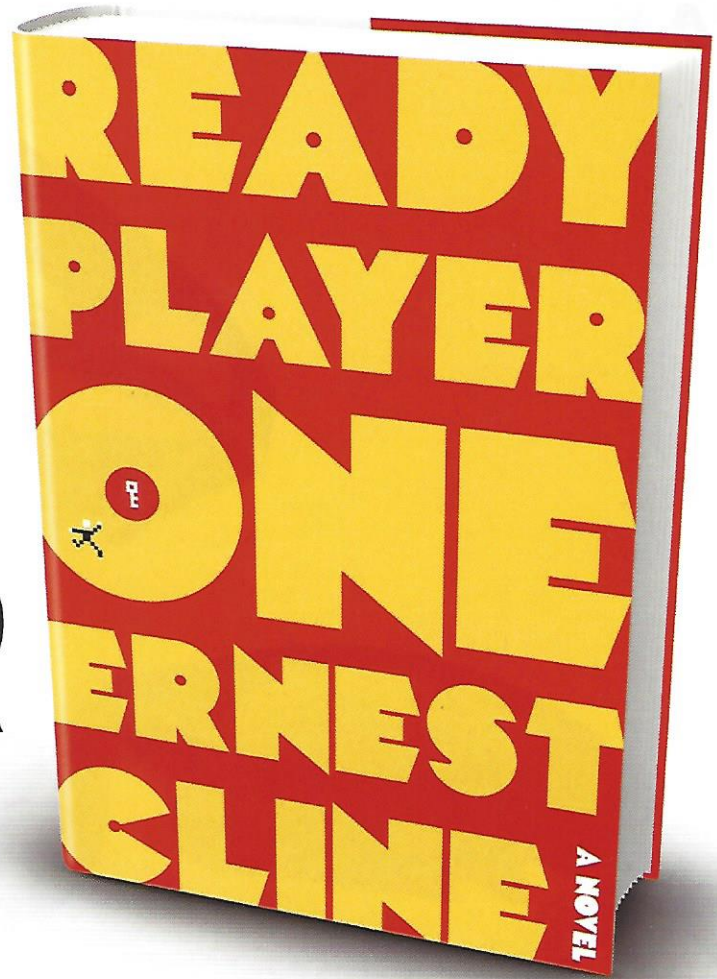
A VIDEO GAME WRAPPED IN A DYSTOPIA WRAPPED IN A HERO QUEST.

Maybe this could begin to describe Ernest Cline's debut novel, *Ready Player One*. In the book, the world is a polluted, war-torn place thirty years from now. To escape from their troubles, most people spend their days on OASIS, a multiplayer, role-playing game even more pervasive than the internet is today. On the OASIS, you can go to school, go on quests, be anyone you want to be based on your avatar, and even create entire planets.

The creator of OASIS is James Halliday, a billionaire computer programmer who, after he dies, leaves his entire fortune to whoever can find the three keys he's embedded into the video game. The only hint anyone has to go on to decode the puzzles is Halliday's obsession with '80s pop culture, and so an entire generation grows up being familiar with John Hughes films, '80s sitcoms, and coin-operated arcade games in the hopes that they will yield clues to the treasure. Yet it takes years before anyone ever finds the first key, and that first person turns out to be Wade Watts, the 18-year-old protagonist of the story.

Wade is a typical nerd—that is, he's chubby, isolated, and antisocial. But he's also very likeable, very witty, and very skilled at video games. Known as Parzival on the OASIS, he is aided on his quest by best friend Aech and blogger/crush Art3mis—both of whom he has never met in real life. When a giant corporation tries to coerce and then kill Wade in order to get to the fortune first, the fun and games quickly turn into serious business.

ERNEST CLINE is an American novelist, spoken word artist, and screenwriter.

Ready Player One has been called "geek heaven" by critics, and it's obvious from the first page why. (The title itself is homage to the phrase that kicked off video games in the old days.) Cline makes OASIS sound like a utopia, and I can easily imagine computer and video game geeks going into paroxysms of ecstasy at the thought of a completely immersive virtual reality like this one. In the book, "players" have visors, chairs, body suits, and gloves to simulate tactile sensations and experiences. (There is also smell technology, but it's less popular.)

For those of us who grew up in the '80s, it's also a nostalgic romp through *Pac-Man*, *Family Ties*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *Dungeons & Dragons*, and animé references.

At the same time, however, Cline creates a terrifying but believable future where humans increasingly use the internet or technology to escape the grimness of real life. Wade even lives in a vertical stack of mobile homes (a.k.a. a trailer park taken to the next level), which may or may not come to pass as the global economy continues to go south.

Yet for all of its forward-thinking technology and obscure pop culture references, at its heart this novel is a classic, coming-of-age story in the vein of *Star Wars* and superhero films. Even as Wade searches for the treasure, he falls in love and realizes things about himself. The book is full of action and drama, and the characters and story are relatable enough even if you didn't grow up in the '80s or play video games.

In the end, the book even reminds you that there is a real world out there just waiting to be explored. But for now, give yourself permission to get lost in the world of this one.