Dancing with the Digital: *Cathy’s Book* and *S.*

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**Abstract**

Discussions about the future of literature and reading tend to assume a paper/digital technologies divide. A similar divide between literary and media studies is entrenched as regards institutional structures and curricula. In reality, the relationship between literature and the Internet/digital media is much more ambiguous and complex. To explore some of these complexities this essay focuses on two print novels that “dance” with the digital: *Cathy’s Book: If Found Call (650) 266-8233* (2006), written by Sean Stewart and Jordan Weisman, and illustrated by Cathy Briggs, and *S.* (2013), written by J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst. While vigorously asserting the primacy of print (not least through their extensive appeal to touch), the novels nudge the reader to enter the digital world, prompting, among others, a re-thinking of the concept of the author and of genre classification. Self-consciously and cautiously, the paper proposes the term “web-augmented novels” to describe the type of texts that *Cathy’s Book* and *S.* stand for: the novels that offer a “bounded” reading experience, while acknowledging the Internet-saturated reality of today’s readers.

**Keywords:** genre classifications, web-augmented novels, joint authorship, *Cathy’s Book: If Found Call (650) 266-8233, S.*

Heavy doses of pronouncements about the impending demise of the novel, of the book, and of print, in general, must have clogged my brain so much that it took me a few seconds to understand what was going on the cover of a newly-arrived book: “Let me state this for the record: The internet is not dead. Digital will not disappear. Print will not kill the web. It’s easy to forget that when physical books were invented, news websites ignored them, and laughed at them as a niche pursuit for geeks” (Losowsky). This delightful mockery of the all too familiar discourse on the imminent demise of print technology and its prime embodiment, the codex, is premised on a provocative and startling reversal of media history.1 Seemingly reinscribing the all too familiar dichotomy, Andrew Losowsky in *Fully Booked* (2013) surprises the reader with a turnabout: “Print or digital? That question is as redundant as asking which is better, red or green? We are in a print AND digital world, and they are better for each other's existence.” He sees print and the digital as “engaged not in a fight, but a dance.”2

I find Losowsky’s metaphor of dance suggestive, but I cannot but wonder what kind of a dance he has in mind; there is, after all, a world of difference between ballroom and stomp dancing; a tango mixes eroticism and combat, proximity and distance, while a disco dance may feature individual bodies bumping randomly against each other. In any case, I would like to appropriate Losowsky’s dance metaphor as a pretext for my discussion of novels that not only make extensive use of the affordances of the print medium but also engage the digital in

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1 Spoofing the rhetoric promoting digital devices seems to be somewhat of a trend today. For instance, IKEA promoted its 2015 paper catalogue by posting a tongue-in-cheek YouTube video, “Experience the power of a bookbook,” which mocks an iPad launch video.

2 Andrew Losowsky’s introduction to *Fully Booked* starts as a blurb on the front cover page and runs for six unnumbered pages.
a broad array of ways. As will become clear, my interest in these novels is not merely scholarly: institutional and pedagogic considerations underline my engagement with the novels.

My concerns here relate to recent transformations in the field of literary studies, the most remarkable of which is the rapid rise of Digital Humanities, a rise which Matthew G. Kirschenbaum claims is as momentous as the emergence of the Birmingham school of Cultural Studies or the Yale school of deconstruction (58). According to Kirschenbaum, there are “some half a dozen reasons” for English departments to be “hospitable settings” (59) for the work done by Digital Humanities. However, since none of the reasons he lists pertains to the core enterprise of literary studies, sense-making, I am skeptical about literature departments accommodating Digital Humanities in the near future. I see it just as unlikely that English departments will wholeheartedly make room for born-digital literature in their curricular as that Media Studies departments will focus on canonical texts. Rather, in all likelihood, literature departments will continue to have the codex in the spotlight, while electronic (or born-digital) literature will be studied in Media Studies departments, at Digital Humanities centers or in institutes. Thus since the type of institutional changes that N. Katherine Hayles, Kirschenbaum, Jessica Pressman, and others have been championing lies in a pretty distant future, a classroom engagement with novels that “dance” with the digital may be a productive way of making students combine their digital and print literacies.

The assumption that, having grown up surrounded by all the “toys and tools of the digital age” (Prensky 1), students are digitally literate is one of the myths surrounding the Net Generation. Unlike their teachers, who are “digital immigrants” (2), students of the Net Generation, it is presumed, not only consume web-based information but also produce content and share it with others; their familiarity with digital technologies and textual productions, such as computer games, one could suggest, makes them positively inclined towards electronic literature. However, while, on the whole, appreciating being informed about the existence of electronic literature, these “prosumers” (Chang qtd. in Kennedy et al., “The Net Generation” 519) or “produmers” (Towers et al. qtd. in Kennedy et al., “The Net Generation” 519) generally show remarkable reluctance to engage with “born digital” texts in a substantial way.

My (admittedly limited) classroom experience is corroborated by the findings of empirical research. For instance, in their study “The Net Generation Are Not Big Users of Web 2.0 Technologies” (2007), Gregor Kennedy et al. report that, while a majority of students frequently search for information on the web and mobile devices, few produce and

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3 For an overview of the short but intense history of the term itself and what it designates, see Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, “What Is Digital Humanities and What’s It Doing in English Departments?” (2010).
4 A word on nomenclature may be in place here. While “English departments” are used in the U.S. as shorthand to indicate institutional sites for studying Literature, in European settings, such departments are likely to host language training, linguistics, and literary studies.
5 See for instance N. Katherine Hayles’s How We Think (2012), a collection of essays, Comparative Textual Media (2013), edited by Hayles and Jessica Pressman, or Matthew G. Kirschenbaum’s “What Is Digital Humanities.”
6 I have but anecdotal explanations for this surprising reluctance, based on my teaching experience. Some students find it frustrating not to be able to get the story at a few clicks; some find electronic texts trivial; others associate dealing with texts on the computer with the pleasure of playing video games and feel a bit embarrassed to have this “low” intellectual activity be part of the “highbrow” setting of the university classroom.
publish material online. Other surveys show that “the transfer from a social or entertainment technology (a living technology) to a learning technology is neither automatic nor guaranteed” (Kennedy et al. 119). Thus though Hayles may be right about our students “incessantly” (How We Think 57) reading and writing in digital media, their engagement with digital devices is mostly in the service of collecting information and communicating. Moreover, while they may use digital technologies for many tasks in their daily life, in classroom situations they tend to be conservative and hesitant.

My interests in how students can be encouraged to develop and combine digital and print-based literacies are akin to those of Hayles’s and others’. But on some points our thinking is quite divergent. For instance, preoccupied with the interpenetration of print and electronic textuality, Hayles resorts to the metaphor of “ecotomes” (Electronic Literature 160), that is, zones between two major ecological communities, to describe the relationships between print and “born digital” (160) texts. “Like biological ecotomes,” Hayles writes, print and electronic texts “engage in a wide variety of relationships, including competition, cooperation, mimicry, symbiosis, and parasitism” (160). While Hayles emphasizes zones of interpenetration, I would like to retain a sense of boundary between the materialization of the text as a discrete physical paper entity and its enhancement on the Internet. Hence the appeal of the dance metaphor.

In what follows, I discuss two instructive examples of print literature’s “dancing” with the digital: the bestseller Cathy’s Book: If Found Call (650) 266-8233 by Sean Stewart, Jordan Weisman, and illustrated by Cathy Briggs, published in 2006, and the cult novel S. by J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst, published in 2013. Both novels are particularly interesting because they exuberantly flaunt the affordances of paper at the same time as they also are extensively supplemented with materials available on the Internet. While asserting their “bookishness” (to use Pressman’s term) with a vengeance, these novels cunningly propel the reader out of the familiar zone of print into the digital world. The extent and type of this supplementation or enhancement vary; it is this variation that makes the two novels such productive case studies. The two novels, I want to propose, can be used to raise the perennial question of the author and to open up a discussion about the changing landscape of literary production. My ambition is to indicate how some of the issues central to electronic literature can be introduced in a course that focuses on print novels.

I.

Let me start by briefly presenting the two novels. Cathy’s Book tells a story of its titular protagonist, Cathy Vickers, a soon-to-be eighteen-year-old high-school senior with a great talent for drawing. Trying to understand why her mysterious boyfriend Victor Chan, age twenty-three, has dumped her, Cathy breaks into his house, finds some puzzling documents, and embarks on a search for the truth about him. Her investigation leads her to a number of dangerous underworld places in San Francisco, especially its Chinatown. Pretty soon she finds herself in a world of mythic Chinese culture, populated by immortal beings. The

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7 For example, see the essays in N. Katherine Hayles and Jessica Pressman’s collection Comparative Textual Media.
increasingly fantastic story of her detective work is braided into the stories about her friendship with Emma and about problems with her recently widowed mother. Cathy records her adventures in a secret journal, in which she includes snippets of her e-mail correspondence with Emma and Victor. She leaves the journal for Emma to find, as we learn by reading the message on the back cover, “in case something happens and I DON’T come back” (Cathy’s Book, emphasis in original). On this cliffhanger the story ends to be continued in the next volume.\footnote{Two volumes, Cathy’s Key (2008) and Cathy’s Ring (2009), follow Cathy’s Book. I deal with the first book only, but my comments are relevant for the whole trilogy.} As this short summary of the plot indicates, the target audience of Cathy’s Book is the category of “young adults,” corresponding quite well with the “digitally native” generation brought up on computer games and mobile devices, which is of importance for the novel’s staging of its engagement with the digital.

As for the intended audience of the book produced by Abrams and Dorst, it is more diverse or “layered” than in the case of Cathy’s Book. The core story is that of an amnesiac man, known only as S., searching for a mysterious woman referred to as Sola (aka Szalómé or Samar). S. finds himself on a ghostly unnamed ship that takes him to various places of conflict which appear to take place in different historical times. Again and again, he is drawn into conspiracies and outbreaks of violence with rebels and disgruntled union members on one side, and the agents and sidekicks of a multinational arms dealer called Vevoda on the other. Eventually, S. finds himself assigned the task of assassinating Vevoda’s agents and then Vevoda himself. At the climax of the story, S. realizes that both he and Vevoda are part of something global and unstoppable, abstains from killing the archvillain, and leaves with the woman he has sought. This bare-bone summary is that of the novel called Ship of Theseus, written by one V.M. Starka, a fictional writer purportedly of the first half of the twentieth century. The mysterious and enigmatic Starka is an object of another story that unfolds through the comments of the (fictional) translator and editor of Ship of Theseus, F.X. Caldeira. The third story layer is that of two readers of Ship of Theseus, Jennifer (Jen) Hayward and Eric Hush, both students at the (fictional) Pollard State University, who collaborate on resolving the mysteries surrounding both Starka and Caldeira, and who, in the process, develop an intimate relationship of their own. Jen and Eric are model readers on the diegetic level, the first a “naïve” but shrewd undergraduate, the other an expelled Ph.D. student who has been studying Ship of Theseus since his teenage years. And, while the implied reader of S. is primarily a sophisticated academic well versed in postmodern literary narratives with their predilection for intertextuality, self-reflexivity, novel-within-a-novel structure, pastiche, parody, and fragmentation, the “real life” reader seems to be “geeks” and fans of Abrams’ work, a fact that has a bearing on the digital enhancement of the novel.\footnote{The novel’s appeal to this category of readers has been repeatedly emphasized in reviews. See, for instance, Mark Athitakis, Graeme McMillan, or Jennifer Vineyard.}

Although Cathy’s Book and S. differ widely in constructing their implied readership and in the complexities of their plots, these differences are less important for my discussion than the commonalities between the two books. One of the most striking features that they share is the presence of numerous print artifacts which are physically separate from the bound volume. On opening Cathy’s Book, the reader finds a plastic envelope glued to the left-hand
cover. The envelope is sealed, a red sticker bearing the following message: “Em—Here’s the proof. Keep it safe. Cathy.” Inside, there are some thirty objects: old photographs, a diner placemat, birth, death, and marriage certificates, a page ripped from a day-timer, business cards, letters, notes, and other items. As for S., it turns out to be but a slipcase for a hardbound book with the title *Ship of Theseus*, which can be accessed once the seal (featuring the names J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst, and images of a monkey and a sail ship) is broken. Tucked between the pages of *Ship of Theseus*, the reader will find over twenty bits of paper artifacts: postcards, copies of documents, handwritten letters on different color paper, pages from the Pollard State University student newspaper, and other newspaper clippings, a paper napkin from the university coffee shop with a detailed campus map drawn on it in ink, and so on.

All the paper items inserted in both books have the optical and haptic qualities of real life objects, offering a rich tactile experience that individualizes the reader’s encounter with the volumes. This overt activation of touch is accompanied by what I call covert haptics: tactility is evoked through an extensive use of the handwritten and the hand-drawn. In *Cathy’s Book*, the reader encounters numerous images that are supposedly drawn by her as well as her handwritten marginal comments; in S., all the communication between the two readers, Jen and Eric, is rendered in the margins of *Ship of Theseus* through their handwritten comments in a variety of colors.

Apart from the presence of seals and ephemera, and the resolute appeal to touch, both novels share yet another feature: they are fashioned as artifacts harking back to the pre-Internet era. Thus *Cathy’s Book* poses as a diary, a private journal, its intimate and personal character underscored by the hand-drawn doodles and other images superimposed on the text. S.—or, to be precise, *Ship of Theseus*—mimics a battered copy of a library book from the 1940s with its de-bossed cover, a Dewey decimal sticker on the edge-worn spine, a note “BOOK FOR LOAN” emblazoned on the front end paper and date stamps of the volume’s borrowing history at the back end paper, and its use of period fonts on aged and stained pages.

**II.**

As must be clear, these commonalities between *Cathy’s Book* and S. all function to flaunt not only the two books’ “bookishness,” which Pressman defines as an exploitation of “the power of the print page in ways that draw attention to the book as a multimedia format” (465), but also, I would like to argue, a variety of forms of paper-based modes of communication and information, such as certificates, newspapers, notes, diaries, or postcards. These function both to position the codex in a broader paper culture and—by mobilizing the handwritten and the tactile—to call attention to the tradition of uniqueness, privacy, and intimacy of writing and reading. Thus both *Cathy’s Book* and S. could be viewed as somewhat nostalgic paens (or would eulogy be more appropriate a term?) to the codex and to paper technology in general. This interpretation is indeed encouraged not only by the artifacts themselves but also by the numerous authorial comments. That *Cathy’s Book* should be gratifying as a codex has been the intention of the authors from the start: “the thing HAD to work as a book, first and foremost; if you never did any of the ancillary material, you still...
had to have an enjoyable, satisfying experience,” says Stewart in interview with Michael Andersen. Also Abrams and Dorst have repeatedly stressed that S. has “intended to be a celebration of the analog, of the physical object,” that it is “intentionally tangible” (qtd. in Rothman). Reviewers too were quick to point out that “[i]t’s almost impossible to imagine S. even existing in a format outside of print, never mind being anywhere near as successful in it” (McMillan).

However, this extensive flaunting of the affordances of print book and paper technology can hardly be interpreted as an act of resistance toward the digital, or as an adversarial attitude toward the Internet. Instead, the Internet is cunningly woven into the very fabric of the narratives, albeit to different degrees. In S., the two readers record their use of the Internet resources to track down information about the mysterious Starka or to disentangle various allusions in Ship of Theseus. Jen has a propensity to use the email sign “@” in her handwritten notes to Eric and refers to her use of the email system. Cathy’s Book draws upon the digital in similar but more extensive ways. The narrative reproduces snippets of email messages; the information given in the main text is glossed with notes about telephone numbers, Internet addresses, or prompts to the intended reader of the journal, Emma, to Google specific facts. That such references to the Internet are made from within the narrative is not surprising; literature, after all, has always engaged with the technology of its times, be it in awe or out of anxiety.

For instance, in Cathy’s Book, it turns out that the reader can call the numbers listed in the book, listen to prerecorded messages, and find information on the Web—both actual sites created specifically for the book. In case the reader misses the prompts to go beyond the print book, a note on the back cover, ostensibly addressed to Emma, urges the reader to call the phone numbers and to check out the websites. If the reader chooses to follow the cues, he/she will find out that the story of Cathy’s adventures is expanded by mini-narratives dispersed across blogs, websites, text messages, and other media platforms. Even on the spine of the inside cover, a doodle prods the reader to get to the DoubleTalk Wireless website, apparently maintained by Cathy’s friend Emma. Apart from the book’s website, there are real MySpace.com pages created for Cathy Vicker with hundreds of registered friends; there are also YouTube videos created by fans. A quintessentially twentieth-first century type of story-telling, Cathy’s Book can be seen as an example of what Henry Jenkins has dubbed

10 Yet, S. has been turned into an ebook. Announcing the book’s audio edition, the publisher put this warning note on its web page: “In S., J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst conceived of a multi-layered novel-within-a-novel that involves handwritten notes in the margins and physical objects slipped between the pages. Because an audio edition is unable to recreate those innately visual pieces and thus the full experience of S., only the text of Ship of Theseus, the novel at the heart of S., has been recorded here” (“Ship of Theseus by V.M Straka”). What I find striking is that only the visual aspect of the book is mentioned; the tactile is ignored.

11 Kathleen Fitzpatrick, for instance, traces the response of the American novel to television in her Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television (2006); in When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking about Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century (1988), Carolyn Marvin discusses the reaction to a number of technologies at the end of the nineteenth century, in particular, telephone and radio; Nancy Armstrong focuses on photography in Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism (1999).

12 Cathy’s Book has two sequels, Cathy’s Key (2008) and Cathy’s Ring (2009). In each case the main title is followed by “If found call,” but the numbers to be called are different.

13 More on Cathy can be found on the “DoubleTalkWireless’ website, the official website of Cathy’s Books as well as on Cathy Vicker’s space on MySpace.com.
“convergence culture,” the prime characteristic of which is a highly complex interaction of old and new media, “a kind of kludge—a jerry-rigged relationship among different media technologies—rather than a fully integrated system” (Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers 17). The range and variety of Internet-based materials that relate to Cathy’s Book and its sequels prompts all kinds of questions about the boundaries of the text: should this material be treated as existing alongside, yet independently from, the print book or as integral to it? Or perhaps only some of the Internet-based material should be treated as part of the narrative? If so, what are the principles of inclusion or exclusion? Should we think of a text message as having a different status in relation to the narrative than, say, a birth certificate found among the material in the evidence pack?

As far as S. is concerned, it elicits both similar and different questions, as it is involved in a different type of “dance” with the Internet universe. The publication of the novel was preceded by a release of a cryptic video teaser, shot in black and white, featuring a man staggering to get out of water, his mouth stitched, a voiceover stating: “He arrived knowing nothing of himself. Who is he? Soon he will know.” Entitled simply “Strange,” the trailer gives no indication of what it advertises, which has stirred a lot of excitement and speculation in the blogosphere: Is it a teaser for prequels and sequels to Cloverfield or Lost? An adaptation of DC comics’ Phantom Stranger? A cryptic reference to the new Star Wars film? This type of marketing strategy has become quite frequent, if not always equally successful. The publication of the print volume was accompanied by the inception of several websites and other digital platforms. On some of them the story appears to continue; some focus on both explaining textual details and multiplying textual mysteries. Most often the provenance of the digital platforms is obscure, unclear, and suspicious. The Radio Straka station, we learn in an interview with Dorst, conducted by Jennifer Vineyard, is put together by the British publisher. An elaborate website S.files22, self-identified as “examining the clues in the novel by J. J. Abrams & Doug Dorst,” is declared to have been created by “a bunch of J. J. Abrams / Bad Robot fans who love a good mystery.” The fans emphasize: “We are not associated with Bad Robot Productions, J. J. Abrams or any other production company, we are just ordinary people who want to make the world a better place” (“About S.Files22”). The Straka Dossier site is identified as having been compiled by one J. W. Dominguez, while the provenance of the extensive blog “Who is Straka” on WordPress.com has turned out to be impossible to identify. Even more uncertainty surrounds the Twitter feeds: Jen and Eric communicate with some irregularity about issues related to S. Are the tweets official (authorial) continuations of the chapters from the book? Are they inventions from clever fans? And how about @MyTheseus, #StrakaNews or Jen’s Tumblr site? Are these accounts constructed by Dorst? Responding to the questions about the authorship behind the sites, Dorst tends to cast even more mystery over the activities on digital platforms. Asked by Vineyard, “Are you or the publishers behind the Jen and Eric Twitter feeds? Or is that something a fan is doing in homage to them?,” he responds:

14 Frantic activity around S. is also going on outside of the U.S., for instance in France at “S. ou Le Bateau De Thesee,” a designated web forum “consacre a l’œuvre de J. J. Abrams, Doug Dorst & V. M. Straka.”
16 See Jen Heyward <@JenTheUndergrad>, Eric Husch <@EricHusch>, Jen Heyward “For What It’s Worth.”
Okay. So there are some extra things living on the web that I have composed. There are things on the web that I did not compose, but I have no idea who did. So all I can say is this particular thing I did not do, but I don’t know [who did]. It could be a fan, it could be someone at the publisher, it could be someone at Bad Robot. I remain willfully ignorant. But it’s still too early in the game to say which ones [I’ve handled].

So if S. itself is a goldmine of false trails, red herrings, and disguise, the digital platforms that are spun round the novel only multiply its mysteries and puzzles.

III.

The point I want to make is that, more often than not, it is impossible to say if the digitally existing extensions of the story have been authored by the same people who wrote the paper novel or if they have been fabricated by fans. Nor is it possible to say what is a hoax and what is not. This makes one of the foundational (if romantic) notions in literary studies, that of a solitary author, undergo, once again, a metamorphosis, albeit a different one than was triggered off by Michéle Foucault’s or Roland Barthes’s poststructuralist pronouncements of the “death of the author”: what we are faced with is not the death (of the myth) of a solitary author but a rise of collaborative authorship. Pondering the question about the survival of the very notion of authorship under the pressures of the World Wide Web, Umberto Eco once said: “I do not see how the fascinating game of producing collective, infinite stories through the Net can deprive us of authorial literature.” Eco’s use of “collective” refers to the activity of readers who may augment, alter, edit, or, in other ways, reconfigure a text written by somebody else; such authoring activities may be distinguished from collaborative authorship which asserts the rights to original work. Yet, even acknowledged and copyrighted collaborative authorship is far from unproblematic.

Let me start with the simple observation that both Cathy’s Book and S. list two people as authors and copyright claimants. However, the nature of this joint authorship, of who has done what, is unclear. Here the information that can be garnered from interviews is of some help. Stewart, a science fiction and fantasy writer, explains in his interview with Andersen that it is Weisman, a game designer, who has come up with the original concept for Cathy’s Book, but that the broad outlines of the story have been sketched by both of them.17 When the publisher suggested that the book be adapted to an iPhone, both Stewart and Weisman were enthusiastic, but the credit, he says, “really goes to our talented and creative publishers.” He goes on to name some of the App team people: “Peter Costanzo, Jaimee Callaway, Rick Joyce at Perseus Books Group, Tane Ross (a very talented animator), the terrific folks at Expanded Books, and Laura Flanagan, the insanely talented actor who read the audiobooks.”

In the same vein, Dorst, in his interview with Edward M. Eveld, gives the credit for S. as a final product to others: “When I first got the book in hand, I thought that this is by far the

17 The title page of Cathy’s Book lists three people under the title: Stewart, Weisman, and Brigg. Brigg, identified as the designer of the interior of the novel, is distinct from the copyright-holding duo of Stewart and Weisman. According to Andersen, Brigg is added as a co-author of the novel but has transferred her claim to Stewart and Weisman (“The Rise of the Producer-Novelist” 61). Apart from legal issues, the systematic exclusion of Brigg in reviews or sales promotions is surprising, given the fact that her design is not only integral but also essential to the multimodal character of the text.
most beautiful book I’ve ever seen. Really, I feel fortunate that my words get to be in it. They did a fantastic job, the publisher and design teams” (“There is a Lot to Be Found in S. by J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst”). Dorst’s modest reduction of his authorship to “words” in the book is quite ingenuous on two counts. First, what are novels if not words? Second, Abrams, although listed as a co-author, has repeatedly insisted that Dorst should be regarded as the author of the book, his own role limited to having come up with the idea of creating a book-within-a-book. In his interview with Rothman, Abrams admits that the idea of “a very cool book that was completely annotated” is his, but hastens to say that he “pitched” it to Dorst and that Dorst “ran with it” (“The Story of S.: Talking to J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst,” emphasis in original). As he proceeded with writing the book, Dorst consulted with Abrams and other people at Bad Robot, Abram’s production company. Joe Berkowitz describes the process of writing S. He explains:

Abrams gave Dorst carte blanche to write the Straka novel as he saw fit. The author would go off and write a chapter, and deliver it to [Lindsey] Weber [the head of the film division at Bad Robot] so she could make notes. Once the two had produced a specific arc or a two-to-three-chapter movement, they would bring the material to Abrams, who would decide what was working and what wasn’t. In essence, Dorst was steering the ship while Abrams was guiding its course. (“Inside J.J. Abrams’s Brain-Bending Book-Within-a-Book”)

Comments and confessions like these reveal how problematic the concept of joint authorship really is: in what sense is an idea-giver an author? If the design is vital to the product, why are designers not copyright holders? After all, in both Cathy’s Book and S. images powerfully participate in storytelling and it is the books’ design that makes the novels unique.

Co-authored novels, though not unheard of, have been rather rare. To the better known examples belong The Gilded Age (1873), co-authored by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, and the three novels that Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford wrote, which are The Inheritors (1901), Romance (1903), and The Nature of a Crime (1909). In recent years, however, joint authorship in fiction writing is on the rise. The collective and collaborative authoring of fictional texts is a particularly interesting phenomenon when readers become co-authors, sometimes spontaneously, sometimes on the encouragement of the “original” writers. Such blurring of the roles of writers and readers lies at the core of the young-adult mystery series called The Amanda Project, launched in June 2009 and terminated four years later, in June 2012. The readers were invited to discuss the text on a website with a promise that some of the comments may be incorporated into the novel. Announcing the end of the project, the project’s team posted this thank you note to the readers:

We welcomed tens of thousands of girls from around the world who have contributed hundreds of thousands of pages of stories, poems, art, songs, comments, and theories—about Amanda, about themselves, and about life in general.

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18 See Mark Medley and John Simmons.
In the process, The Amanda Project became much more than a fictional hunt for a mysterious missing character. It became a unique experiment in collaborative fiction, a vibrant online magazine, and most importantly, a community of talented writers and artists who supported each other in their creative work.

Each one of you has contributed to making the site the remarkable place that it is, together, you have produced an original work of art that is unlike anything else in the world—either online or off. (“Dear Friends of Amanda”)

In Amanda’s Project, the author becomes a project leader; in the case of Cathy’s Book or S., one of the copy-holding authors appears to be an idea-giver; in both novels, the role of the designers is hardly acknowledged, although it is their work that makes the novels interesting as specimen of multimodality. The uncertain authorial provenance of the web-based sites further destabilizes the traditional understanding of the author which, in the codex format, is indicated by the copyright sign.

IV.

It is important to restate a point that this article has already made: while both S. and Cathy’s Book resolutely insist on their codex format and celebrate their “bookishness,” they also take advantage of the Internet and other digital platforms to expand or complement the print text. In this they are far from alone; rather, they are representative of an important trend in contemporary literature, a trend that raises the question of the place of such novels in the current literary ecosystem. As experimental narratives that combine text with web-based features are becoming quite common, how are we to refer to them? What is the landscape of literary genres today? My concern with nomenclature is motivated less by a desire to show how difficult it is to find a satisfying designation for novels, such as Cathy’s Book or S., rather than by a pedagogic impulse: by asking students to reflect on the various forms of dancing of print with the digital, we can make them aware of the problematic of genre as well as help them realize how varied and rich electronic literature is today.

There is no shortage of terms that have been proposed in the past two or so decades in response to the emergence of new literary forms available on electronic platforms. This proliferation of terms is an issue in itself, since rather than offer guidance and clarity, they make the literary field appear even more unruly and complicated. Let me start with an uncontroversial observation about what novels like Cathy’s Book or S. are not. They are definitely not digital fictions, if digital fiction is defined as “fiction written for and read on a computer screen that pursues its verbal, discursive and/or conceptual complexity through the digital medium, and would lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function if it were removed from that medium” (Bell et al.). At this point, the nomenclature that may be used to refer to the type of novels that concern me here becomes more of a challenge: since Cathy’s Book, S., and similar codex novels “dance” with the digital in a variety of ways, a number of terms may appear to be at least partly applicable. Yet, I find none of the existing ones satisfactory.

The categories of hypertexts, interactive or network fiction (which Hayles sees as sub-genres of electronic literature), have been used to refer to both Cathy’s Book and S. Although at times engaging tweets, these are not Twitter stories unlike Jennifer Egan’s “Black Box”
(2012) or David Mitchell’s “The Right Sort” (2014). Nor are they “vooks” like Richard Doetsch’s thriller Embassy (2009); such “enriched ebooks” (a term often used as synonymous to “vooks”) are available on computer screen or even a mobile phone and interspersed with invitations to play brief embedded video sequences or check a link to the internet and social media, although both Cathy’s Book and S. do contain some such elements in their app formats. Similarly, it is as tempting as it is problematic to call Cathy’s Book or S. digi-novels, a term coined by Anthony Zuiker to describe his and Duane Swierczynski’s Level 26 series of stories. This interactive crime thriller affords the reader several levels of engagement, such as reading the book like any traditional novel, entering a “code” at Level26.com every thirty pages or so provided in the book, watching a film clip, or even participating in communal completion of the novel on a designated website. Neither of the novels I have discussed refers the reader to the websites with a similar regularity; the websites that are invoked in the narratives are not essential to the story line.

But how about calling Cathy’s Book or S. “transmedia narratives”? Indeed, a combination of printed text with other media seems to make them good examples of exactly this form of narrative. However, a closer look at Jenkins’ definition (which, as he himself admits, shifts) reveals that neither Cathy’s Book nor S. fulfills the requirements he builds into it. According to him, transmedia story telling is “a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story” (“Transmedia 202,” italics in original). Although it has been broadly circulated, Jenkins’s definition of transmedia story telling begs an important question: How systematic, unified, or coordinated does the process have to be? What are the criteria of evaluating this systematicity? Even without a precise answer, it is clear that, contrary to what critics like Andersen claim, neither Cathy’s Book nor S. can be forwarded as exemplars of “a growing trend in publishing in which novels interweave story threads from different media to create a cohesive and interactive storytelling experience for readers” (“The Rise” 48) for the simple reason that no such cohesion is created. Whatever the interactive experience the texts may offer, it is not systematic; instead, it is quite whimsical and unpredictable.

To classify Cathy’s Book as an Alternate Reality Game (ARG), as Lisa Dusenberry does, is equally problematic. Although there is as yet no agreement as to how to define ARG, most propositions emphasize a gaming process that involves players working collaboratively through email, phone/text-message contact, real time interactions, and extensive online engagement; the paper artifact, which is so central to Cathy’s Book, is totally irrelevant for ARG.

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19 Jennifer Egan’s experimental text was announced by The New Yorker on 23 May 2012; it was tweeted in hourly installments over ten days from 8.00 pm to 9.00pm EST and published in magazine on 4 June 2012. David Mitchell’s Twitter short story was tweeted over roughly five days.
20 The moniker Cydecks/Cybooks, launched more or less simultaneously with vooks, never became popular, and the idea has apparently vanished.
21 They leave unaddressed the question of distinctions between vooks and digi-books. Quite often the two terms are used as synonyms, pulling into their orbit even multimedia books (see, for example, Monica Hesse).
22 One of the most sustained attempts to define ARG may be found in Dave Szulborski’s This Is Not a Game (2005). Noting the difficulty of defining ARG, he sees this type of artifact as a combination of a video game, an
My reluctance to employ terms such as transmedia, interactive, networked, and others in discussions of Cathy’s Book or S. stems from the concern that they overemphasize the digital media aspects of the narratives. This is, of course, in line with a more general tendency to privilege digital books in today’s literary landscape. Joseph Tabbi, for instance, sees literature as a “print-based system existing at the margins of the defining media of our time” (xi). For him, books “must now link up [. . .] with a wider, distributed media network” rather than remain “instances of a bounded, individuated organization” (xi). Raine Koskimaa too claims that “literature in the traditional sense has given way to electronic and, increasingly, digital media in the overall media landscape.” Actually, I find Losowsky’s somewhat quirky reversal of today’s mantras much more appealing: it is the paper book that leads the dance; the Internet follows. So I would like to propose the concept of “web-augmented novels” to describe the type of “dance” between print and the digital of which Cathy’s Book or S. are good examples. It is, of course, with an enormous dose of self-consciousness that I propose this term: not only does this entail adding yet another concept to a plethora of already existing and unruly ones, but the term is haunted by the established, if vague, notion of augmented reality. Defined as the real-time interaction of a virtual scene generated by the computer with a real-world environment, augmented reality is primarily associated with games and entertainment, although the notion of “augmented reality novels” has recently been used to describe such diverse phenomena as the publication of classic texts supplemented with moving images and sound as well as multiplatform creations a la James Frey’s Endgame: The Calling (2014). In contradistinction to “augmented reality novels,” the concept of web-augmented novels does not stress the enhancement of reality or the production of virtual scenes, but the supplemental character of the material that can be found on the Internet.

To reiterate: what I want the term to indicate is that the web-based material is auxiliary, that it offers a surplus to a bounded paper volume which works alone as a readable novel. Readers of Cathy’s Book or S. do not have to shift between the paper volume and the websites; they do not have to go online to engage with the stories. However, they will find themselves encouraged to plug into the digital network. If they do visit the websites in response to the clues in the narrative, or out of the habit of looking for information on the Internet, they will come across new information, additional bits of narrative and clues about how to solve mysteries. Such websites bring the readers together to pool their knowledge to solve some mysteries and, at times, create new ones. They offer a surplus to a bounded paper volume but do not replace it.


23 In partnership with Zappar Application, Penguin Books has published classics, such as Moby Dick or Great Expectations, as augmented reality novels. After having downloaded a mobile application, the reader/user can access the content of the novel by pointing the camera at the book cover to bring the book to digital life and engage in a highly interactive relation with the text. But it must be noted that even James Frey’s Endgame: The Calling, perhaps the prime example of an attempt to turn “static print into an interactive experience” (Farr), cannot overcome the supplementary nature of added content. As Nathan Ingraham notes, Endgame “might have the most involved and deeply layered supplementary content of any piece of media in recent memory, but at its core it’s still just that: supplemental.”
Novels such as *Cathy’s Book* or *S.* can be productively used in classroom settings to contest the entrenched divide between institutional curricular, privileging a bounded paper volume and the Net generation’s preference for things digital. Such preferences, reported, for instance, by Tom Bradshaw and Bonnie Nichols in *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* (2004), painted a gloomy future for the codex and the reading habits: soon, we were warned, the “traditional reading experience involving a fat novel, a fireplace and a cup of tea” (Hesse) would be a matter of the past. With *Cathy’s Book* and *S.*, bewitching paper novels both, the readers may curl in an armchair, a computer, or an iPad at hand, and choose the type of dance between the codex and the digital in which to engage.

**Works Cited**


