



Many Windows: On  
Experimental Fiction

**DANIEL GREEN**

## CONTENTS

*Make it Different (2)*

*Clearing the Ground (4)*

*A Certain Latitude (6)*

*Innocence and Experience (11)*

*Across the Borderline (15)*

Sara Greenslit, *The Blue of Her Body*

Che Elias, *West Virginia*

Paul Griffiths, *Let Me Tell You*

*Doing Something (24)*

*What Novels Are For (27)*

*Define Your Terms (31)*

*Interfictions*

*30 Under 30*

*Local Experiment (Jeffrey DeShell, The Trouble With Being Born)*

*Late Barth (43)*

*Where 3 Roads Meet*

*The Development*

*Early Efforts (49)*

Erin Pringle, *The Floating Order*

Zachary Mason, *The Lost Books of the Odyssey*

Stephen Marche, *Shining at the Bottom of the Sea*

Peter Markus, *Bob, or Man on Boat*

Jeremy M. Davies, *Fancy*

Anakana Schofield, *Malarky*

## Make It Different

Frank Wilson contends that "artistic experiment" is defined by the amount of "trial and error" involved. He takes the scientific "experiment" to be the model for the use of "experimental" as a classificatory term in the discussion of literature (*Booksinq*, 9/24/2006). Scott Esposito more or less accepts Wilson's definition, although he has no problem with "art experiments being praised as ends in themselves," something about which Wilson seems skeptical. Scott also suggests that "unlike in science, we can continually come back to and learn new things from successful literary experiments, or simply admire their beauty" (*Conversational Reading*, 9/2006).

Actually, we can probably do the same with certain especially compelling scientific experiments, but I think both Esposito and Wilson are mistaken to view "experiment" in literature as essentially analogous to the way the term is understood in science. Esposito is correct in asserting that "a lot of trial and error is involved in the writing of most novels," and for that very reason "trial and error" is not really very helpful in capturing what literary critics/scholars have meant by using "experimental fiction" in describing selected works of fiction, especially fiction written since 1945, "experimental." For the most part, critical commentary on postwar experimental fiction (more broadly "postmodern" fiction) has focused on "experiment" as, in Jerome Klinkowitz's words, the "disruption" of a "conservative stability of form" in literary fiction (*Literary Disruptions*, 1980). Klinkowitz thought this stability had reigned since the 1920s, but it probably goes back farther than that, to the establishment of realism in the mid/late 19th century—experimentalists such as Joyce and Woolf could be said to have also "disrupted" this stability of form (often characterized as the "well-made story"), although their experiments did not disrupt the assumptions of realism itself, were in fact an extension of these assumptions into what is now called "psychological realism." From this perspective, "trial and error" is not so much the guiding principle of experiment (except insofar as it involves finding appropriate methods of disruption) as is the notion that "stability"—to which scientific experiments always return—is itself not a desirable state where the art of fiction is concerned.

It is true that the term "experimental fiction" is a catch-all term of convenience that doesn't necessarily signal anything very specific about what particular writers might be up to in their efforts to, if not "make it new," then "make it different." Thus Klinkowitz prefers "disruption," while other critics have written about "breaking the sequence" or "the art of excess" or "anti-story." In most cases, however, these critics are really interested in what Ellen Friedman and Miriam Fuchs in *Breaking the Sequence* simply accept as "innovations in form." Friedman and Fuchs also provide a handy description of the elements of "stability" against which most innovative writers are rebelling: "Plot linearity that implies a story's purposeful forward movement; a single, authoritative storyteller; well-motivated characters interacting in recognizable social patterns; the crucial conflict deterring the protagonist from the ultimate goal; the movement to closure. . . ." Perhaps the most succinct statement of the motivations underlying experimental fiction would be the remarks made by John Hawkes: "I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting and theme, and having once abandoned these familiar ways of thinking about fiction, totality of vision or structure was really all that remained."

A critic who did use the term "experimental fiction" straightforwardly was Robert Scholes in his book *Fabulation and Metafiction*. In the chapter of that book called "The Nature of Experimental Fiction," he writes: "Forms atrophy and lose touch with the vital ideas of fiction. Originality in fiction, rightly understood, is the successful attempt to find new forms that are capable of tapping once again the sources of fictional vitality." Scholes's book popularized the term "metafiction" as a more specific term describing the tendencies in postwar American fiction that made readers think of them as "experimental": "Metafiction. . . attempts to assault or transcend the laws of fiction—an undertaking which can only be achieved from within fictional form." Writers like Gass, Barth, Coover, and Barthelme were "working in that rarefied air of metafiction, trying to climb beyond Beckett and Borges, toward things than no critic—not even a metacritic, if there were such a thing—can discern."

Eventually that air probably became too "rarefied." Many readers came to associate metafiction—and thus "experimental fiction"—as "game-playing," an obsession with "art" over "life." This perception probably informs Frank Wilson's disdain for experiments "as ends in themselves." (Also his disinclination to think of Joyce as an experimenter—Joyce "knew from

the start what he was going to do and how he was going to do it" and would never have stooped to mere "experiment.") It may also explain why Christopher Sorrentino, in a comment on Scott Esposito's post, observes that "while I have met a great many novelists ranging in outlook and approach from Ben Marcus to Jonathan Franzen, not a single one of them to my knowledge has ever described his/her work as 'experimental.'" While the writers associated with the *Journal of Experimental Fiction* would probably be less skittish about the designation than Marcus or Franzen, it probably is now true that many "experimental" writers (putting aside whether Ben Marcus or Jonathan Franzen are actually experimental writers in the first place), are uncomfortable with the word as applied to their work. I'd still accept the explanation given by Raymond Federman, who coined the term "surfiction" as an alternative to "metafiction" in identifying his own brand of experimental fiction:

The kind of fiction I am interested in is that fiction which the leaders of the literary establishment (publishers, editors, agents, and reviewers alike) brush aside because it does not conform to their notions of what fiction should be; that fiction which supposedly has no value (commercially understood) for the common reader. And the easiest way for these people to brush aside that kind of fiction is to label it, quickly and bluntly, as experimental fiction. Everything that does not fall into the category of successful fiction (commercially that is), or what Jean-Paul Sartre once called "nutritious literature," everything that is found "unreadable for our readers" . . . is immediately relegated to the domain of experimentation—a safe and useless place. (*Surfiction*, 1975)

### **Clearing the Ground**

Whether we choose to call this sort of fiction by Federman's chosen term or continue to refer to it as "metafiction," the foundational works of American metafiction are John Barth's story collection *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) and Robert Coover's novel *The Universal Baseball Association* (1968), as well as Coover's collection *Pricksongs and Descants* (1969). These books of course themselves show the influence of various precursors in the work of, among others, Borges, Beckett, and Nabokov, but finally they are the books that brought together most

explicitly those characteristics of all previous fiction that work against transparency in narration, that point the reader away from the unfolding narrative and toward the artificial devices by which all literary narratives are constructed and embellished. In so doing, Barth and Coover created a kind of "self-conscious" fiction that would decidedly—and perhaps irretrievably—alter perceptions of the role of convention in fiction.

In Barth's fiction, these conventions were challenged directly, in stories that blatantly reveal themselves to be fabrications, that examine self-reflexively the process and the tools of storytelling, that delight in all the contrivances and tricks that are involved in storytelling even as they acknowledge that such contrivances are always involved. Coover's fiction indulges in these sorts of diversions as well, although his work is perhaps more likely to explore the ways in which fiction and fiction-making incorporate, perhaps inevitably, elements of ritual and myth, as in *UBA* or "The Magic Poker," and to explode the conventions of realism and traditional narrative from within, to produce a kind of kaleidoscopic surrealism, as in "The Babysitter," rather than the comic anatomies of storytelling to be found in *Lost in the Funhouse*. (Although Barth is certainly interested as well in the mythic/ritual origins of storytelling.) But even as both Barth and Coover were seemingly set on demolishing the established conventions of narrative fiction, both also clearly reveled in storytelling and in finding new ways for stories to be "relevant" in a period of upheaval and radical change, as the 1960s clearly was.

Thus, metafiction was simultaneously an attempt to clear the ground of the remaining inherited presuppositions about the "craft" of fiction and to make possible a more unrestricted view of what actually constitutes literary craft, to open up the ground for new practices that might expand fiction's potential range, that might even lead to a renewal of storytelling in new forms and styles. Most importantly, Barth and Coover went about this without sacrificing fiction's "entertainment" quotient. (In my opinion, at least.) *The Universal Baseball Association* is an engrossing read (even if you don't like baseball), "The Babysitter" an intensely compelling story despite the fact that what's "really going on" is impossible to determine. A story like Barth's "Menelaiad" is great fun to read, as long as you're willing to go along with its almost literally infinite regress of story-within-story. Other readers might not find them as entertaining as I do, perhaps, but that the authors meant them to be entertaining in their own way seems to me indisputable.

A list of subsequent metafiction of equal value and accomplishment would have to include William Gass's *Willie Master's Lonesome Wife* (1971), Gilbert Sorrentino's *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* (1971) and *Mulligan Stew* (1979), as well as some of the work of Ronald Sukenick and Raymond Federman. These writers continued to ask questions not just about the conventions of fiction but about the very medium of writing, about the established usages of language itself. Gass and Sukenick play games with typography, Sorrentino adds to metafiction his outrageous humor and inveterate experimentation, Federman uses metafiction (or "surfiction") to question the "reality" of reality. Taken together, they remain the literary touchstones of American metafiction. Their books may occasionally go out of print, but they will always be rediscovered because they still seem audacious despite the passage of time and the borrowing of their innovations by later writers.

By the 1980s a backlash of sorts had set in, both among other writers, (the "minimalists"), and among critics, who increasingly called such fiction "self-indulgent" rather than "self-reflexive." Nevertheless, all of the metafictionists continued to write some very good books, and younger writers emerged who were clearly influenced by their earlier work. There are metafictional elements in the work of Richard Powers and David Foster Wallace, of Steve Stern and Steven Millhauser. A good deal even of Philip Roth's later work would clearly not have been the same without the prior efforts of the metafictionists. Other writers, from Michael Chabon to Ian McEwan and David Mitchell, would not necessarily be called metafictionists, but their books show a preoccupation with writing and with forms of storytelling that can be traced back to the related but different kind of preoccupation to be found in *Lost in the Funhouse* and *The Universal Baseball Association*.

However, the real promise of metafiction has not yet really been fulfilled. Its true legacy is to be found in the way it calls writers' (and readers') attention to the attributes of fiction as art, potentially making all of us more immediately aware of the limitless ways in which works of fiction can be shaped into artful verbal creations. Too often self-reflexive devices and strategies are still used simply as gimmicks, empty gestures, stratagems employed by those wishing to appear clever and knowing. Not enough effort has been made to redeem the still latent possibilities of fiction when approached as an aesthetically malleable form waiting to be adapted to various imaginative purposes. (For an example of how one of the founding metafictionists is

still able to do this, read Robert Coover's *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*.) The unmitigated commercialism and careerism of the publishing "industry" as it now exists is not going to make this sort of effort more likely in the near future, nor will the disciplinary imperatives of academic creative writing, which mostly makes for the homogenization of product. But anyone who might like to strike out on a different path anyway, to understand how fiction might be freed of its encrusted layers of formula and routine, could do worse than to read (or re-read) the books and writers I have mentioned.

### A Certain Latitude

The stability of form against which experimental fiction rebels, although not exactly identical with "realism" as a mode of representation, nevertheless is unavoidably associated with the dominance of realism in Western fiction since at least the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. But in American fiction, at least, that dominance has *always* been contested, specifically in the preference of many American writers for "romance" over realism. Richard Chase, in *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957), perhaps most famously made this distinction, highlighting the tendency in the romance "to render reality in less volume and detail," to prefer action to character, and to present characters who are "probably rather two-dimensional types," not "completely related to each other or to society or to the past." "Being less committed to the immediate rendition of reality than the novel," Chase concludes, "the romance will more fully veer toward mythic, allegorical, and symbolistic forms" than the novel per se. "Romance" can thus be seen as an inclination on the part of many American writers toward a more flexible view of the relationship between fiction and ordinary reality.

Since Chase, other scholars have examined the elements of romance in provocative ways, firmly establishing that it is a central impulse in American fiction. They have emphasized the ways in which the romance draws attention to the form itself, from the depiction of artist-figure characters to a preoccupation with the very act of reading. They have also focused on its predilection for exuberant, at times even excessive, stylistic effects, showing how a reliance on metaphorical language and other rhetorical devices results in a high level of abstraction and a

ruminative, at times self-conscious tone. Although most of these studies concentrate on 19<sup>th</sup> century fiction (Edgar Dryden, however, does include Barth in his *The Form of American Romance*), it is clearly possible to trace the impulse through the twentieth century, including its eventual expression in the fiction Scholes identified as both “fabulation” and “metafiction.”

In *The Development of American Romance*, Michael Davitt Bell offers a perspective that illuminates the attempt to see classic American fiction and postmodern fiction in such a continuum. Bell writes of the status of the romance in 19<sup>th</sup> century American that the romance-novel distinction was not necessarily as significant as "the more general distinction between all fiction and what conventional thought took to be fact." Bell continues:

Indeed, the novel/romance distinction was often used to obscure the larger dichotomy. The avowed "romancer" admitted or proclaimed what the "novelist" strove to conceal or deny: that his fiction was a figment of the imagination (xii).

The romancer's proclamation is, of course, quite postmodern. Perhaps the hallmark of metafiction is its open admission it is indeed a "figment of imagination," a "fiction" not to be mistaken for "fact." Writers like Barth and Coover insist their stories and novels be taken as writing, not as reflections of literal reality. The celebration of sheer artifice in these writers' work validated the romancer's emphasis on imagination as the essence of literary creation.

Postwar experimental writers do not really express such a fear. The distinguishing feature of American metafiction is a deep *belief* in "imaginative fiction" implicit in its obsessive formalism and its self-reflexive uncovering of the "order of fiction." Metafictionists deliberately disrupt the "narrative communication" traditionally conceived as the rhetorical contract of fiction in order to forge a new relationship between writer and text, text and reader. Thus, metafiction can indeed be taken as a postmodern reworking of the underlying assumptions of American romance, but, importantly, it is one in which the kind of guilt Bell identifies has no part.

*Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) provides a cogent example of such a development. Barth was one of the first metafictionists to write about his aesthetic and theoretical principles in terms that suggest considerable consonance with the tradition of American romance. Particularly revealing is his use of the term "aesthetic irrealism." According to Barth, this phrase denotes "any set of artistic principles and devices, conventional or otherwise, felt by people on a

particular level of a particular culture at a particular time to be enjoyable and/or significant though understood to be not literally indicative of their imagination of the actual world" (*The Friday Book*, 222). Barth's statement strongly brings to mind the preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, in which Nathaniel Hawthorne asks his reader for a "certain latitude" in the creation of nonverisimilar effects. This preface is one of the most direct expressions of literary philosophy by any American romancer, and its implications go far in explaining the connection between romance and metafiction.

Like Hawthorne, Barth wants to take fiction beyond a merely documentary function. The writer should be allowed to indulge in effects that ignore the demands of verisimilitude, effects which affirm that a novel or short story constitutes a world unto itself, operating under laws of its own making. Barth and Hawthorne seem to accept the essential insularity of fiction, which takes "life" as raw material but converts it into what Richard Poirier has called a "world elsewhere." According to Poirier, "the great works of American literature are alive with the effort to stabilize certain feelings and attitudes that have, as it were, no place in the world, no place at all except where a writer's style can give them one" (ix). Thus, the true subject of much American fiction is not really the phenomenal world of American "experience" at all but the problem of creating a world in fiction.

Barth's earliest novels, *The Floating Opera*, *The End of the Road*, even *The Sot-Weed Factor*, were quite dark, almost nihilistic, works, but from *Lost in the Funhouse* on Barth becomes a more hopeful, indeed celebratory, writer. Barth's "hope," however, is not for the moral or ethical elevation of humankind; rather, his books implicitly place their hope in the aesthetic elevation provided by fiction. The celebration in these books is not of human possibility in the abstract, but of the humanizing play of language. Such emphasis on the value of form and language for its own sake might be the key difference between Barth's metafiction and the romances of Brown, Hawthorne, and Melville.

The title story of *Lost in the Funhouse* is in many ways a paradigm of the metafictional impulse, a key to this book's place in the tradition of experimental romance, in the words of Chimera, the "key to the treasure." "Lost in the Funhouse" is ostensibly about Ambrose Mensch, an intellectually curious, bespectacled, Barth-like character groping through childhood and

adolescence in the three stories in which he is the protagonist. But the story is also about its own creation. On the one hand there are conventional expository passages:

Thrice a year--on Memorial, Independence, and Labor Day--the family visits Ocean City for the afternoon and evening. When Ambrose and Peter's father was their age, the excursion was made by train. . . Many families from the same neighborhood used to travel together, with dependent relatives and often with Negro servants; schoolfuls of children swarmed through the railway cars; everyone shared everyone else's Maryland fried chicken, Virginia ham, deviled eggs, potato salad, beaten biscuits, iced tea. . . .

On the other, such passages alternate with passages of self-reflexive commentary:

Description of physical appearances and mannerisms is one of several standard methods of characterization used by writers of fiction. It is also important to "keep the senses operating"; when a detail from one of the five senses, say visual, is "crossed" with a detail from another, say auditory, the reader's imagination is oriented to the scene, perhaps unconsciously. . . .

The second passage seems to undermine the first. It seems to tell the reader that the previous passage is full of calculation, the product of sheer convention. This move is one of the central features of metafiction. By calling attention to its own artifice, metafiction attempts to demystify the fictionmaking process. Most importantly, it undermines what Jacques Derrida calls "presence" inherent in any use of language, whether spoken or written. In traditional fiction that presence corresponds to the "elements"—plot, character, theme—that are the vehicle of the author's "intent." Barth questions, and asks the reader to question the unexamined assumptions of such a view, and, in effect, leads the reader back to the resources of language per se. Thus, while "Lost in the Funhouse" seems to undermine itself, it actually works to affirm the independence of language in its literary context. By calling attention to its own narrative artifice, the story emphasizes its substantiality as language

In Barth's fiction, and in metafiction in general, the reader cannot consider language to be a window on an immediately present view of the world. Approaching metafiction in this way will provide only frustrating glimpses through the window of the writer himself, staring implacably back at the reader, or even more frustrating perhaps, the reader's own image reflected

in the window's foreground. The language of metafiction is opaque, implicitly requiring the reader to acknowledge the distinction between "the world" and literature. This distinction is crucial, of course, in the tradition described by Poirier, Chase, and others; metafiction takes the principle a step further, making problematic the idea that fiction creates or reflects any world beyond or separate from the language that evokes it. In metafiction it is language—as Derrida might have it, "writing"---that itself becomes the "world elsewhere."

### **Innocence and Experience**

In his essay "On Several Obsolete Notions," Alain Robbe-Grillet describes the novel in its "classic" phase:

All the technical elements of the narrative—systematic use of the past tense and the third person, unconditional adoption of chronological development, linear plots, regular trajectory of the passions, impulse of each episode toward a conclusion, etc.—everything tended to impose the image of a stable, coherent, continuous, unequivocal universe. Since the intelligibility of the world was not even questioned, to tell a story did not raise a problem. The style of the novel could be innocent.

He continues:

But then, with Flaubert, everything begins to vacillate. A hundred years later the whole system is no more than a memory, and it is to that memory, to that dead memory, that some seek with all their might to keep the novel fettered. . . .

It is tempting to say that Robbe-Grillet's account of the 19th century novel and the shadow it cast on subsequent novelists still seems relevant, fifty years later, and that many readers still think of the "innocent" narrative as the novel's natural form, from which any variation or experiment in form is merely a temporary departure. However, an honest consideration of Robbe-Grillet's bill of particulars would have to conclude that fiction over the course of the 20th century did in fact move beyond the model Robbe-Grillet associates with Balzac and other early novelists.

While much current fiction does continue to employ third-person narration—usually the "free indirect" variant through which a character's thoughts, recollections, and emotions provide a perceptual matrix but are not directly stated by the character—first-person narratives are probably more prevalent than ever before, as are experiments in shifting, alternate, and multiple points of view. Similarly, stories related in the present tense have become so common that what was once a notable divergence from the norm is probably no longer noticed by most readers. And while most novels still rely on "plot," their plots are by no means always "linear," such chronological development as they possess often enough supplied by the reader after piecing together the fragments of narrative presented without much immediate regard for chronological continuity. It could perhaps be argued that too many novels do still imply a "decipherable universe"—decipherable insofar as it can be adequately rendered through the protocols of realism—but most literary fiction is not so tied to a 19th century worldview as to portray human experience as "stable, coherent, continuous, unequivocal."

Indeed, to the extent that contemporary life seems to many of us discontinuous and indefinite, the modernist-derived strategies emphasizing subjectivity and fragmentation seem justified in the name of realism itself. And to this extent, Robbe-Grillet has been proven correct when in the same essay he predicts that this sort of modernist experimentation (with which he more or less associated his own fiction) will become "assimilated," viewed by critics still attuned only to the past as the most recent golden age of storytelling. Thus, esteemed critics such as James Wood point us back to Henry James or Virginia Woolf as writers who set a standard of inner-directed realism, a realism of the mind and its subjective perceptions rather than a realism of the material world presented as a collection of facts. Wood is certainly not alone in holding up the psychological novel as the apogee of the novel as a literary form. The notion that in fiction, and only in fiction, we can "get inside" a character, can "feel" what it's like to negotiate the world from a perspective other than our own, is very widespread. But, I would argue, this is because one part of the modernist project, the extension of realism into "psychological realism," has been successful, while that part setting a precedent for aesthetic innovation ("make it new") as a measure of artistic achievement has not been embraced as firmly by either writers or critics. The set of accepted conventions for the writing of fiction has been advanced from about 1825 to about 1925, but those voices that "seek with all their might to keep the novel fettered" to a "dead

system" can still be heard, even if that "system" has incorporated some of the strategies for which Robbe-Grillet himself was an advocate.

Although "innocent" novels are still being written (particularly within some forms of genre fiction), very few serious writers have failed to notice fiction's loss of innocence. But the expansion of techniques available to the modern writer has developed into its own kind of "systematic" practice that can be just as stubborn an obstacle to the development of a "new novel" as the traditional story form Robbe-Grillet wanted to clear away. It is probably inevitable that strategies and approaches once regarded as mold-breaking will eventually become conventional, established techniques for the novelist to adopt when they suit his/her need. But this only makes it more important that writers like Robbe-Grillet or John Barth or Gilbert Sorrentino emerge to point out that such techniques have become hidebound and to offer fresh alternatives.

It is sometimes mistakenly assumed that "experimental" writers (and the critics who champion them) have little regard for the kind of fiction that preceded them, that they simply deny the continued aesthetic value of what has come before. But I think most experimental or unconventional writers have a relationship to the past that is captured by these words from John Dewey in *Art as Experience*:

When the old has not been incorporated, the outcome is merely eccentricity. But great original artists take a tradition into themselves. They have not shunned it but digested it. Then the very conflict set up between it and what is new in themselves and in their environment creates the tension that demands a new mode of expression.

Writers like William Gass or John Barth or Robert Coover have always been at pains to make clear they consider their own work to be extensions of past practice, part of the very tradition their fiction otherwise seems to be challenging. Barth especially found inspiration for his "postmodern" work in such 18th century forms as the picaresque and epistolary novel, as well as in Greek and Arabic literature, while Gass's essays frequently pay tribute to writers of the past. By "digesting" literary history, these writers both nourish their own talents by heightening the "conflict set up between [tradition] and what is new in themselves," thereby discovering "a

new mode of expression," and help to bring a usable literary past into the present. This is not so much Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence" as it is a necessary sounding of literary tradition in order to find one's own proper place within it.

Certainly there are "eccentric" writers whose work seems merely strange, even incomprehensible, because an enabling context--to what convention is this device responding, to meet what known goal has that strategy been used--is missing. Such works lack the "tension" Dewey speaks of, and the effort to read them is mostly frustrating rather than creatively challenging. But I would guess that most writers of innovative fiction set out to create fiction as good as that which they've admired as readers. To do so requires more than imitation. It requires finding the means adequate to "a new mode of expression" that perhaps will measure up to those already to be found in the great works of the past. Ultimately it requires an effort equal to that Dewey ascribes to the "great innovators in modern painting," who "were more assiduous students of the pictures of the past than were the imitators who set the contemporary fashion."

Indeed, if you abandon tradition completely, you're no longer experimenting with the forms that interested you in the first place. There's not even anything left to challenge. John Barth once wrote that he was "of the temper that chooses to rebel along traditional lines." He preferred "the kind of art. . .that requires expertise and artistry as well as bright aesthetic ideas and/or inspiration." This Barthian kind of experimental fiction in turn could invoke a number of oxymoronic descriptions: "conservative radical"; "cautious iconoclast"; "pragmatic revolutionary." (I especially like the last one.) But in some ways it's only in the contradictions between these terms that actual experiment with literary form can take place.

Ultimately no writer can completely break the "rules" because the result would be literally incomprehensible. Something so thoroughly new that it can't at all be recognized as participating in the tradition that initiated and shaped the form is indeed a new form and must be judged by criteria appropriate to it. Sometimes, it seems to me, readers and critics are so anxious that the pleasures they associate with a literary form be preserved that more adventurous, rule-disregarding work becomes a threat. Such an attitude is itself what threatens the endurance of a literary form and its pleasures, since only the adventurous writing renews it, prevents it from becoming so convention-ridden the pleasures merely become rote.

## Across the Borderline

There's no doubt that life could be made easier, for both writers and critics, if the identifying tag "novel" were confined to that plot- and character-heavy sort of narrative into which the novel evolved between 1850 and 1950 and which a majority of readers still steadfastly associate with the term. Devotees of "exploratory" prose would not have to contend, or would have to contend less, with objections that a particular work of experimental fiction is not "really" a novel, because it would indeed not be such and could perhaps be more honestly assessed according to criteria appropriate to what it is rather than what it is not. Many of the currently contentious critical debates about the purpose and proper form of the novel would presumably disappear, and those who insist it continue to be what it's always been and appeal to the widest possible audience would have the field to themselves.

Such a dispensation would have the added benefit of eliminating obtrusive discussions of "art" where the novel is concerned, since whatever art it would still be granted would be confined to minor variations on pre-established methods, and everyone still reading novels would be able to concentrate their attention on the "ideas" they supposedly express, the political efficacy they're claimed to have, the sociological observations they're said to make, or just the nice stories they're counted on to tell, all of which, as far as I can tell, are of much greater interest to readers of conventional novels than aesthetic values or formal ingenuity. "Style" might remain a relevant consideration, as long as it's used to identify especially pretty prose.

I confess I find this potential reinforcement of boundaries, and subsequent realignment of the literary sphere, initially attractive and possibly liberating. The reduction of the novel to its simplest form—or at least its most readily accessible—would allow adventurous writers to follow their creative bliss in whatever directions they wished (to the extent that they, too, are finally willing to "ignore the needs of the publishing industry") and critics to extend their horizons beyond the already known. Yet I think I would ultimately resist abandoning the classification "novel" as an umbrella term naming a still-evolving literary form. For one thing, a hardening of the boundary defining the novel would surely give whatever lies outside it a bracing freedom to explore new territory, but eventually it seems likely that either new boundaries would be erected around certain kinds of "prose works," boundaries that could prove just as restrictive,

or that something like literary anarchy would ensue. Perhaps this anarchy would still be tolerable, depending on the quality of what some writers manage to produce, but such a state of affairs would make it more difficult to maintain a critical perspective on new writing, which might in turn make it more difficult for "prose writers" to gather an audience.

In addition, my appreciation of the experimental in literature is still pretty firmly rooted in literary history itself, and I am hesitant to conclude that those impulses that motivated writers to begin writing what we now call novels, and that has guided the development of fiction in general, are entirely spent. Fiction, at least in the modern literary tradition, began as an experiment itself, an offshoot of "narrative poetry" that began to test out the possibilities of extended narratives written in prose. Indeed, many of the early works of prose fiction, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Jacques the Fatalist*, could be described as "prose works" seeking their own conventions rather than novels per se. The history of the novel, in my view, is the continued search for subjects, strategies, and techniques that would redeem the artistic potential both of the form and of prose itself as a literary medium. Many people seem to think that this search effectively ended in the late 19th/early 20th centuries, when novelists discovered realism, enhanced by modernist experiments in "psychological realism," and thus added these approaches to the earlier emphasis on storytelling, but I think that such an arbitrary circumscription of the novel's further development is effectively a renunciation of the form's own history as an "exploratory" practice.

Perhaps, given both the adamancy with which the gatekeepers of the "novel" in its ossified version insist on its right to the designation and the sheer abundance of alternatives to this version offered up over the last sixty years, we ought just to accept this renunciation and get on with writing and reading whatever fresh "prose works" continue to appear. Maybe this is the price to be paid for the novel's brief period of popularity as a mass entertainment before the arrival of movies and television to usurp that role: the "book business" expropriated the label "novel" as a marketing device and has continued to force all subsequent efforts at expanding the form back into its slim container. (Although in light of what seems to be the imminent implosion of this "industry," it may no longer be able to devote many resources to any but the most gaudily commercial novels at all.) The novel has effectively been severed from its place in the unfolding of literary history and tied instead to the imperatives of capitalism.

But would we have to discard as well the more elastic term "fiction" while we're giving up on "novel" as hopelessly constraining? "Fiction" doesn't just mean "something made up"; it's a signal that, as a prose composition that shouldn't be judged by its conformity to the prescripts of "reality," the work at hand is free to distort, embellish, pare away, redirect, transmute, or transcribe the "real" in whatever way provides the work its integrity, at whatever length, and in whatever style or form. Or at least it could mean this if we didn't insist that "fiction" is synonymous with "story." Much of the "experimental prose writing" of the past few decades has, in fact, moved fiction closer to the practices of poetry (back, as it were, to the origin of prose fiction in poetry), away from narrative toward various other arrangements and rearrangements of language. If this tendency were to result in some hybrid form somewhere between poetry and prose narrative, and were to inspire a new name to solidify its status, I myself wouldn't complain, but I'm content to stick to "fiction" and to challenging unnecessarily narrow conceptions of its scope.

On the one hand, it is easy enough to see how Sara Greenslit's *The Blue of Her Body* (Starcherone Books) could be called a "poet's novel." It makes no effort to "tell a story" in the ponderous, pedestrian mode too often adopted by novelists who come to fiction through an interest in narrative (as exemplified either in other fiction they've read or in movies) rather than an engagement with language and the possibilities of language in creating verbal art and exploring fresh ways of representing experience. There's no facile psychologizing of characters portrayed as "real people," no faux-dramatic plot points, no perfunctorily inserted dialogue straining to be "believable." No exposition, rising and falling action, or contrived resolution of the artificially induced "conflict." Instead, *The Blue of Her Body* is an artfully arranged construction of words, a novel that asks the reader to infer the "story" between the lines of its brief prose passages.

On the other hand, one would not call this novel "poetic" because it indulges in conventional figurative phrasing, lunges after arresting tropes, offers up an ostentatious display of "fine writing." Greenslit's prose is more matter-of-fact, more objectively descriptive:

Her rented house on the edge of town is small, chipped paint, all her own. She likes the windows, large and filled with trees. The morning light on the wood floor reminds her of

her mother's caramel. The dog clatters through the house, pet hair collects in the corners. She no longer needs a vacuum. The broom is easier.

She has chosen birds over the soft other.

A week before her new job at the aviary starts, boxes are left stacked in the living room. She is afraid to put everything away. She fears the open space. She fears the silence she sought, the echoes. She had wanted these things, but now they loom and hover.

She brought only what was hers. But everything reminds her of Kate.

One chapter consists entirely of mostly one-sentence "paragraphs":

Whenever it was summer, I fell into a trance watching leaves on windy days

The sky was cloudless and blue like the spaces inside loved ones

Peregrine hacking box, nestling feather fuss down, eyes and beaks

Mother's summer garden: Asiatic lilies, red as a South American carnival, coneflowers about to unfold

When I was in love, I couldn't imagine any hands but yours. I smelled you while I worked, I saw you in our bed.

When I left, you wouldn't look me in the eye.

I was fool, fool to my mood.

I ate my pills day after day, unable to see.

One could say that the novel unfolds in lines and stanzas, rather than sequential prose paragraphs that disappear in the narrative flow they are meant to serve, although this does not so much make it a kind of prose poem as provoke us into considering the sometimes fine line between prose and verse, fiction and poetry. Why can't a novel proceed via evocative, carefully crafted sentences rather than routine, narrative-bearing paragraphs? At what point does the novelist leave to the poet the care and tending of language at its most fundamental level, the habitation of the word, the phrase, the sentence?

Much of what *The Blue of Her Body* is "about" is expressed in the first-quoted passage above: "She has chosen birds over the soft other." The novel's unnamed narrator has broken up with her lover in the city and moved into the country to work at an aviary. In her isolation, she considers her own history of depression, broods on her relationship with her mother (also a depressive) and her failed relationship with Kate, and takes the opportunity to further cultivate her love of animals. The novel in effect chronicles the narrator's convalescence, concluding with a variation on Emily Dickinson: "Hope is a damaged bird. She heals and then stays. . . ."

The narrator's dilemma and her attempt to work through it, however, are presented almost entirely through inference and suggestion. The story is purely backstory. In addition to the brief expository passages and the declarative sentences (sometimes stated in the third-person, sometimes in first-person), there are fragmentary accounts of the activity in the aviary, haiku-like descriptions of animals and of nature in general, and cumulative bits of information about the various efforts to treat the narrator's depression. While Greenslit thus avoids converting the narrator's circumstances into narrative melodrama, ultimately her novel does present a coherent and convincing, if oblique, portrait of its protagonist's struggle to gather her life into some semblance of order and purpose.

I believe that the future of prose fiction will only lead it closer to a kind of rapprochement with poetry, where the novel began as a splintering-off of narrative from the storytelling mode of epic poetry (just as drama appropriated the "dramatic" in dramatic poetry). Now that film and television (as well as what is called "creative nonfiction") have in turn taken over the storytelling function, at least for the mass audience, fiction's continued relevance, aside from those novels seemingly written with the film adaptation in mind, will perhaps require that it return to its origins in the poet's attention to language per se. Experimental fiction almost always points us in this direction, as challenges to the hegemony of conventional storytelling usually entail a reinvigoration of the resources of language, highlighting the capacity of prose fiction to do something else. *The Blue of Her Body* is an admirable addition to this effort.

One hesitates to "review" a book like Che Elias's *West Virginia* (Six Gallery Press), since the conventions of reviewing require a focus on what a book is "about," where fiction is concerned on recapitulating the "story" (which, unfortunately, most newspaper book reviews

emphasize most directly and at greatest length), as well as summing up the characters and situation motivating the story. Such reviews assume a shared, stable definition of "fiction" or "novel" in which these elements predominate, and to give an account of a particular novel using them is to position this novel—as well as the reviewer—in the recognizable, respectable space devoted to "literary fiction."

When confronted with a work that doesn't itself assume the stability of definition used by book reviewers, that is manifestly unconventional or "experimental," the temptation is to either label it so and let readers reach their own (usually unfavorable) conclusion about whether it's a book they'll want to read or to find a way to describe the work in such a way that it to some degree does incorporate the conventional elements—"the setting is indefinite and shifting, but nevertheless evokes a world of dreamlike dimensions," etc. I myself generally adopt the latter strategy when attempting a review of an unconventional work, although I don't so much try to make the work fit the existing categories as to explicate what it seems to me to be doing that effectively replaces or substitutes for those categories.

Even so, a descriptive review of this sort can still impose an appearance of normative coherence that the work doesn't really express, sometimes actively resists. This kind of review also risks misleading the reader, who might give the book a chance, hoping to find enough of the conventional pleasures to make it worthwhile in those terms only to find it remains alien and "difficult." Such a review does a disservice both to the reader and to the work in question, the latter of which ought somehow to be given the opportunity to be approached on its own terms. The effort to "dumb down" fiction so that it appeals to the widest possible audience is in general misguided and counterproductive, and even an unwitting distortion of a challenging novel's discernible features also does the cause of experimental fiction no favors at all, if anything drives the "ordinary" reader even farther away.

Thus I will not attempt to recover *West Virginia* for the casual reader who knows he/she will not find enjoyable a novel--albeit a relatively brief one--whose prose style might be captured in a passage such as this:

Now I can only listen to the smile that killed me before, to the time that ran away and the days where they say they've all left me. And the time now, the room indefinite, and the room now, the place where you were next to me, and the room said, well, you got

some things you can think of being the only ones that exist, and the days being the only men you can say were human. And the people, down to the point in Wheeling, they will all say yes, we're those people, and the men, too, the ones who killed us, and the ones who only held one thing against us in Wheeling, there was just a time when we knew they were all through. And I had to walk down steps in Wheeling too, think I crossed halls and fields as well, guess these are the worst people I know, guess that I should get used to them.

I enjoyed *West Virginia*—in fact, read it twice—but I can't finally say what the book is "about," although the above-quoted passage does invoke several of the motifs and images that recur throughout the text: a room, "the people," an incident in Wheeling, which may have involved a rape, a killing, child abuse, a fire. There are several named characters, Andy Reed, Amber Reed (the latter of whom may have betrayed the former), Lynda Cleary, but they are hardly "characters" of the sort most readers expect to find in novels. They are essentially the locus around which the motifs and images swirl in a montage of repetition and variation. The effect is often hypnotic and sometimes dramatic—a revelation of sorts seems on the verge of materializing only to become lost again in the swirl—and the reader willing to suspend expectations of character continuity, of narrative "arc" and resolution, of style as a source of information, with the occasional rhetorical flourish, might well find the pull of language itself an adequate substitute for the narrative devices most writers still cling to.

But I don't think many readers will be willing to suspend these expectations, especially not as radically as a work like *West Virginia* solicits us to do. Those who consider the usual narrative devices to be the essence of fiction would surely put the book aside in confusion after a page or two. To some extent one might say that *West Virginia* is a "novel" that takes "psychological realism" to its most insular extreme: We are trapped inside the memories and/or perceptions of the narrator, who is unable to exteriorize these perceptions into what most readers of fiction would consider appropriate discourse. If you want access to "mind" in its rawest precincts, this is it. I don't think too many readers, even readers ostensibly committed to realism, would find much solace in this, either. Nor would it suffice to call this text "poetry" rather than fiction (a hybrid, perhaps), as most readers already avoid poetry because it's "just language," arranged in ways these readers don't "get." To urge such readers to try *West Virginia* because it's

in some deep sense "poetic" might get us over the obstacle posed by "difficulty" in fiction but doesn't get us over the remaining obstacle that poses the poetic as difficult in the first place.

The Oulipian strategy behind Paul Griffiths' short novel *Let Me Tell You* (Reality Street) is made plain on the book's back cover:

So: now I come to speak. At last. I will tell you all I know.... These are the words of Ophelia at the beginning of this short novel: literally her words, in that her narrative is composed entirely of the vocabulary she is allotted in Hamlet.

If it is true that fictional characters are literally no more than the words they are assigned in the text that gives them "life," *Let Me Tell You* illustrates that those words can go a long way. Through creative reshuffling and inconspicuous repetition Griffiths takes the fewer than 500 words Ophelia speaks (or sings) in Hamlet and fashions them into a convincing first-person account (with an interpolated play, several sonnets, and a soliloquy or two) of Ophelia's life before the events portrayed in the play, although in the words following those quoted on the back cover, she in effect acknowledges the difficulties of being liberated from the script she has until now always followed and that has set the terms of her existence:

. . .I was deceived to think I could not do this. I have the powers; I take them here. I have the right. I have the means. My words may be poor, but they will have to do.

What words do I have? Where do they come from? How is it that I speak?

Very rarely do Ophelia's words seem obviously contrived to fit the new circumstances of their utterance, and as the text unfolds Ophelia convinces us she has the right and the means to speak for herself and that the origin of her words is secondary to her often affecting repossession of them.

At the same time, one can never quite "lose" oneself in Ophelia's narrative. Its origin in the recycling of a precursor text, one that is no doubt well known to most who might read *Let Me Tell You*, must remain a manifest reality in the experience of reading the novel; it has very little claim on our attention, in fact, independent of its source in Hamlet and in Ophelia's role in the play. Admiration for the skill with which Griffiths rings changes on those 500 words is an

unavoidable part of the reading experience. Indeed, the pleasure one takes in a work like *Let Me Tell You* is precisely the pleasure of witnessing in a particularly intent way the way a writer is using a structural device to bring character and event into existence.

In an interview with Mark Thwaite (*Ready Steady Book*), Griffiths himself comments on the utility of his structural device: "If you keep to some form—some command, if you like—you come up with things you could never come up with by yourself." Griffiths' initial decision to write under the "constraint" imposed by sticking to the text of Hamlet--what he has "come up with" by himself--allows him, or forces him, to invest form with the duty to produce "content." This is what fiction writers who fancy themselves as having something "to say" are rarely able to do. For them, form is mostly an inconvenience, the bare minimal means to be enlisted in the grander act of saying something. Their work is thus formally unimaginative and, usually, thematically banal. In *Let Me Tell You*, Griffiths trusts that his form will effect its own kind of "saying." That it results in a character with emotional depth and a narrative that plausibly develops a life story about which Hamlet is otherwise silent only validates the wisdom of the author's commitment to that form.

Ultimately, *Let Me Tell You* seems to me one of those experimental fictions that straddles the line between narrative fiction and poetry, although by "poetry" we now mean only one of the modes that was included under that heading prior to the emergence of the novel as a separate literary form ("prose fiction"). Before then, "poetry" essentially included all modes of literary expression. If it is often the case that, as Brian Phillips has it, poets who write fiction often tend to exhibit a "powerful narrative impulse" that "refashions fiction with fiction's own materials, not with transposed notes of poetry" (*Poetry*), writers of fiction who challenge what Phillips calls "narrative straightforwardness" often create works of "prose fiction" that remain more or less identifiably in "prose"—they are not "poetic" because they indulge in flights of figurative language similar to what is found in an older mode of lyric poetry—but that challenge the equation of "fiction" with narrative, refashioning fiction by aligning it with the structural imperatives of poetry but leaving the "lyrical" elements of verse aside. Such a move still puts more emphasis on language, as the reader must focus more squarely on the writer's effort to turn prose to account for purposes other than "telling a story," but it represents an approach to prose fiction that might re-establish it as a "poetic" genre alongside lyric poetry.

Near the end of *Let Me Tell You*, Ophelia, on the cusp of her fatal madness, laments to an absent Hamlet that "I cannot tell you what I most wish to tell you, for there are no words for what I would say." This is at the same time a playful reference to the conditions imposed on Ophelia's speech by the text itself and an honest statement of the unavoidable conditions imposed upon all poetic saying: the urge to express is quickly confronted with the actuality that all such expression will be incomplete, that the substance of what would be said is always escaping between the words. But, as *Let Me Tell You* demonstrates, what can be done with those words is sometimes almost sufficient compensation.

### **Doing Something**

John Ligan maintains that

The *Recognitions* and *JR*. . . are not books that function as the literary equivalent of a player piano. They are not "hot media," to borrow one buzz term that Gaddis quoted in his National Book Award acceptance speech for *A Frolic of His Own*. Rather, they require effort, metaphorical reading between the lines, and ideally a little research, as evidenced by the encyclopedic website *The Gaddis Annotations*, devoted to annotations of the novels. They require, in other words, the readerly equivalent of a Protestant work ethic. (*The Quarterly Conversation*)

Gaddis is indeed one of those postmodern/experimental writers whose writing is considered "difficult," requiring more effort than the casual reader is likely to expend. While it is true that books like *The Recognitions*, *JR*, and *A Frolic of His Own* call for a special kind of attention on the reader's part, an attention capable of reading not just between but around the lines of dialogue that comprise so much of these novels, I don't believe that referring to the act of reading Gaddis as encompassing "the readerly equivalent of a Protestant work ethic" is ultimately very useful or very accurate in commending his novels to potential readers. It suggests that, as the "last Protestant," his "work" privileges moral critique over art, is more ponderous matter than engaging aesthetic manner, and I don't think either is true.

Lingan quotes Gaddis himself protesting this austere view of his fiction:

. . .I think the reader gets satisfaction out of participating in, collaborating, if you will, with the writer, so that it ends up being between the reader and the page. . . . Why did we invent the printing press. Why do we, why are we literate? Because of the pleasure of being all alone, with a book, is one of the greatest pleasures.

The perception of Gaddis as a moralist depends largely on construing his fiction as essentially a kind of satire of what Lingan calls "postwar industrial American culture." There is undeniably an element of satire in Gaddis's novels, but in my view to settle for that in responding to these novels is to settle for the least possible interest one might find in them. Satire is ultimately a one-channel mode of discourse: the satirist mocks, and the reader is duly edified. There is no "participation," no "collaboration" on the reader's part--except to agree that the subject at hand is worth mocking. When Gaddis says that what his fiction offers "ends up being between the reader and the page," he is asserting that it provides a much more complex reading experience, one that is itself the source of "pleasure" and that transcends the lesser value to be found in satirical correction.

However much fiction like Gaddis's challenges some complacent reading habits, it does so in the service of expanding our capacity to read abundantly, and thus our capacity to take "pleasure" in what we read. An assumption that seems to be held by those who decry "difficulty" in fiction is that the ideal reading experience is one in which little is asked of the reader, who judges the value of the experience by how quickly we can get from one sentence to another, one paragraph to the next. A reading experience is worthwhile if reading is in effect concealed, the reader made to forget that words are interceding between him/her and the "story," that a work of fiction is ultimately a verbal composition the patterns and internal logic of which are more immediately the object of the reader's engagement than any "content."

But I think many readers implicitly reject this notion of reading, and many others could be led to do so if confronted by a text whose initial difficulty—which is to say unfamiliarity—is eventually ameliorated by the work itself, which teaches us how to read it as we go, and which proves to be as aesthetically pleasing as any more transparently "enjoyable" conventional narrative—indeed, perhaps even more so, since this pleasure has been earned more rigorously. Gaddis's novels are of this type, it seems to me, and fans of these novels are not just responding

to their invocation of a "work ethic" but are finding the work exerted amply rewarded by the subtleties of effect that become available and by the very heightened attention that makes these effects more visible. Both the volubility evoked by Gaddis's emphasis on talk and the silences such talk obscures, the reader asked to make those silences speak, act to make Gaddis's fiction very active, and thus very entertaining in its own way. This is what makes his fiction appealing to most of his readers, not the prospect of gaining glory through hard work.

In his book on the work of Ronald Sukenick and Raymond Federman (*The Novel as Performance* 1986), Jerzy Kutnik comments:

The rise of Action Painting, the Happening, The Living Theatre, John Cage's experimental music and Charles Olson's "projective verse," to name only a few examples of performance-oriented works of the 1950s and 1960s, forced many aestheticians to review the underlying assumptions of classic aesthetics. Performance was now seen as a category which could be made relevant to all art forms. Indeed, for the postmodern artist, performance was shown to be an essential element of all creative activity, a fundamental value in itself, an indispensable, even unavoidable, ingredient of the work of art.

But it should also be noted that performance is not something that, as a result of certain historical developments, was added as a new element in the creative process, for it had always been there, though ignored or suppressed. What was added, rather, was the awareness that all art is always performatory, that it not so much says something about reality, but, by its occurrence and presence, does something as a reality in its own right. .

..

Federman is a writer who directly and self-consciously engages in a "performance" strategy—anyone who picks up *Double or Nothing* or *Take It or Leave It* will immediately encounter Federman's notational performance as his text spreads itself across and down the page in seemingly (but not actually) chaotic arrangements—but ultimately his work forces us (or should force us) to consider the extent to which the writing of fiction and poetry is always, as Kutznick points out, about doing rather than saying. While few fiction writers play around with "text" as explicitly as Federman (or Sukenick), poets have certainly always done so; thus, what

Kutznick is really getting at it that the work of writers like Federman insists that fiction as well be a mode in which the writer "does something as a reality."

The great majority of literary fiction is overwhelmingly dedicated to the task of saying something. Not only do most writers of such fiction have very little to say in the first place—the "theme" of most literary novels can usually be reduced to platitudes—but whatever "performance" that is involved in the use of the elements of fiction is dull and familiar, at best focused on forwarding the theme most expeditiously. Much experimental fiction is also dull and familiar, reworkings of previous, and better, performances of other experimentalists. However, the departures from the norm to be found in even the most perfunctory experimental fiction does at least continue to remind us that it is possible to conceive of fiction as a practice in which form and language are malleable, the medium through which the writer may offer a fresh and distinctive performance.

Even from within the confines of conventional practices it is possible to write fiction that is more doing than saying. The enactment of point of view and narrative structure affords ample opportunities for "performance-oriented work," and the best fiction has always taken advantage of these opportunities. Style also can be an "ingredient" in the performance of literary art, as long as style is regarded as something other than, something beyond, "pretty writing" of the usual kind. Unfortunately, most attempts to manipulate these elements that I read (or start to read) are again usually carried out in the name of more colorfully reinforcing theme, not as a performance seeking out its own limits or capable of sustaining interest in and of itself.

As Larry McCaffery puts it in his foreword to Kutznick's book, writers like Sukenick and Federman show us that the most challenging fiction "seeks to be an experience for its own sake." This is precisely what John Dewey, the foremost proponent of "art as experience," had in mind when he extolled the achievement of "adventurous" art. Like all other such art, adventurous fiction enhances experience by encouraging us to attend more closely to performance, in the best cases a performance unlike any we've experienced before.

### **What Novels Are For**

In his review of Richard Powers's *The Echo Maker*, William Deresiewicz exclaims that Powers "has been called an experimental novelist for some reason, but aside from a predilection for double plots, his approach to narrative is quite conventional, even naïve."

On the other hand, "*The Echo Maker* will tell you a great deal about neuroscience, environmental degradation and the migratory patterns of the sandhill crane, but like Powers's other novels, it won't tell you much about what its laboriously accumulated information and elaborately constructed concepts have to do with what it means to be alive at a particular time and place, or what it feels like," which, pronounces Deresiewicz, "is what novels are for."

Thus Deresiewicz the narrative theorist finds Powers insufficiently attuned to the possibilities of formal experiment, while Deresiewicz the "naïve" thematic critic, preoccupied with "content," faults him for not focusing on "what it means to be alive at a particular time and place." It's a pretty good critical trick, to censure a novelist both for overemphasizing his "elaborately constructed concepts" and not emphasizing them enough. Powers excessively stresses "head" and "heart," all at the same time!

Always beware of literary critics who come to inform us what novels really "are for." It's the act of someone who usually doesn't much care about the artistic possibilities of literary forms at all but has decided that some works pass muster according to the critic's own selective criteria. More often than not, we're told that fiction ought to perform the function Deresiewicz appears to favor (we'll assume he's really more a partisan of the heart), that it reveal something about what it means "to be human," but whether the mold to which novels should conform is formal or thematic, a conventionalizing of manner or matter, the effect is to reinforce the notion that "the novel" is a single entity, a fixed form, something that can produce either genuine copies of itself or else some aberrational version, a mere literary pretender in prose.

The processes of self-replication are, of course, at the heart of what I think is still Powers's best novel, *The Gold Bug Variations*, embedded in its very formal/narrative arrangement as it tells, in part, the story of the uncovering of the double helix structure of the DNA molecule. But what the novel suggests, in the intertwining of this story with the present-day story of the uncovering of a now-forgotten scientist's role in the earlier uncovering, is that the meeting-up of a few basic, fairly simple parts (the DNA proteins) can result in continually new, potentially infinite combinations, resulting in both varied human organisms and, as applied

analogically and metaphorically to the writing of fiction, fresh and surprising formal compositions. ("Composition" being further implicated in the aesthetic design of *The Gold Bug Variations* through the associations the scientist, Stuart Ressler, himself makes between the DNA strand and the musicals scores of J.S. Bach.) For the most part, Powers's subsequent books have attempted to explore the possibilities of this alternative view of "storytelling," through which stories are linked to other stories, all such stories themselves composed of the additional, previous stories making them what they are.

I actually agree with Deresiewicz that *The Time of Our Singing*, Powers's previous novel, "represented something of a departure" from his established practice (and he surely ought not to be criticized simply for attempting something different, at least in the context of his own developing career). I also agree that it suffers from didacticism and sentimentality, although one would think that Deresiewicz would acknowledge that these flaws mostly originate from the effort to fill the prescription he himself is issuing, to depict "what it feels like" to "be alive at a particular time and place," but he instead only affirms what we long-term Powers readers already know: that his talent does not lend itself to the conventional tasks of "fleshing out" his characters in a manner acceptable to the critic looking for "real people" in fiction rather than formal ingenuity or stylistic brilliance. Since Deresiewicz concludes that the moralizing of *The Time of Our Singing* "make[s] you feel as if you were being jabbed in the chest by someone on the verge of bursting into tears," it would seem only logical to allow that Powers might perhaps better serve his talent by sticking to those "elaborately constructed concepts" featured in his other novels.

How surprising, then, that after correctly pointing out the weaknesses of *The Time of Our Singing*, Deresiewicz tells us that "*The Echo Maker* marks. . . a further departure in promising directions," even if it does ultimately signal "the return of old problems." Ultimately, Deresiewicz's principal criticism of Powers's work is the same criticism that has periodically been made since the publication of his first book, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*. It's too cerebral, too interested in "ideas" at the expense of characters and plots, too "cold." That Powers has now chosen to tell stories that hew "closer than before to the emotional bone" would seem to take care of most of these problems, but no, the ideas still "bury the story that's meant to bear them." As it happens, I share the view that *The Echo Maker* continues the "departure" begun

by *The Time of Our Singing*, but I think it's a lamentable development and that, far from weighing down "the story" in *The Echo Maker*, the ideas are borne much too lightly, are too facilely incorporated into a story that otherwise doesn't really convey much interest.

Part of the problem with *The Echo Maker* flows from the narrative technique Powers employs, quite consciously, as it turns out: ". . .my technique was what some scholars of narrative have called double voicing. Every section of the book (until a few passages at the end) is so closely focalized through Mark, Karin, or Weber that even the narration of material event is voiced entirely through their cognitive process: the world is nothing more than what these sensibilities assemble, without any appeal to outside authority" (*"Echo Maker Roundtable," The Return of the Reluctant*) In other words, Powers has chosen a more or less conventional version of "psychological realism." Everything that happens is filtered through the consciousness and understanding of one of the three characters; their world is presented to us as they perceive it through their ongoing experiences.

To the extent that the novel is focused thematically on the way in which "reality" is affected if not determined by our own brain states, this strategy makes perfect sense, but it does make it necessary that the ideas of neuroscience, which Powers certainly does seem interested in explicating, are offered up in a version of the "infodump," scattered around as lumps of Gerald Weber's "cognitive process." The conceit of "misrecognition," or other potential tropes derived from neuroanalysis, are never really integrated into the novel's narrative scheme, made into a complementary formal device in the way *The Gold Bug Variation* or *Gain* uses the double helix. The ideas are talked about, reflected upon, but never really transformed into aesthetic effects that make the novel interesting as something other than a forum for discussion of the fragility of neural networks.

A secondary consequence of this is that *The Echo Maker* abandons Powers's previous strategy of transposing events in time and space, hitching together seemingly unrelated stories (as in *Plowing the Dark*, say), to produce unanticipated correspondences. Paradoxically, *The Echo Maker* lacks this "echoing" effect. I could only read it as a disappointingly orthodox psychological study of three characters confronting crisis and emerging changed but more or less intact. The characters themselves are not really interesting enough to carry the weight of a 450-page narrative, and the occasional lyric interludes (some of which are nevertheless very

impressive, especially those devoted to the sandhill cranes and their own environmental crisis) cannot make up for the novel's overall aesthetic lassitude. I found myself struggling to get through some of this book, which has never before happened in my reading of Richard Powers.

In his conclusion, Deresiewicz asserts that "Instead of letting the story speak, [Powers] is the only one who speaks. Instead of locating meaning in experience, he locates it in ideas. But novels should test ideas, not surrender to them." This only demonstrates that Deresiewicz is unable to make even the most basic kind of distinction between author and character, between characters who "speak" and authors who merely allow them to do so. He is unable to appreciate the aesthetic choice Powers has made to evoke a world that is "nothing more than what these sensibilities assemble, without any appeal to outside authority." If the characters in a novel discuss "ideas," by Deresiewicz's reckoning those ideas are perforce the author's ideas. Further, he apparently doesn't recognize that in *The Echo Maker* Powers is precisely "testing ideas," and that this is the reason it ultimately fails to satisfy. Powers is engaged in "locating meaning in experience," it's just that the experiences being rendered are littered with unprocessed ideas, leaving both the experiences and the ideas inadequately shaped into a compelling aesthetic whole.

### **Define Your Terms**

According to Alan Massie:

One may make a distinction between two types of novel: the self-enclosed and the open. . .By the self-enclosed novel, I mean one which makes no reference — or almost no reference — to anything beyond itself. It belongs to its age of course, but it does not appear to be set in time. Time naturally passes, as it must in a narrative, but there is no suggestion that events in the world of fact beyond the novel might impinge on its characters, influence their behaviour, or affect the course of their lives. The doors of the novel are closed against the winds of the world.

I really have no idea what it would mean for a work of fiction to make "no reference. . .to anything beyond itself." It would at the least require that such a work be written in an invented language—and thus have no audience beyond the author him/herself—a language that would carry none of the "references" that English carries simply by being a historical language spoken by billions of people. And even if such a thing could be done, the invented language itself would have to make no reference to the "world of fact" its author would nonetheless still inhabit, presumably focusing entirely on an alternative "world of fact" that somehow only the author has ever experienced. This would indeed be quite a feat of self-isolation, and the resulting fiction would be cordoned off both from the actual "world of fact" and everyone inhabiting it, but the notion that some writers do this, or try to do it, is, of course, resolutely absurd.

In suggesting that certain fiction does "not appear to be set in time," Massie must mean that it does not directly refer to either current events as described by journalists or past events as related by historians. There's no other way to understand the bizarre claim that some novels want to deny "that events in the world of fact beyond the novel might impinge on its characters." Since all humans live in the world of fact and are subjected to the "winds of the world," and since writers are themselves human, the stories and novels they write bear all the marks of that wind, even if some writers are less concerned with charting it directly than other writers.

Presumably a story such as Donald Barthelme's "The Balloon" is the sort of thing Massie has in mind (although he gives no examples at all of the sort of thing he does have in mind). Or a novel such as Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association*. "The Balloon" is an obvious fantasy, in which an infinitely expandable hot-air balloon is inflated until it spreads out and covers all of New York City. The story records the way the city's people adapt to and come to understand this "phenomenon": "There was a certain amount of argumentation about the 'meaning' of the balloon; this subsided, because we have learned not to insist on meanings, and they are rarely even looked for now, except in cases involving the simplest, safest phenomena." Massie no doubt objects to the way in which a "self-enclosed" fiction like this casts doubt on "meaning," portrays meaning as something always up for grabs. But who could assert that this story rejects "the world of fact"? It is all about New York City, a "fact" that informs every line and paragraph. It's about New Yorkers, whose residence in the city most assuredly "influence[s] their behaviour" and "affect[s] the course of their lives."

*The Universal Baseball Association* is about as "self-enclosed" as a novel can get. It takes place completely inside the head of a man playing a game of fantasy baseball. He has created an entire league and invested it with a glorious past. He further invests it with a life-and-death significance that culminates in a horrible accident that tears his world (the baseball world) apart. Ultimately the novel is a kind of meditation on the interplay of fantasy and reality (the "world of fact" represented most obviously by baseball, a very real pastime in whose intricacies millions of people do become entangled), but it does subject its protagonist, however indirectly, to the "winds of the world." Those winds "impinge" on J. Henry Waugh in a particularly destructive way. He wants to be the God of his invented world, but the real world of chance and human imperfection intervenes nevertheless.

Massie essentially uses the distinction he draws between "self-enclosed" and "open" fiction to marginalize the former as "merely literary," while lauding the former for its willingness to "take on" history, "the world of harsh political fact which, working in conjunction with personal qualities, forms or deforms men's lives." In Massie's view, the open novel "was invented more or less by Walter Scott," whose novels for Massie are exemplars of the kind of fiction that is "open" to the currents of reality. But I think he has it exactly backward. It's fiction like "The Balloon" and UBA that depicts the forces of "contingency" through exercises of the imagination, while writers of historical and "documentary" fiction are stuck with what was and what is. Self-enclosed fiction is actually "open" to any and all kinds of aesthetic innovation, while the "open" novel is closed to all but the most conventional approaches that allow the "world of fact" to predominate.

The important distinction to be made is not between "self-enclosed" and "open" works of fiction. It is between those works whose authors think of fiction as primarily an aesthetic form and those who think of it as a form of commentary on human behavior or the state of the world, on "the world of harsh political fact" or some such thing. If you want to think of the latter kind of fiction as more "open," more "engaged" with facts and thus more relevant to your concerns as a reader, so be it. Some readers are impatient with art and want their novels to be like sociology only with stories, or like journalism with better stories. But this is no justification for defining a whole other kind of fiction almost out of existence and distorting it beyond recognition in the process.

It's good that Delia Sherman and Theodora Goss print at the end of the book an interview with themselves about *Interfictions*, an "anthology of interstitial writing" they've edited and published through the Interstitial Arts Foundation. Otherwise I, for one, would have finished the book, including its nominal "Introduction," without having much of an idea what either "interfiction" or "interstitial" are supposed to mean.

How does an interfiction differ from other literary works that also manifest a high degree of "indeterminacy" but no one ever thought to call "interstitial."? (In my opinion, all great works of literature are indeterminate in this way. It's what makes them literature in the first place, And Heinz Insu Fenkl's invocation in his introduction to the volume of "a retroactive historical trajectory," by which literary works of the past are transformed by new works, seems to me just a restatement of T.S. Eliot's notion that "The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them," which applies to all new works, interstitial or otherwise.) Does it merely have to be "transgressive" of genre boundaries? Where do we mark those boundaries, anyway? And what exactly is a "typical literary work"? It always seems to me that when partisans of genre fiction criticize "literary fiction," they usually associate such fiction with "realism," against which all genre fiction transgresses in one way or another. But is *Finnegans Wake* realism? *The Unnameable*? *Catch-22*? *Infinite Jest*? If not, do they also qualify as interstitial or as interfictions? Are or they just not "typical" literary fiction? (In which case the whole notion of "transgression" becomes just a convenient buzzword. It only applies to the most rigidly conventional or the most really boring literary fiction.)

Sherman and Goss clear things up a little bit in their interview. "An interstitial story does not hew closely to any one set of recognizable genre conventions," says Sherman. This makes it sound like an "interfiction" blurs the lines between genres, although from my reading of the stories collected in the book it seems that most of them revolve around a fantasy/science fiction/horror axis that, as an only occasional reader of these genres, I often have trouble seeing as radically opposed forms that need bridging or boundary-smashing. But then Sherman says of one of the stories ("Climbing Redemption Mountain," a kind of cross-breeding of John Bunyan and Erskine Caldwell) that "If I tried to read it as realism, I ran up against the fact that the writer

had made up this world out of whole cloth. If I tried to read it as a fantasy, I ran up against the story's lack of recognizable genre markers." This suggests that the real "boundary" the book wants to question is again that between "realism" (literary fiction) and genre fiction with its identifiable "markers."

Reading the book as a collection of stories that are "willfully transgressive in a noncategorical way," as Fenkl put it, did me no good at all. Notwithstanding that most of them were "transgressive," when at all, in rather tepid and formally uninteresting ways, I simply was unable to understand what they shared in common that made them "interfictions." The editors' narrowing of focus to the contest between "realism" and genre fiction did allow me to reexamine the stories in this more concentrated light. (Although not all of them. Apparently are interstitial because they portray characters who feel "in-between" or because their authors themselves feel this way, as revealed in the author's comments appended to each story.) But ultimately I am still puzzled by Sherman's explanation of how it is that interstitial fiction avoids "any one set of recognizable genre conventions." She continues:

An interstitial story does interesting things with narrative and style. An interstitial story takes artistic chances. . .[E]very interstitial story defines itself as unlike any other. . .The best interstitial work. . .demands that you read it on its own terms, but it also gives you the tools to do so.

I am hard-pressed to understand how these characteristics of "interfiction" distinguish it from other, non-genre, "experimental" fiction that also "does interesting things with narrative and style" and "takes artistic chances." Experimental fiction (which ultimately I would have to say is a part of "literary fiction," representing its vanguard in exploring the edges of the literary) precisely "demands that you read it on its own terms" rather than according to pre-established conventions. If interfictions are just versions of experimental fiction, why coin this additional term to describe them? If there is some significant difference between interstitial and experimental fiction, something that has to do with genre, why not be more specific and delineate exactly what that is rather than fall back on the usual language about taking artistic chances, etc.? Or is the purported conflict between realism and genre really meant to blur the fact that plenty of writers, writers who are otherwise thought of as "literary," have already deconstructed this opposition and created work demanding "you read it on its own terms"?

On the other hand, if the stories in this anthology were to be presented as simply "experimental," without the accompanying claims that they alone challenge the "typical literary work," it's not likely they could stand up to scrutiny. Adrienne Martini's review of the book in the Baltimore *City Paper* asserts that the first story, Christopher Barzak's "What We Know About the Lost Families of ----- House," "feels wholly unique, as if it is rewriting our expectations about what kind of story it is even as we're reading it," but it's really just a haunted-house variation on Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily." The second story, Leslie What's "Post Hoc," about a woman who tries to mail herself to her estranged boyfriend, strikes me as standard-issue surrealism, with perhaps a chick-lit chaser. (I guess this might itself be "interstitial," but it's not very interesting.) "Climbing Redemption Mountain" doesn't really go anywhere with its blending of allegory and rural Gothic except to a mountaintop rendezvous with banality.

Of the rest of the stories, Matthew Cheney's "A Map of the Everywhere" is pleasantly odd and Colin Greenland's "Timothy" has an amusing premise (a woman's cat is transformed into a man) that unfortunately doesn't go anywhere. Most of the rest are forgettable exercises conducted on what seem (to me) familiar science fiction/fantasy terrain. Some of them, such as Anna Tambour's "The Shoe in SHOES' Window" and Catherynne M. Valente's "A Dirge for Prester John" are essentially unreadable, full of pretentious declamations substituting for narrative: "Truly, where chaos reigns, even at night, nonsense and evasion shine where people look for straightforwardness, but where they look for inspiration, something beyond the realm of daily existence, they are then shown only things, and who can feed his soul with that?" Too many of the stories, in fact, are like this, straining after Meaning where some "merely literary" formal and stylistic pleasures would go a long way toward deflating the pomposity.

Karen Jordan Allen's "Alternate Anxieties" is the best story in the book, but it also only highlights the book's overriding weakness. The story's protagonist is a writer attempting to write a book about "mortal anxiety," which also appears to be the defining condition of the writer's own life. The story is presented mostly as a series of notes and brief episodes to be incorporated into the book. In the course of accumulating these notes, the protagonist latches on to the "alternate universe theory," according to which "events may have more than one outcome, with each outcome spinning off its own universe, so that millions of universes are generated each day. . . ." This notion then leads the author-protagonist to further reflection on the events in her own

life (are there other universes in which her actions led to different outcomes?) as well as on the capacity of fiction to embody such alternate universes. It's a compelling enough metafiction, but again I can't see what calling it an "interfiction" instead of a metafiction accomplishes. Nor is it that clear why it would even be categorized as science fiction, despite the toying with the theory of alternate universes. It's a pretty good story, and trying to espy its "interstitial" qualities adds nothing to its appeal.

In her review, Martini asserts that "The stories in *Interfictions* operate. . .by existing in the spaces between what we want our genres to be." Speaking for myself, I don't want my genres to be anything but sources of interesting fiction. When it comes down to it, I don't really even want genres, just worthwhile stories and novels. Whether you want to call them "interstitial" or "metafictional" or "postmodern" doesn't really matter much, and I suppose by that principle calling a group of stories "interfictions" isn't finally that objectionable, although in this case it is a needlessly byzantine way of arriving at the conclusion that a good piece of fiction "does interesting things with narrative and style."

The most serious obstacle to taking the anthology *30 Under 30* as an illuminating introduction to "innovative fiction by younger writers" is that, literally, it provides no introduction. The thirty stories are presented to us without context, with no preliminary statement by the editors, Blake Butler and Lily Hoang, of the principles of selection they used, no discussion of the variety of experiment or innovation the reader will encounter, no indication of the logic, if any, behind the order of the stories' presentation. Essentially we are asked to make sense of the anthology as we can, without the assistance of those who presumably believed it was important that an anthology of innovative fiction by writers under 30 be published in the first place.

Perhaps this is deliberate. Perhaps the editors hoped to let the stories, in effect, speak for themselves. As a gesture in support of the integrity of the selections included, this might be laudable enough, but arguably any anthology of innovative or "experimental" fiction requires some advice and direction for readers not already sympathetic with its ambitions, perhaps even intimidated by it, and it would seem even more important to provide some guidance for a book such as *30 Under 30*, which in concentrating on experimental fiction by a rising cohort of writers

brings up several implicit questions: How does this new cohort understand the concept of “innovation” as applied to works of fiction? How do the writers situate themselves in relation to previous innovative writers? What new avenues of exploration do these stories open up for fiction writers who might in turn be inspired by them?

An editor’s introduction that addressed these questions certainly could not answer them definitively, but an awareness that such questions naturally suggest themselves in confronting a book like *30 Under 30* surely would help the reader consider the selections attentively, in a way that rewards the effort. Most of all, it would help the writers whose work has been selected, since their fiction could be judged in its appropriate context, in relation to both the work of their predecessors in the development of self-consciously innovative fiction and the other writers included in the anthology. Instead, the reader is left to apply whatever connotations of “innovative” he/she already brings to the stories, if any, which potentially leaves some of the selections incomprehensible to some readers and does nothing to remind us that connotations of “innovation” and “experiment” must remain in flux, that expectations of fiction evolve along with the form itself.

Moreover, readers who do expect that an anthology of innovative fiction will exhibit significant formal innovation will probably be disappointed with *30 Under 30*. On the whole, the selections included are quite heavy on narrative, even old-fashioned linear narrative, however surreal or fantastic the events chronicled often are. Indeed, surrealism or a fantasy-inflected version of absurdism seems the dominant strategy in these selections, but it is a fabular, allegorical mode of surrealism in which the reader’s attention is consistently oriented toward story. Many of these stories have strong affinities to the work of Aimee Bender and George Saunders, who, to judge by this anthology, may be among current writers the strongest influence on the rising generation of “younger writers,” although some of the fiction in *30 Under 30* subtracts the essentially whimsical humor that characterizes Bender’s and Saunders’s work, making these surrealistic fables somewhat starker in their distortions of reality.

Another inspiration for the flights from reality that mark most of these stories seems to be various narrative forms of popular culture: movies, tv, comic books, perhaps video games. Matt Bell’s “Jumpman vs. the Ape,” for example, recapitulates King Kong by way of DC comics, its protagonist attempting to himself ascend the structure the ape is climbing in order to rescue the

heroine from its clutches. The story in substance extracts the melodrama of heroism and victimization from such popular genres, but, in a move reminiscent of *Groundhog Day*, Bell portrays Jumpman failing in his goal of winning the girl and being compelled to repeat the quest again and again. Jaclyn Dwyer's "Biography of a Porn Star" is an affecting if askew account of the life and work of the title character, which portrays them both as decidedly unglamorous. Each of these stories takes familiar narrative types and twists or inverts them, a strategy that works well enough in these two stories but that surely now isn't very "innovative," previously employed as it was by such "postmodern" writers as Donald Barthleme and Robert Coover. The same thing might be said of Devin Gribbons's "A Short Story," which is an enjoyable enough metafiction (its first-level "plot" revolving around the development of a device that destroys souls) but can't really be said to much extend the possibilities of metafiction beyond those already established by the postmodernists.

There are some stories in *30 Under 30* that do obviously experiment with form. Zach Dodson's "I Write to You" is presented in the form of a familiar Mead Composition book (complete with cover and appropriately lined pages), but finally there's really nothing about the substance of the story—a series of typically disconnected musings by an unidentified diarist---that really is either enhanced by the formal framework or seems to require it. Adam Good is described in the contributor's notes as an "interdisciplinary artist" rather than a fiction writer, and while his "Guided Walks" might provoke some curiosity as a "word installation," it doesn't seem likely as a model for future development in fiction. The most interesting and successful of these formally unconventional stories is Todd Seabrook's "When Robin Hood Fell with an Arrow Through His Heart," which relates the death of Robin Hood and the demise of the Merry Men through a first-person account by one of the latter that observes no typographical rules or boundaries. But in this case the ortho/typographical idiosyncrasies have an aesthetically justified and reinforcing function, as the wandering prose and depleted verbal resources mirror the lost focus and declining powers of the Merry Men in the wake of Robin Hood's death.

A kind of lassitude and lack of focus lingers thematically over much of this collection. In addition to the frustrations of purpose conveyed by the narratives of stories like Bell's and Seabrook's, many if not most of the selections portray characters who are at loose ends, disconnected from their environment, alienated and aimless. In many ways the prevailing

surrealism seems a way of emphasizing such disconnections and alienation, but the loss of direction is perhaps most directly represented in the extreme fragmentation characteristic of the selected work as a whole. If narrative is emphasized in this work, it is not narrative continuously presented. But, again, fragmentation cannot really any longer be considered particularly innovative as a narrative strategy, however much it does seem appropriate to the characters, setting, and circumstances of specific stories and to the worldview that emerges from the collection in general. Michael Stewart's "Sister," comprised of twenty-two very brief "chapters" (in an eight-page story) is just one example of a story unfolding in fragments, although its structure particularly highlights its radical compression. The cumulative impression left by stories like this is that even though the need to tell stories remains, the possibility of telling them straight—either through the assumptions of realism or through sustained narrative exposition—seems to have been exhausted, no longer among the resources currently available to the writer of fiction.

Compression" is at work in *30 Under 30* in other ways as well, specifically in the form of "shorts" or "flash fiction." Several of the included writers are represented by a series of such pieces, including James Yeh and Joshua Cohen. Yeh's pieces are untypically (for this volume) realistic sketches that seem carefully composed for the "flash" form. Although it is tempting to find continuities between the five short pieces that would allow considering them as a larger whole, finally they are probably related only by the first-person narrator common to each. Cohen's seven shorts seem even less integrated, but since Cohen is arguably the most accomplished innovative writer included in this book, and since his already published work has been of the maximalist rather than the minimalist variety, it is also tempting to wonder whether he might be experimenting with the juxtaposition of seemingly disassociated short prose pieces, or whether such pieces simply have less force when regarded separately.

While "flash fiction" is hardly a new phenomenon, it is fair to say it has yet to achieve full acceptance as a literary form separate from the "regular" short story or as a possible convergence of short fiction and prose poetry. Of the approaches to be sampled in *30 Under 30*, it seems to me the most likely to continue offering writers the opportunity to extend the horizons of fiction. Simply inverting realism through surrealistic distortion and discordance (as if "realism" is still the primary enemy of innovation in fiction rather than conformity of practice

more broadly) is a limited strategy that can become just as conventionalized as realism. Working toward a hybrid of fiction and poetry (which need not be restricted to short forms) would perhaps encourage writers—and readers—to focus more on language as the essential element of both.

Finally, literary “innovation” can really occur only through the emergence of form from language artfully arranged, an achievement that, putting aside the promise some of the writers included here certainly show, unfortunately is not consistently realized in this anthology.

The term "experimental" in fiction covers a very broad range of strategies and effects, and some distinctions between different kinds of literary experiment and between works manifesting experiment to different degrees could certainly be made. Just to consider "experiment" in fiction at the most general level of adherence to convention—convention understood as a definable feature that has come to make fiction recognizable to most readers as fiction—it is possible to distinguish between works that set out to transform our conceptions of the nature of fiction in toto, and those that focus in a more limited way on producing innovative changes on specific conventions. The former might be called "transgressive" experiments that overrun the extant boundaries observed by most readers, critics, and other writers, while the latter might be regarded as "local" experiments that challenge "normal" practice but do so from within the boundary that otherwise marks off the still-familiar from the disconcertingly new.

Novels like Samuel Beckett's *The Unnameable* or Gilbert Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew* would be good examples of the former, while Jeffrey DeShell's *The Trouble With Being Born* (FC2) is more appropriately considered as a local experiment. Readers of *The Trouble With Being Born* would probably find it accessible enough, a family chronicle that traces the lives of a husband and wife from their youth to their extreme old age. Its autobiographical roots are explicitly exposed, as the family is the DeShell family and the couple's only child is named Jeff, but the book's most provocative feature is undoubtedly the way in which the couple's story is related. The husband and wife tell their own stories in alternating first-person narratives, but while Mrs. DeShell's story is presented in reverse order, beginning with her affliction by dementia in old age and proceeding backwards into her childhood, Mr. DeShell's story proceeds in the opposite direction, from childhood to lonely old age. The two stories meet at numerous

junctures, and the overall effect is to provide a convincing account of a mostly dysfunctional marriage.

The novel's twinned first-person narration spares us the kind of tedious psychologizing to which we would potentially be subjected through the use of a third-person narrator "going inside" the characters' heads in order to understand them, but it does pose a problem shared by other first-person narratives that do not make clear their source in a plausible narrative situation--the narrator committing his/her story to the page directly (albeit in any number of possible forms of notation), or speaking it directly to some identifiable audience. Both Mr. and Mrs. DeShell tell their stories in seemingly disembodied voices that represent neither their attempts to reckon directly through writing with the direction their lives have taken nor the recitation of their experiences before at least a potential audience. It is understandable that the author wished to explore these characters' sense of themselves through ventriloquizing their voices, but such an unmotivated mode of narration occasionally calls attention to itself in a way DeShell probably doesn't intend:

My fiftieth birthday. I don't look fifty. I'm driving Jewell's Firebird with her to meet Tommy the Rock at Mr. Z's, a nightclub in the Springs. Tommy the Rock will be sure to have some broads with him. Too bad Dominic is sick. I told Frances that I was going down to the Knights of Columbus, but I don't think she believed me. Screw her. She doesn't know fun. If she hadn't gotten so fat, maybe I'd be with her more often. She can watch the fireworks at home with Jeff. The two of them deserve each other. My wedding ring is in my pocket.

In a passage like this, DeShell is forced to use his narrator to present information so transparently and so implausibly (no one really says such things to oneself) that narrative continuity is broken. Since it seems to me that DeShell is ultimately attempting to maintain the illusion of realism in character and narrative voice, and is not indulging in postmodern tricks by calling attention to narrative artifice, this storytelling strategy can make suspension of disbelief difficult to grant.

Perhaps it was necessary to employ this style of narration in order to allow the characters' voices their necessary role both in the unfolding of their separate stories and in the larger story those stories together create. Both perspectives must be provided. And despite the awkwardness occasioned by the choice of point of view (and by the consistency of its application), the novel's

aesthetic strategy essentially does succeed in making *The Trouble With Being Born* a compelling read and in chronicling the fortunes of what is probably an all-too-common American family. It succeeds in turning our notions of chronology and contiguity against themselves to create a locally satisfying narrative experiment, even if in the final analysis narrative itself as the central focus of interest in fiction is not challenged and the protocols of point of view are actually reinforced. Such a book won't revolutionize the art of fiction, but it does help remind readers that the requirements for creating this art are not fixed in place.

### **Late Barth**

In his review of John Barth's *Where 3 Roads Meet*, Traver Kauffman maintains that the book consists of a "trio of loosely connected novellas" (*Rocky Mountain News*). I have to disagree. That the book is a "trio" is true enough (and the word itself highlights the book's central conceit), but the three novellas it includes are actually very tightly connected, although not through overlapping characters or setting or some other superficial element of continuity. *Where 3 Roads Meet* is very much a *composed* book, and anyone who reads it as merely a conveniently collected group of fictions somewhat longer than short stories but too short to be called novels will be missing out on the features of the book most relevant to Barth's purpose.

The book is unified, first and foremost, through the motif named in its title. It acts as both a structural and a thematic device, at the same time foregrounding the image of three roads meeting (for Barth a symbol of fertility, both physical and artistic) and providing a rich source of cross-textual echoes and recurrences that substitute for the narrative momentum that, in typical Barthian fashion, is constantly interrupted and redoubled, seemingly always about to move dramatically forward but never quite doing so. Thus there are corresponding situations/groups of characters: three college students (who also play together in a jazz trio) in the first novella, *Tell Me*; the three elements in the literary interchange, Tale, Teller, Reader, embodied as characters in the unabashedly metafictional *I've Been Told*; three sisters (symbolically representing the Three Graces) in the final novella, *As I Was Saying*.

In *Tell Me*, the three students are engaged in a love triangle, in *I've Been Told* (the "story of the Story"), tale and reader are carried successfully by their Dramatic Vehicle (driven by the teller) away from the place where three roads meet to a narrative climax of sorts, while the three sisters tell (in a series of three tapes) how they came to inspire a celebrated writer to compose his trilogy of novels, *The Fates*. And, of course, *Where 3 Roads Meet* is itself a more modest reduction of this imaginary trilogy, a triumvirate of fictions that presents to its own readers a place where three roads meet--three ways of exploring the sources and the fascinations of storytelling. (There are even more instances of such tripling, as readers of W3RM will discover.)

These days Barth is most often criticized for failing to "move past" the metafictional game-playing for which he has become perhaps the emblematic figure. But where, exactly, is he to go? Toward some more conventional kind of narrative strategy? Presumably he determined long ago that this was not the direction in which his talents would take him, or he would never have abandoned conventional techniques in the first place. Moreover, to call self-reflexivity in fiction a matter of "game-playing" is to undervalue what metafiction is ultimately all about. There is an element of game-playing in John Barth's work to be sure---he wants his fiction to be entertaining, if not in the way stories are expected to entertain—but the self-reflexive gesture ("baring the device") is also the first and necessary step in establishing fiction as an aesthetic form whose limits are only the limits of language itself. Once we've acknowledged that a work of fiction does not require a suspension of disbelief, that its possibilities are not exhausted by the orthodox telling of tales, fiction as a literary form becomes that much more malleable, more open to other kinds of formal patterning.

*Where 3 Roads Meet* participates in this project in its modest way, allowing Barth to reinforce, through the cross-referential scheme I've described, more familiar metafictional devices with an intricate aesthetic design that balances the deconstruction of conventional narrative strategies and a simultaneous construction of alternative structures (much as Barth himself once posed the "literature of replenishment" against his previously elucidated notion of the "literature of exhaustion"). I would not claim that this is one of Barth's best books, although it might provide uninitiated readers with a pretty good introduction to his approach and assumptions. I would even agree with criticisms of Barth's late, mock-heroic style as a bit too mock—and more than a bit too mannered, as exemplified in a passage like this: "An upbeat,

firm-willed, independent-spirited lass, be it said, who welcomed [her grandparents'] monitoring, took the loss of her not-much-of-a-mother in stride, comforted her not-all-that-bereft father as best a third- or fourth-grader can, and threw herself into her schoolwork, music lessons, team sports, and bosom-buddyhood with young Al Baumann. To whom she enjoyed mischievously displaying and even offering to his touch the not-yet-budding bosoms that anon would blossom into adolescent splendor."

No one will ever claim John Barth as either a plain stylist or a spinner of conventional yarns (although he does like to spin versions of yarns already spun). But that he is less than a conscientious writer concerned to enhance readers' appreciation of the art of fiction is an unsustainable argument.

At this late stage in his career, John Barth is probably in a kind of no-win situation. Those who identify him as a first-generation postmodernist, and have probably never had much admiration for postmodern fiction, anyway, will see every new work as an example of postmodernism's obsolescence. Thus Gregory Leon Miller proclaims that in Barth's most recent book, *The Development*, "Emotional moments - mortality is a major theme of the book - are undercut by narrative games that have become cliché, as narrators reveal themselves to be someone other than we were led to believe, and then someone else altogether. . . The tedium of these gestures strongly suggests that it is such postmodern fiction itself - at least in its purest, initially conceived form - that has run its course" (*San Francisco Chronicle*).

On the other hand, those who do consider themselves admirers of Barth's work are more likely to find a book like *The Development*, which undeniably is more accessible to the non-pomo-inclined, disappointingly ordinary. Thus Christopher Sorrentino concludes that "Barth once talked about embracing 'another order of risk,' in which one would test one's ability to hold an audience with narrative complexity. Here, though, we have stories about community that, while not without their appeal, are as bland as the homespun Americana of Garrison Keillor" (*Bookforum*).

Although I am more inclined to agree with Sorrentino in his judgment that *The Development* is "a modest addition to [Barth's] oeuvre," I can't quite agree that the portrayal of the gated community on Maryland's Eastern Shore that is the focus of the nine stories comprising the book bears comparison to Keillor-type sentimentality. Indeed, to the extent that Miller's

criticism has validity--and only here does it have validity--it is true that Barth's fiction rarely lingers over "emotional moments" without resorting to distancing effects such as verbal irony or authorial self-reflexivity. While it might seem "conventional" for John Barth to write a sequence of stories about elderly couples trying to cope with the fact that the horizon line of their lives has come much closer, I don't think either the subject or the setting is inherently "hokum."

Indeed, the most emotionally unsettling moment in *The Development* occurs at the conclusion of "Toga Party," in which the story's husband and wife protagonists decide to gas themselves in their garage rather than continue on their life's "crappy last lap," as the husband puts it. The story is unsettling precisely because there really has been no emotional preparation for this almost spontaneous decision and because it is carried out with little emotional display:

. . .Already they could smell exhaust fumes. "I love you, Dick."

"I love you. And okay, so we're dumping on the kids, leaving them to take the hit and clean up the mess. So what?"

"They'll never forgive us. But you're right. So what?"

"We'll each be presumed to have survived the other, as the saying goes, and neither of us'll be around to know it."

The car engine quietly idled on.

"Shouldn't we at least leave them a note, send them an e-mail, something?"

"So go do that if you want to. Me, I'm staying put."

He heard her exhale. "Me, too, I guess." Then inhale, deeply.

It is true that this event has emotional resonance throughout the rest of the book—other characters refer to it, its possibility as the final act for these characters as well can't be dismissed—but I don't see how it can be taken as "a virtual Hallmark card for suicide." That people like the Fentons might indeed resort to this kind of clear-eyed suicide in the midst of modern "retirement" only seems to me an equally clear-eyed indictment of the very middle-class lifestyle to which almost all of the characters in the book have readily acceded, to one degree or

another. There is a repressed but still palpable disappointment with the outcome of American "success" permeating *The Development*, not an affirmation of it.

Some of the characters are more resistant to the illusions of the American Way than others. At the end of "Progressive Dinner," about the annual Heron Bay Estates social, we are left with Peter Simpson, an associate dean at the local college:

From the porch Chuck Becker adds loudly, "God bless us all! And God Bless America!"

Several voices murmur "Amen." Looking up and away with a sigh of mild annoyance, Peter Simpson happens at just that moment to see a meteor streak left to right across the moonless, brightly constellated eastern sky.

So what? he asks himself.

So nothing.

Most of the characters are presented as financially comfortable and as having accomplished career success, but many of them don't seem to regard their careers as achieving anything very important. Some are outright failures, as for example George Newett, a creative writing professor at the same local college, who confesses to having published little and who settles for "trying to help others do better" than he did, although "as of this writing no Stratford alum has managed that not-so-difficult achievement." None of them are held up as especially insightful, morally or intellectually. They may indeed be "bland," but this seems to me at least the natural outcome of their author's vision of Heron Bay Estates, the small but representative world John Barth wants to invoke.

Given the extent to which in *The Development* Barth has trimmed back what Gregory Leon Miller calls the "meta-fictional [sic] flourishes" for which Barth has become, at least to critics like Miller, infamous, it is rather astonishing that Miller would insist on charging it with "excessive self-reflexivity." There are a couple of stories—in particular, "The Bard Award" and "Rebeginnings"—that feature Barth's trademark dual emphasis on telling the story and on relating the story of the storytelling, which makes some of his most notoriously postmodern

novels and stories more like narrative puzzles than narratives per se. But for the most part, the stories in *The Development* are surprisingly straightforward suburban slices-of-life joined together to create a surprisingly earnest work of late-life realism. One suspects that for readers like Miller, Barth could never be less than "excessive" unless he were to stop writing altogether or start being an utterly different kind of writer than the one he's always been.

One "self-reflexive" feature of the book that even Miller does not bring forward for censure, and that might be considered an addition of "narrative complexity," can be found in its title. "The Development," it seems to me, does not refer merely to the housing development itself, nor to the "development" of the characters' lives so far, but to "the development" as one of the elements of narrative. Most of the stories (except, of course, for "Toga Party") consist mostly of "development," most of them beginning in no particularly urgent situation and trailing off before the "tale" could be said to have reached its dramatic apex. "The End," which ostensibly tells the story of HBE's destruction by tornado, doesn't actually narrate that catastrophe and registers the deaths of two of the community's members in just a couple of sentences. But this seems to me to reinforce the book's portrayal of the characters' "last lap." As Paul Lafarge puts it in his review of *The Development*, "The open-endedness of these stories is not mere trickiness. The tired reporters and washed-up teachers of creative writing in Heron Bay Estates are, like Barth himself, close enough to the end of their lives that the autobiographer's paradox is more than a theoretical worry. How do you tell the conclusion of your own story? . . . there is perhaps no better way to face the certainty that your own consciousness will cease, than with a defiant colon, so:" (*Barnes and Noble Review*).

Barth employs such a strategy of inconclusiveness, it seems to me, with particular skill in this book, so much so that its more subtle effects are apparently lost on his harsher critics who see only the more obvious "meta-fictional" touches.

### **Early Efforts**

A debut work that is explicitly identified as experimental—or in this case "unique and innovative," as the book's back cover has it—seems a useful opportunity to consider what

"experimental" appears to signify to young writers aspiring to produce fiction worthy of that designation. Erin Pringle's story collection *The Floating Order* (Two Ravens Press) offers such an opportunity, and while I have some reservations about classifying it as experimental, I nevertheless found this book an impressive set of stories. It is certainly not an ordinary first work of "literary fiction" and for that reason alone commends itself to readers looking for more than the pallid and derivative exercises in convention most such fiction has to offer.

If an immediately observable characteristic of "experimental fiction" is an implicit questioning of the centrality of "story," with its attendant requirements of "exposition," "narrative arc," "backstory," etc., then *The Floating Order* initially meets this expectation. A few of the stories do ultimately include moments of action—even rather extreme action—but most of them either proceed in the absence of a chartable narrative line or in effect take place in a discursive zone in which the important events have already happened, the protagonist, frequently the narrator and frequently a child, continuing on while unavoidably returning to these events in a fragmentary and oblique way. The reader is asked to suspend final comprehension of the nature and the consequences of these events, but the gradual realization of their full import has a quietly powerful effect.

The collection's first, and title, story is a good example of this approach. Narrated by a woman who has, we ultimately determine, drowned her own children (a situation no doubt inspired by the Andrea Yates case), the "story" unfolds as a kind of spontaneous emanation of the narrator's disturbed mind, circling around the deed but not quite confronting it, freely shifting from past to present, often speaking of the dead children as if they were still alive. The story doesn't so much plumb the depths of the character's insanity as it spills that insanity onto the --hpage through the narrator's free associations of memory—however dissociated—and detail. Ultimately the jumbled, distorted pieces of the story cohere into an affecting account of the narrator's troubles, and the impact is only heightened by the incremental way in which the horror of her experience is revealed.

"The Floating Order" also exemplifies the prevailing prose style of the stories in this book, a style that reflects a certain ingenuousness in the characters' perspective expressed in unadorned language:

I asked the policeman if he'd like some juice, as we were out of milk. He was polite. I explained that my babies are saved. He held my hand and opened the car door for me. Natalie sat in the passenger seat and played with the radio dials. I told her to stop it. The policeman asked who I was talking to. I wouldn't explain. My husband has such high hopes.

Many of the stories are narrated by a child, for whom this sort of low-affect discourse seems well-suited in its guilelessness, but it also has an almost hypnotic effect when applied to damaged adult characters like this one. The occasional shocks it delivers as revelatory images and bits of information punctuate the narrator's recitation effectively substitute for straightforward plot progression.

The author wisely chose to present what is perhaps the volume's best story first, but the next several stories are also quite good, reinforcing the themes and the narrative strategy introduced in "The Floating Order." "Cats and Dogs" relates the predicament of two abandoned children (the father is in prison), the nature of that predicament revealed in the same piecemeal fashion; in "Looker," a father struggles to convey to his daughter what her now dead mother was like as a young woman, although again we have to infer she is dead through indirect references ("Your mother shouldn't have smoked"); "Losing, I Think" fitfully unfolds a story of a mother raising a child without the assistance of a mostly elusive father; in "Sanctuary," a mover while transporting a piano from a church finds the corpse of a young girl inside it.

These stories establish an atmosphere of menace and foreboding that permeates the book and that the style and structure introduced in the first few stories evoke especially well. Children are portrayed as particularly vulnerable to the hazards of the adult world, and thus most of the stories in *The Floating Order* feature children, either as narrators or important characters, attempting to cope with the consequences of human weakness, or in some cases with what seems the random drift of existence. The second half of the book is not as effective as the first, featuring some stories that are a little too sensational ("Why Jimmy?"), too melodramatic ("Drift") or tug a little too much at the heartstrings ("And Yet"), but the best stories show a young writer seeking to reveal uncomfortable truths and challenge complacent reading habits.

However, I'm not sure "experimental" would be the appropriate term to use in characterizing Erin Pringle's fiction as represented in *The Floating Order*. Ultimately the stories

work to create an overarching depiction of the lives of children in present-day America, and, the honesty of the depiction notwithstanding, this is a project all too familiar in first books (and sometimes later ones as well) by American writers. To the extent that the book does take risks in style and form, it does so, or so it seems to me, in order to first of all advance this project, the "content" elevated above formal experiment. I don't necessarily say this is a flaw in the book, although I do say that the effort to "capture" childhood in fiction has become rather hackneyed and that while *The Floating Order* surpasses most other efforts in this sub-genre of literary fiction, it tacks hard enough in the direction of "saying something" about childhood in America in purely sociological terms that I have to regard whatever is "experimental" in the book as secondary to this larger purpose of locating the stories within the sub-genre, however "dark" they may be.

In my opinion truly experimental or innovative or adventurous fiction attempts to expand the possibilities of fiction as a literary form and does so for the sake of the form itself, not to amplify social or cultural criticism or to intervene in philosophical debates (although these things might be an indirect effect, as is often enough the case in all worthwhile fiction). To question whether *The Floating Order* really signals that Erin Pringle will consistently produce such aesthetically challenging fiction, however, is not at all to diminish its achievement or deny its satisfactions.

Zachary Mason's *The Lost Books of the Odyssey* (Starcherone Books) would seemingly qualify as a "novel" only if we define the form in the barest possible terms: a lengthy composition in prose. Purporting to be a decoded translation of a series of "extra" episodes of *The Odyssey* (decoded because, according to the translator, who provides an introduction to the book that has now been made of them, they have existed as an encrypted manuscript the means of decrypting which has only recently been discovered), it bears no resemblance to the sort of unified narrative most readers expect to find in a novel. There is no plot other than the preexisting plot of the *Odyssey*, on which the "lost books" perform multiple variations. Similarly, while Odysseus is presumably the protagonist (if it isn't the "translator"), many different versions of Odysseus, assuming many different roles, are presented in the 46 episodes comprising *The Lost Books*. The stories are told from many different points of view, both first-person and third-

person—one of the most affecting of the tales is told by the Cyclops, lamenting his blindness at the hands of Odysseus (for whom he expresses great hatred)—and while one might read the tales simply as a collection of stories, this would rob them of the coherence they ultimately attain as a set of imaginative supplements to the *Odyssey* narrative. Taken together, they form a kind of anti-*Odyssey*, an implicit commentary on the Homeric version of the story achieved by highlighting its elisions and sounding out its interstices.

Such a strategy does require some familiarity on the reader's part with the *Odyssey* itself, since the effects created by this sort of rewriting and rearranging to an extent do depend on our recognition that an episode from Homer's text has been recast—Odysseus returns to Ithaca to find his people "all astonishment and delight" and Penelope dead, Achilles abandons the Green encampment to do good works in the world, perhaps to spend "a year in contemplation in the shadow of a tree"—or a character or episode has been enhanced or freshly emphasized. While it is certainly possible that the reader only minimally acquainted with both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* would still find Mason's alternative versions diverting enough, the humor and the wit embodied in Mason's counternarratives, as well as the cleverness of their construction, will surely strike the *Odyssey*-literate with more force and efficacy than those who know Homer's epic only in its barest outlines, if at all. By no means is *The Lost Books of the Odyssey* a book to be enjoyed only by classicists, but it helps to be a reader with an interest in literature, and *The Odyssey*'s role in its history, that overshadows whatever interest most readers of novels profess to have in encountering "real life" in fiction.

Despite these potential obstacles to a broad audience for a book like *The Lost Books of the Odyssey*, it is, in my opinion, nevertheless a work of "experimental" fiction that many readers would find enjoyable if they were to give it a chance. Not only are many of the invented episodes entertaining in their own right, but gradually one comes to anticipate what new twist on the Odysseus story Mason will offer, in a way that is almost analogous to the pleasurable anticipation readers feel when looking forward to the next turn of plot in a conventional narrative. Equally rewarding is the opportunity to reflect further on the Homeric themes of war, honor, leadership, and sacrifice, which, if anything, are accentuated even more intensely (if at times ironically) through the liberties taken with the story of the Trojan War (e.g., the chapter narrated by Odysseus that begins, "I have often wondered whether all men are cowards like I

am") and through the parallels that might be drawn between this re-told *Odyssey* and our own ongoing, ill-conceived war. The Borgesian frame provided by the translator's introduction and an appendix relating the history of the lost books contributes an additional tongue-in-cheek element that completes the novel's masquerade as a feat of "scholarship."

For me, the most successful works of experimental fiction always "entertain," even when they reject or subvert the usual devices conventionally considered the source of fiction's ability to entertain—the devices that create "compelling characters," dramatic narratives, "vivid" settings, etc. (Gilbert Sorrentino's novels provide a good example of this ability to entertain while dispensing with the standard accoutrements of entertainment.) In experimental fiction of the postmodern kind, this is frequently accomplished through comedy and satire. In the case of *The Lost Books of the Odyssey* it is achieved through what might simply be called ingenuity, along with a certain amount of *chutzpah*.

In his review of Stephen Marche's *Shining at the Bottom of the Sea* (Riverhead Books), Brian Evenson asserts that too many of the selections in the fictionalized anthology that gives this book its form have "too few of the satisfactions we've come to expect from fiction" (*Bookforum*)

On the one hand, Marche would probably be disappointed that this reviewer at least found his book to some degree unsatisfying, but on the other, that this dissatisfaction comes from finding too few of the pleasures "we've come to expect from fiction" doesn't necessarily mean the book has failed. Indeed, if *Shining at the Bottom of the Sea* provoked the reader into reflecting on the "satisfactions" fiction ought to provide, it probably could be called successful in fulfilling one of the implicit goals of experimental fiction: to remind readers there is no one form fiction has to take, that what is "expected" from fiction isn't necessarily what it always needs to provide.

*Shining at the Bottom of the Sea* is, it seems to me, an experimental novel in the purest sense of the term. It bypasses almost entirely the conventional elements of the novel—plot, character, point of view—and offers in their place an historical narrative of sorts that unfolds between the lines of the anthologized documents substituting for the "expected" narrative of

incident, character revelation, etc. Edited by "Stephan Marche," the documents are primarily a selection of short fictions representing the literary heritage of "Sanjania," a fictional North Atlantic island whose original inhabitants were brought there on Spanish slave ships but which came to be a British colony. The stories are arranged chronologically, thus giving us both a survey of Sanjanian literary history and an exploration of Sanjanian history and culture more broadly (at least as the latter can be inferred through the stories—not necessarily a straightforward process, since they are, after all, fictions and not historical narratives per se.) There is also a section at the end of the volume devoted to "Criticism," which is less literary criticism in the strict sense than a series of nonfiction pieces, including an interview with a living Sanjanian writer, that act to tie together the stories by focusing on important themes and historical motifs. One of the conventional elements of fiction that remains in effect is setting, and it is the way in which Sanjania itself acts as the focus of attention, becomes a kind of character in itself, that leads me to call *Shining at the Bottom of the Sea* a novel. It's a novel that asks us to expand existing definitions of what a novel might be.

Since this is literally a text highlighting writing as writing, it would have to be categorized as "metafiction," but one of the accomplishments of this book is the way in which it demonstrates how metafiction can be not a symptom of literary narcissism but a perfectly serviceable means to other literary ends. In this case, a text about writing also turns out to be a text about something else, a something else that probably couldn't be evoked in some other manner without sacrificing its unity of effect and a certain kind of efficiency. A sprawling saga about the colonial and post-colonial history of Sanjania is not the sort of thing I would rush to read, but the metafictional ingenuity of *Shining at the Bottom of the Sea* does appeal; in fact, I am more likely to note the postcolonialist themes inherent in the story of Sanjania as they emerge through the juxtapositions of story and the gradual accumulations of reference than through the more obvious effects of "drama." In my view, readers are more likely to return to a text like *Shining at the Bottom of the Sea* to try to piece together even more coherently the underlying story of Sanjania and Western colonialism, to align the selections that make up this faux-anthology into an even more comprehensible whole. It's a novel that invites re-reading in a way more conventional narratives do not.

Which does not mean that Evenson is entirely incorrect in suggesting that not all of the individual entries in Marche's anthology-as-novel are equally interesting. Some make for better reading than others. Some play a stronger role in depicting the history of Sanjania than others. In his review of the book at the *Toronto Star*, Philip Marchand calls it a "pastiche" and comments that in such a work "The reader's assumption is always that the author of a poem or story is doing his best to make it a good poem or story – but this assumption falters when the story or poem is put inside of quotation marks, as it were," asking further: "If the reader finds the story or poem dull, is it because the (real) author has failed or because the reader has missed some part of the joke?" I'm not sure it's necessary we think the author was "doing his best" to make each selection an equally "good poem or story." The contents of the anthology need to reflect the development of Sanjanian literature, but this doesn't mean every story has to be "good" in some universally acceptable sense of the term. It isn't a "joke" if the writer is trying to evoke a particular style that doesn't exactly fulfill expectations of "good" writing. It's possible to achieve "good" writing, to write well, by summoning up a prose style with its own limitations, even that is deliberately wretched (see *Mulligan Stew*).

Still, some readers might find parts of *Shining at the Bottom of the Sea* slow-going, not necessarily because they're inattentive readers but because of hazards inherent to the kind of work this is. It may be that Marche has pulled this experiment off about as well as it can be done, or someone inspired by Marche's example might try something similar and avoid its longeurs. (And I don't want to exaggerate their effect. Most of the conjured-up stories are well-done, and the occasional dense patch doesn't obscure the overall realization of the novel's design.) But I would hope that all readers would finally judge it using criteria that are fair to the sort of novel it is rather than those appropriate to other novels using conventions "we've come to expect from fiction" that this novel rejects.

Peter Markus's *Bob, or Man on Boat* (Dzanc) is first of all a welcome departure from most debut novels in that it is not some form of bildungsroman, or more loosely a disguised memoir, a perfunctorily fictionalized version of the author's youthful experiences (more precisely, of the author's experience of youth). Nor is it, like most literary fiction, whether a first

novel or the latest mid-career production, a mostly recognizable variation on a conventional narrative of psychological realism.

Indeed, a reader expecting a conventional first novel will surely realize after only a few pages of *Bob* that this is not one, that, in terms of plot development, it is a novel that isn't going to go much beyond the delineation of the character and situation named in the title. The portrayal of Bob and his boat could perhaps be said to reach inward—although this is done through concentration and indirection, not through the tedium of the "free indirect" method—as well as to expand outward and around Bob in concentric circles of thinly-layered exposition, but it could hardly be said to ever really push forward into a plotted narrative. Just as Bob himself, a fisherman, generally sticks to one spot, where he knows the fishing is good, this novel remains anchored in its narrator's mostly static perceptions of Bob, with whose piecemeal revelations we will have to be content.

But experimental fictions that try to dispense with story and character development in their conventional form run the risk of simply alienating the reader if they don't substitute for them some alternative strategy or technique that engages the reader's attention and to an extent, at least, satisfies the need for "entertainment," if only in the narrowest sense as "interest," most readers bring to works of fiction. Often this substitution takes place as the manipulation of language in odd or surprising ways, the use of "style" to create or even replace "form." *Bob, or Man on Boat* is a novel of this kind, but, unfortunately, in my view it doesn't really manage to play its language game with sufficient vigor or dexterity to redeem its otherwise commendable resolve to avoid the usual practices associated with fiction. It is, on the most immediate level, not much fun to read, and this problem originates not from the novel being "difficult"—It is in fact a very quick read—but from its rather unimaginative simplicity.

Although practically any brief excerpt from the book would do as illustration, this passage does exemplify both its stylistic approach and the limitations of that approach:

The fish, unlike the sun, listen to Bob.

When the fish hear Bob singing to them, singing to them through the darkness of the river, the fish can't help but take a bite: of Bob's son, of the bait that Bob is fishing with.

Sometimes, Bob takes his fishing hook and Bob digs out the eye of a fish to use this fish's eye for bait.

Most of the time, though, Bob baits his hooks with mud.

Bob is a mud man.

Some men who fish for fish fish with minnows or worms.

We call these fishing men worm men and minnow men.

We call this kind of bait live bait.

But live bait never lives long.

Live bait usually dies before it's eaten.

Which is why Bob fishes with mud.

The most obvious features of such writing are, of course, the arrangement of sentences into what seem at first to be something closer to lines of verse than to prose, the deliberate repetition of words—Bob, fish, bait, mud—the simplicity of word choice in general. It is somewhat reminiscent of Gertrude Stein, but where Stein's sentences break down syntactical sense, and in doing so paradoxically draw more attention to the sentence as sentence, as a unit of composition, Markus's approach simply breaks down the paragraph into its individual sentences without otherwise questioning their ultimate connections in an expository chain. Combined with its focus of attention—baiting a hook—such language is not only more prosaic than poetic, it winds up emphasizing the least compelling element of traditional prose fiction, namely exposition and its obsessive scene-setting, which in this novel threatens to become almost endless. It might be possible to focus on exposition as a substitute for narrative and still make such a work lively, but in this case the information we are gradually provided about Bob and his life as a fisherman just isn't of sufficient interest to keep the fiction afloat (so to speak).

In this context, the repetition of words comes off as labored, the unstudied syntax robotic and enervating, making even such a short novel something of a chore to read. In his review of *Bob* at *The Brooklyn Rail*, Joseph Salvatore claims of Markus's work that

The integrity inherent in Markus's simple structure. . .is deceptively powerful, often leaving the reader in a hypnotic swoon. It is through the accumulation of so few words, their repetition and syntactic arrangement and re-arrangement that a kind of linguistic alchemy takes place. Inside the blast furnace of Markus's prose, language gets smelted down and reconstituted. Words we assumed to have fixed meaning slowly begin to lose meaning, begin to take on new sound and new sense, and, finally, return to a meaning that has been enriched with new alloying elements, both uncanny and astounding.

While this might sound good in theory, in practice, at least as embodied in *Bob, or Man on Boat*, unfortunately it doesn't quite work out. The arrangements and re-arrangements just get bogged down in their own aimlessness and the "alchemy" never happens. Words don't so much get "smelted down" as lost in a processing loop, and they don't really enrich themselves through repetition but simply become repetitive and don't accumulate as much as they cancel themselves out in a linguistic haze. Sometimes the postulate through which a work of experimental fiction is supposedly to be understood just can't overcome the ennui with which the work is actually experienced.

Each of Jeremy M. Davies's first two novels, *Rose Alley* (2009) and *Fancy* (2014), emphatically reject the notion that, in fiction, form serves content, proceeding instead as each of them do by establishing a form to which narrative content must accommodate itself. *Rose Alley* especially subordinates its "story" to the operation of its formal devices. According to Davies in an interview, the book's chapters "were composed with predetermined vocabularies, taken from twelve different works (sometimes nonfiction, sometimes fiction): twelve lists of twelve words that had to be used, will I or nil I—though I was allowed to use them in whatever way I liked: all at once, in one long sentence, or spread out, etc." (*HTML GIANT*)

*Fancy* is less directly Oulipian in its appeal to constraints, but it is still strictly formalized, nevertheless, it's narrative premise unorthodox but rigorously carried out. Its first-person narrator, a retired librarian named Rumrill, rehearses aloud the instructions for taking care of his cats that he wishes to give to a young couple, whom Rumrill designates as the Pickles, a soliloquy that soon enough expands into the story of Rumrill's life, including his relationship

with the elderly and enigmatic Brocklebank, for whom he once performed the same duty he is now entrusting to the Pickles. The novel systematically alternates paragraphs beginning "Rumrill said:" with a much briefer paragraph, an aside of sorts, beginning "He added:." In addition, an occasional entry introduced with "Brockleman writes:" provides a quote from the late Brockleman's surviving manuscripts, which lay out a philosophy of cat-fancying that also acts as a series of Wittgensteinian reflections on our experience of reality itself.

In a sense, what both novels are "about" is determined by how effectively the eventual details of the story allow the formal devices to be realized and is otherwise almost inconsequential beyond plausibly elaborating on the initial premise--in *Rose Alley* the recreation of the circumstances surrounding a fictional movie shot in Paris in 1968, in *Fancy* the successful completion of Rumrill's monologue as the means of getting his story told. *Rose Alley's* formal structure encompasses more than the initial imposition of constraint, as its 12 chapters (a 13th is added from the perspective of the present) are presented not in a way that would give us an account, chronological or otherwise, of the making of the film--about the English Restoration poets John Wilmot and John Dryden, and the violent 1679 attack on the latter allegedly instigated by the former--but as a series of narratives about the people involved in making the film (or involved with people involved in making the film). The novel as a whole thus moves sideways, the chapters associated by who is involved with whom. We never get a panoptic view of the film in either its nascent or completed state, and the reader unfamiliar with the *Rose Alley* attack on Dryden (or with Wilmot) has to wait until the penultimate chapter to get an extended explanation.

The novel's mischievous formal gestures might be more enlivening if the characters and their stories were themselves more compelling, however. It would seem that we are to take as compensation for the lack of focus on the film and its actual production the eccentric and at times sexually adventurous behavior of the characters, a fairly motley collection of failed actors, a sensationalist producer, the faux avant-garde director and his writer wife, the film's editor and designer, as well as others more tangentially connected to the film. But these characters and their circumstances are only mildly interesting at best, and at times the lengthy expository detours away from a clear connection to other characters or to the film make for somewhat laborious reading.

If *Rose Alley* suffers from a lack of immediacy and a surfeit of exposition over drama, certainly *Fancy* risks succumbing to a similar fate, given its reliance on a single character and his continuous monologue. But in this more recent novel its one character (aside from those who have a presence only in the speaker's discourse) seizes our attention, initially through voice and style but ultimately as well through his obsessions and idiosyncrasies. His narration is nothing if not immediate, and while there are no other characters present to literally interact with Rumrill, he nevertheless manages to invest his nondescript town and his seemingly commonplace existence as a librarian with a kind of archetypal quality, himself an Everyman grappling with fundamental questions of existence, disguised as a fascination with cats.

Rumrill's language is consistently rather stilted, but this very quality is weirdly engaging, as we hear him attempting to explain himself as precisely as possible:

Rumrill said: Apropos, may I say that through my open door as you stepped in I saw little clouds frisk across the morning or evening sky? Which clouds looked by no means significant enough to be responsible, down here below the tropopause, at the height of the three stone stairs that access Rumrill's house--squat in the fashion of most detached residences in our town--for having left you both so wet and weary from your walk?

He added: Little round lucid clouds.

Not least of the reasons why *Fancy* is a compelling read is the undercurrent of humor running throughout, derived first of all from the implicit absurdity of Rumrill's situation, the mundane task with which he is ostensibly occupied at odds with the theatrical manner and ornate style he adopts to carry it out, his expansively developed, carefully articulated address essentially delivered into the void. Ultimately one could say that *Fancy* is a novel about language (that, in a sense, it is a novel in which there is only language), but it is language deployed in such a way that it becomes inextricable from character.

And yet Rumrill does not finally come off as a hopelessly absurd figure, or at least not entirely so. It is perhaps tempting to say that in his apparent loneliness he is a somewhat pitiable figure, illustrated most poignantly perhaps in his repeated references to "the woman with whom I had gone into the stacks," a fellow librarian whom Rumrill claims he often met in the stacks for a

sexual assignation but who has long since left town. Eventually it becomes clear that these encounters were probably the closest thing to intimacy with another person Rumrill has experienced, and that he acutely realizes it even as he speaks of their relationship in the most impersonal terms. His relationship with Brocklebank could be described as close—he in fact cares for Brocklebank in the latter's dotage, but Brocklebank barely recognizes him most of the time, and what Rumrill really knows of Brocklebank comes from the writing reproduced throughout the text, the "system" Rumrill has adopted as his own.

Rumrill's real dilemma, however, is existential. So profound is his appreciation of the tenuousness of reality, in fact, that he is loath to leave his house in the first place for fear that when he is gone it and his life in it will blink out of existence. One of the most outrageous episodes in the novel recounts Rumrill's elaborate construction of a corridor of mirrors, placed in such a way along his route when he must be away from home that he can continue to see his house and thus remain assured it abides and will be there when he returns. Brocklebank's cat-fancying system appeals to Rumrill because of the way it seems to promise order and coherence, sense from the seemingly random: "The variation of the features of a basic unit [of the system] producing all the thematic formulations which provide for fluency, contrasts, variety, logic, and unity, on the one hand, and character, mood, expression and every needed differentiation on the other."

In its focus on a character who would like to impose certainty and consistency on a recalcitrant reality, *Fancy* is reminiscent of Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*. While the narrator of *Remainder* continually rehearses episodes in his life in an effort to recreate them, however, Rumrill's rehearsal of his directions for the Pickles seems as likely to be the thing itself, the actual extent of his willingness to contemplate leaving the house and its cats (who may also, of course be a figment of Rumrill's discourse) in the care of Mr. and Mrs. Pickles. Rumrill speaks often of his dreams, and ultimately we have as much reason to believe that his purported recitation is one of those dreams as that he is actually performing it. Rumrill is not so much an unreliable narrator as he is an unavoidably contingent one, and part of the novel's lingering resonance comes from acknowledging this.

Anakana Schofield's *Malarky* is an engaging work that sustains attention through the appeal of its down-to-earth protagonist, its narrative of the protagonist's odyssey of self-discovery, and its quietly compelling style. It is an impressive first novel.

However, the reception of Schofield's novel has prominently emphasized its "experimental" qualities. In her review, for example, Emily Keeler refers to "its expansive and experimental spirit" (*Quill and Quire*). Sharon Chisvin notes its "strangeness. . .in plot, structure, language and characterization" (*Winnipeg Free Journal*). The novel's episodic narrative and fractured chronology in particular have been identified as creating this sense of "strangeness."

Despite my ultimate admiration for *Malarky*, I just can't accept that there's anything particularly experimental or innovative about it. The fragmentary narrative is effective, but it's hardly at this stage in literary history an innovative or shocking move. "Linear narrative" has been in retreat since modernism, to the extent that it's somewhat unusual these days to read a novel that is truly "linear" in the fashion of 19th century fiction. Similarly, the scrambled chronology works well in this novel, but Anakana Schofield is certainly not the first writer to think of using this strategy as a way of suggesting the operations of memory or of reflecting the unstable state of a character's mind. Schofield has artfully used both of these strategies in *Malarky*—they are perhaps the only strategies she could have used this successfully given the story she wanted to tell and the characters she wanted to evoke—but to call them "experimental" tells us less about this novel than it does about some readers' inability to consider the novel in its appropriate context.

There's nothing really "strange" about the characters in *Malarky*, although referring to the protagonist, an ordinary Irish farm wife, as "Our Woman," and to her loutish husband as "Himself" does create a certain oddity in the narrative. The novel's other major character, Our Woman's gay son Jimmy, is a somewhat mysterious figure, due to the fact that we really perceive him only from a distance, through Our Woman's recollections and in scenes witnessed by her but not presented to us directly. Jimmy is ultimately a mysterious figure to Our Woman as well, as her discovery that her son is gay (a literal discovery when she comes upon him having sex with another boy) is one of the events that leads her to question her assumptions about the life she has led and sets her on a journey that will end only after both Jimmy and her husband are dead and she has been hospitalized for a mental breakdown. Our Woman also discovers, through

a meeting with a woman calling herself "Red the Twit," that Himself has apparently had an affair with her (Red the Twit turns out to be not so reliable a source, however). In response, Our Woman decides to engage in her own extramarital sexual explorations, encountering a card salesman (Card Man), who turns out to be something of a nonentity, and Halim, a Syrian security guard who is rather more interesting. Halim's sexual interest in Our Woman seems closely related to his interest in the biological realities of reproduction, and he repeatedly questions Our Woman about what it is like to give birth.

Our Woman's experiences are presented to us in a discontinuous form, moving freely through various stages of her relationships with Jimmy, her husband, and her lovers, including sessions Our Woman eventually has with a counselor, "Grief," after her hospitalization. The novel might be called "expansive" in the way it seems to bring all of these stages of the protagonist's life into the narrative "present," and eventually even to blur the line between past and present through this shuffling of chronology, but really *Malarky* is a remarkably honed and concentrated work that in spite of its disjunctions might be described as "poetic" in its unity of effect rather than experimental in its breaking of form. It might indeed also be called expansive in its portrayal of a woman seeking to enlarge her own sense of possibility (as well as her understanding of the world), but this is the novel's thematic focus, not a formal quality.

The most admirable feature of *Malarky* is its idiom-inflected language, which evokes Our Woman's speech patterns—sometimes directly, as parts of the narrative are related in the first-person—without losing the appeal of her Irish-flavored speech by in effect burying it in a psychological realism that goes too deeply into the perceiving consciousness of the character, where distinctions of idiom and accent disappear into generic "thought." Nevertheless, the novel's style does work to augment character, helping us to feel closer to Our Woman, at the same time it influences us to apprehend her world as she does, delineating that world in a dynamic and often memorable way, as when she begins to consider Jimmy's behavior shortly after realizing he must be homosexual:

Of course she worried tall that it was off to Patsy's boy he was. If there was a way to separate them, she'd build a wall for the sake of it. She'd to steady herself into the chair as it came back to her again. She pulled the cushion, the strange one with off-colour ducks on it that one of the girls had embroidered for her and now she couldn't recall who

and she wanted to recall who because she wanted her mind cleared of what was rolling in to remind her of that night. It was Jimmy. All Jimmy. She couldn't blame the other boy for he was the younger. If she'd turned away she could have saved herself, but she did not. Every time she saw a cup or glass of orange squash, it would come back to her. She was in it now.

Passages such as this occasionally require somewhat more patient reading in order to untwist the syntax or to "hear" the voice. One might thus say that in this way, along with the novel's fragmented structure, *Malarky* asks for a more active reader, but neither the structure nor the language is so utterly unfamiliar that they would really disconcert an attentive reader. Schofield has written a novel that draws on existing strategies that nevertheless don't allow the reader to fall back on the most conventional expectations of sequential plot and transparent prose.

Perhaps the clearest mark of her artistry is the way in which Schofield employs the formal and stylistic devices found in *Malarky* to produce a novel of considerable emotional power. Our Woman is a convincingly invoked character who earns our sympathetic response, both to her confusion when faced with the apparent breakdown of her marriage (or the breakdown of her role as "wife") and with the probability that her son is gay, as well as to her subsequent attempts to change herself. The novel's final words has Our Woman reflecting that "It's beautiful when it all makes sense, so it is. Occasionally it makes sense, just for a moment," and *Malarky* is most successful as the portrayal of Our Woman's attempts to make her life make sense. In this way we could say that the novel's fragmented form reinforces the protagonist's quest by asking the reader to help make sense of the narrative by piecing together its continuity in a more exacting way than other stories of self-realization might. The reward is worth the effort, however, as when we finish the novel we feel we have reached a "moment" of aesthetic completion that might not have been possible had Schofield used some other narrative form.

It is the triumph of *Malarky* that by the end its main character seems conjured fully into life but also that this has been accomplished not through obvious appeals to emotion or overdramatizing but through the clarity and rigor of style and structure skillfully applied. This need not lead us to categorize it as an experimental work, but it should prompt us to call it a very good novel.