PROJECT MUSE®

Super Genre

Anne Derrig

American Book Review, Volume 32, Number 4, May/June 2011, pp.
20-21 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/abr.2011.0085>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/447521>

AVATAR

Evan Lavender-Smith

Six Gallery Press
http://www.sixgallerypress.com
118 pages; paper, \$15.00

In Evan Lavender-Smith’s novel *Avatar*, there are no periods, no commas, no colons, no punctuation of any kind to direct our eyes and serve as spotlights in the darkness; perhaps they have been overlapped, “shielded” from our view:

I would time and again attempt and fail to recall what it was I had forgotten with respect to the fact of the so called empty space between the stars not actually being empty the black space the apparent uniform blackness between the stars in fact not actually empty the coincidence or the overlapping of two periods.

We thus illuminate the book with the flyspeck field of focus our eyes are able to maintain as they scrabble for information in this 118-page sentence fragment, a single point of light in the empty field between stars that, though seeming so, is not dark but light overlapped, as the book’s sentences overlap. The starlight that reaches us through the narrator, only the width of a quarter of a fingernail, is very possibly only a remnant of life, the result of a nuclear reaction that happened millennia before the fingernail’s carapace, itself living tissue only in the past tense, widened to the measure of this light by being crowded out, overlapped by still living tissue pushing up from underneath. The rest is an omnipresent dark, so wide as to be immeasurable, so wide as to not even elicit comment, the effect of so many overlapped lights, individually tiny like our own but numberless, approaching infinity.

In 1964, Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson discovered cosmic microwave background radiation, frequencies set waving at the dawn of time, or so it is believed, radiation which escaped the Big Bang. But to say that it was “discovered” is disingenuous: how does one “discover” something as old as time and all around us? Rather, they picked it out, decoded it,

and discovered its place in their hierarchy. They assigned meaning to it.

Avatar, Lavender-Smith’s second book of fiction, undergoes the same process. It may be that this narrative, like the light of the stars, travels as both particle and wave: do we but try, we can begin at any point and reach it again as either crest or trough. “Friends” (are they the stars?)—discrete, the narrator is at pains to explain, different and noncontinuous with himself—are the subject of the beginning and the end. But a thought, a single, unbroken particle is our impetus and our vessel:

if not for the singular phenomenon of this particular something or other then the empty space would at all times appear entirely white entirely bright with stars entirely bright with starlight there being so many stars so very many stars that at every point at which I look in the blackness somewhere along my line of sight somewhere within the great depths of darkness there should be a star at that precise point very far away the so called empty or black space between the stars appearing empty or black on account of this something or other being there to prevent the starlight from reaching me.

This narrative, like the light of the stars, travels as both particle and wave.

It rolls on and on, discursive and barely comprehensible until it circles back around or goes on to something different, from which point the reader can begin to discern the limits of the space he’s just covered. *Avatar*’s epigraph, from Søren Kierkegaard’s journals, gives us the grid upon which Lavender-Smith plots his novel:

You always need one more light positively to identify another. Imagine it quite dark and then one point of light appears; you would be quite unable to place it, since no spatial relation can be made out in the

dark. Only when one more light appears can you fix the place of the first, in relation to it.

The agony of the narrator, who floats alone between two stars and thus fixes his own position before he begins, is not the question of where to locate some second light, the light by which his narration is fixed—it is here, in the telling, that that relationship is made—the question is not where but of what is it made? Who observes it, and how is it observed?

At the end of the human race, all of the history of our art, the supposedly everlasting appendage of memory, will be overrun, disintegrating right alongside its frail creators. In less than a human lifetime, the imprint of our most advanced technologies will be wiped away, paper, wood, concrete, even steel will reject the hand that bent them, return to their natural state. Only our nuclear waste will be left, the deformed, ugly light of manmade suns, slowly decaying and poisoning everything around them.

In this human-free universe, in among the cosmic microwave background radiation, TV signals and radio waves, the cultural waste of *The Shadow*, *The Tonight Show*, and *The Twilight Zone* will be zooming around the galaxy, forever and ever clacking the last evidence of our existence, until there is no galaxy. Samuel Morse had already entered into immortality on May 24, 1844, when he telegraphed “What hath God wrought?” into perpetuity.

It is a peculiarity of memory that without the right question asked of it, no matter how much data is collected, nothing is stored. There is some Penzias-and-Wilson of the brain, picking out the CMB radiation of our increasingly cluttered culture and showing us what has always been and always will be. *Avatar* is some cousin frequency, a light not to be overlapped, a star by which to find our relation to others. It exists so that we might begin to understand what it means to be a single point of light, in danger of eclipse. Let it and Lavender-Smith not go unnoticed.

Gabriel Blackwell is the book review editor for The Collagist. His short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in Conjunctions, Puerto del Sol, DIAGRAM, Uncanny Valley, and elsewhere. He is the author of Neverland.

SUPER GENRE

SUPER

Aaron Dietz

Emergency Press
http://www.emergencypress.org
236 pages; paper, \$16.00

Aaron Dietz’s *Super* is a study of bureaucratic restrictions and supervillains. And superheroes, too, though they scramble more than they super. The novel is structured as a series of escalating examinations to pass levels and garner promotions. Genre-wise, the novel takes its cues from the SAT and a Super Mario Bros. video game.

The two narrative strains are tucked into the work as reading-comprehension tests: one centers around superhero Robert, coaxing his love life along; the other finds Robert in his pack of superheroes. Being typical superheroes, they find themselves in shootouts attempting to save a water source from being poisoned. A helicopter reels and explodes. And

some of the superheroes meet nasty ends: “Edward was dying at the bottom of the canyon. Or maybe he was finished by now,” reads one account. Worse, their actions are forever under scrutiny. Civilians serviced by these bureaucracy-harangued superheroes have the option to fill out a comment card regarding their experiences of rescue. “I would want to be saved by this superhero again,” the questionnaire reads, and the customer either agrees or disagrees by filling in a bubble with a #2 pencil.

The language of *Super* is dry and static; if it’s being reigned in, it’s reigned in by something with

Derrig continued on next page

super-human strength. “It doesn’t hurt when the front end of the bus wraps itself around me,” Robert says in one moment—in another, “The fire incinerates my clothing, roasting me naked in the street. It hurts.” One despairs, a little, at reading about a man who can fully empathize with a Thanksgiving turkey, but who is tongue-tied, or tongue-singed. Seemingly, language is beside the point, and it’s genre that gives shape to the bulk of the work.

In the work is a whole tangle of genre—even within the exam format, we’re given crosswords, a telegram, letters, poems, comic panels, interviews, and a psychiatric examination, to name a few. There aren’t so much scenes as there are presentations. It is a deluge, and the freneticism of genre-leaping is mirrored in the plot: Robert tumbles in and out of relationships, characters rear up and retreat, and quizzes are pitched at the reader after each selection. “In Document I, what is the primary reason why Asana is going to counseling?” “In Document D, why was Sera willing to care for the narrator, Nelson?” The answer to each of these questions (it’s one of the choices provided in this multiple-choice format): “There is not enough information to figure it out.” These moments, tales, and caped figures are fleeting.

There’s a sweetness (a *strict* sweetness, but sweetness nonetheless) to those moments that are allowed to bloom. Robert is presented as a loaf-of-bread of a man; he drinks wine (wine!) until he vomits. He speaks in telegram-isms. In one moment, he invites his love interest to act as his yoga instructor; they curl up like roly-polies and rock from side to side. The exchange occupies perhaps two inches

on the page; it’s nearly as though the moment curls up as well, shyly tucking in.

Most interesting is Dietz’s efforts at making the book interactive; on his website, he’s releasing a page of the work each day. (Readers are encouraged to print it out for their personal use; binding instructions are even provided.) You’ll also find YouTube clips of the author conducting superhero meetings in lieu of a standard reading. Such actions seem to speak to the efforts at the core of the book: to create a plaything of paper, akin to an adult cootie-catcher. In this attempt, one feels a heartfelt love of literature.

***Aaron Dietz’s Super is a study of
bureaucratic restrictions and
supervillains.***

If the reader is willing to get her hands inky with this work, then she should be prepared to heave out some sighs. The overwhelming trope of the work is desperation—or, in some documents, desperation’s more passive cousin, disappointment. It’s all cloaked in cheekiness. One of the superheroes receives a letter from a person who identifies himself as his “best friend from a time that doesn’t exist anymore.” The writer conjures up a dire description of his future self: “He was the butterfly that flapped its wings and no matter which way he flapped them, the world kept blowing up.” The letter rounds out with a PS: “I can’t tell you my real name, because that ends up blowing up the planet. Sorry.” What emerges from this frantic fragility of it is a strange pitch: the tone (barking

laughter) is that of a cocktail party gone awry.

In one of the early scenes, we meet a member of Robert’s cohort—Irma, who melts things with her touch. She also makes mix-tapes. “Sometimes I have powers that make me dangerous to everyone around me,” she says. In another moment, Irma is made poetic: “Irma says, I want out of / this world / now,” and in this form—deconstructed sentences—she seems to helplessly slide down the page.

Anne Derrig is an MA student at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

TRUTH OR

OR CONSEQUENCE

Cynthia Hogue

Red Hen Press

<http://www.redhen.org>

104 pages; paper, \$18.95

The title of Cynthia Hogue’s *Or Consequence* conjures the phrase “truth or consequences.” The game show by that name ran on and off on radio, then television, for decades. Contestants had to answer obscure trivia questions truthfully or, because they usually couldn’t answer correctly or quickly, faced consequences. These consequences were always surprises, sometimes gags or stunts, and occasionally sentimental reunions. Hogue’s poetry collection, of course, is no game show, but the poems recognize that truth slips away as the buzzer cuts off our thoughts and that the real stuff of life is not truth per se. In the title poem, Hogue writes, “Aren’t we bound at least by consequence? // To have turned things around. Lies truth and truth lies.” It’s the consequences that are the true experiences of this world. *Or Consequence* embodies the effects we experience and our sense of their causes. The poems are inferences.

The word “consequence” comes from the Latin meaning “to follow with, to track together.” In Hogue’s poems, the reader follows beside, even from the first lines of the opening poem, “Étude (on Love)”:

I have been all this
while in transit which is to
say without a clear
aim in mind....

The speaker is already moving, and we keep step, watching images unfold and figuring things out right alongside.

The collection includes five études, three in the first section and two in the last. “Étude” means “study”; Hogue writes studies of love, power, listening, trust, and memory. Traditionally, an étude is a musical composition, relatively difficult and used to practice or demonstrate a particular technique. The technique to which I keep returning with admiration is Hogue’s use of line break. In the opening étude are the following lines:

Do we all go through
this floating from time

to time when the self cannot see
the self so close in its need
to control, which is the urge
to have nothing

change? This desire....

Each line carries its own sense, and also creates meaning with the lines before and after. We are first floating *from*—as a result of, away from—time and then floating from *time to time*—occasionally. Similarly, line breaks recast a blind self into a self that’s not self-aware, then recasts the idea that a person is indistinct from her needs into the idea that the individual has the need to control. Likewise, “the urge / to have nothing” becomes the desire that “nothing // change.”

Anna Leahy

Detail from cover

In *The Sounds of Poetry* (1998), Robert Pinsky observes of line breaks, “the syntax is trying to speed up the line, and the line is trying to slow down the syntax.” He calls this a “pull or dance,” and that’s what Hogue’s lines do. They dance together, pulling back and pushing forward to create richness of meaning. In *The Art of the Poetic Line* (2007), James Longenbach argues for the term “line ending” rather than “line break,” to capture “the shifting effects of three ways of ending the line: annotating lines, parsing lines, and end-stopped lines.” The lines excerpted from “Étude (on Love)” are beautifully annotating in Longenbach’s terms: “rather than following the grammatical units, the lines cut against

Leahy continued on next page