“We are living in a material world and I am a material [text]”: Metamateriality in Twenty-First Century American Fiction

by

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In 1984, Madonna sang that she was a material girl living in a material world. The music video to accompany the song replicated a scene from the 1953 film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* in which Marilyn Monroe sang that diamonds were a girl’s best friend. In her music video, Madonna replicates not only Monroe’s look, but also her style and the materialistic message of the song. Though she rose to popularity in the 1980s, Madonna remains active if not popular in music and pop culture today, having reinvented herself multiple times to adapt to the changing culture. In a 2015 honors seminar that I taught at SUNY Orange, “And but so: Post- and Post-postmodern America,” sophomore student Connor Rhodes aptly pointed out in a final presentation the many ways in which Madonna, who has begrudgingly become known as “The Material Girl,” embodies many aspects of postmodernism, particularly in her willingness to change her identity to adapt to the changing times. When the materialism of the 1980s was no longer the status quo, she shifted to the 1990s’ high-fashion look, occasionally channeling Marie Antoinette or Marilyn Monroe, who never quite left her repertoire. As with any artist, Madonna looked not only to the past, but also to the future to know how to connect to her audience. Literary artists of the past and present have done the same to connect to their readers, though in literature, it may not be as visually obvious as Madonna’s visual and cultural transitions through the years. The creators of physically- and visually-driven texts, namely *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and *Tree of Codes* by Jonathan Safran Foer, *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski, and *S.* by J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst, find equally enthralling methods to keep readers engaged and interested in the material texts they create.
When modernist fiction writer Ernest Hemingway introduced his “Iceberg Theory” of minimalist writing, it was relatively revolutionary. In a 1958 interview in the *Paris Review*, Hemingway told George Plimpton, “I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven-eighths of it underwater for every part that shows. Anything you know you can eliminate and it only strengthens your iceberg. It is the part that doesn’t show. If a writer omits something because he does not know it then there is a hole in the story.” At the time, Hemingway’s style was experimental yet of the moment: World War I had left in its wake a landscape of uncertainty and disunity. Americans, including American readers, were often left attempting to define the meanings in absences, the significance between presences.

However, although Hemingway is credited as the originator of the “Iceberg Theory,” it was likely an idea from his first wife, Hadley Richardson; in a letter to Hemingway in August 1921, Richardson writes, “If only one could...find the scheme behind any subject tackled. I found something like that in music a little once, but you've got a magnificent grip...on the form back of the material no matter how strange it is, like icebergs” (Beegel qtd. in Moreland 50). Hemingway is credited with this modernist artifact, but its origins do not come from nothing; the same can be said of experimental forms before or since. They often begin organically as observations of societal and cultural changes in the world around the writer; the writer and his work adapt—as Richardson observes of Hemingway’s writing—perhaps knowing that his readers, too, are adapting and changing. With time, we may forget where certain ideas or theories have come from,¹ but their impact lasts nonetheless. Hemingway’s incarnation of minimalism, his concealing and absenting seven-eighths of the story, engaged the reader in Roland Barthes’s

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¹ Though one could easily argue that Hemingway did not “forget,” but resisted giving any credit to his wife.
writerly sense; he expected the reader to, as anomalous postmodern minimalist Raymond Carver explains in 1981, “engage” her “own artistic sense” in order to achieve the totality of the story.

Over half a century later, postmodern fiction writer David Foster Wallace does the opposite of Hemingway and later Carver: Through encyclopedic, maximalist detail, Wallace’s reader must work to find the tip of the iceberg; she must work to find the point within that one-eighth that Hemingway would have provided. One need only compare Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants” (1925) and Wallace’s maximalist retelling, “Good People,” (2007)—later §6 of *The Pale King* (2011)—to see this stylistic difference. Wallace essentially “retells” the Hemingway’s story of the American and the girl’s uncertainty over whether or have an abortion with an opposite style—Hemingway provides only the tip of the iceberg whereas Wallace provides everything under the surface. Wallace’s reader must engage her “artistic sense” to weed out the information that is not integral to plot development or text creation to determine what exists in that one-eighth similar to how Hemingway’s reader’s engagement to find the seven-eighths. Whereas Carver and Hemingway believe that engaging one’s “artistic sense” involves constructing what is not present in the missing seven-eights of the text, Wallace’s version involves the reader sifting through encyclopedic information, immersion in every detail that the protagonist, in the case of “Good People” Lane A. Dean, Jr., experiences. She must not only engage her artistic sense, but also her human sense. Like Lane, the reader would likely experience the world similarly, noticing every person, every felled tree, every breeze, however insignificant it might be to the forward movement of the plot. However, in Wallace’s

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2 “The reader” will employ the feminine pronoun as a Wallacean nod.
encyclopedic, maximalist structuring, such detail is pertinent to the experience of the story: it important to Lane’s experience, and therefore the reader’s mimetic experience of Lane’s.

In 1976, Edward Mendelson defines the “encyclopedic narrative,” now more popularly referred to today as “maximalism,” the veritable opposite of Hemingway’s minimalism. According to Mendelson, all encyclopedic narratives formally include the following: 1. “Encyclopedic narratives all attempt to render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture, while identifying the ideological perspectives from which that culture shapes and interprets its knowledge” while “necessar[ily] mak[ing] use of synecdoche” (1269); 2. “Encyclopedic narratives...are set near the immediate present, although not in it” (1269, emphasis original); 3. “An encyclopedic narrative is...an encyclopedia of narrative” (1270, emphasis original); 4. “Most encyclopedic works include characters who try unsuccessfully to live according to the conventions of another genre” (e.g. romance, epic, novel) (1270); 5. Encyclopedic narrative identifies itself not by a single plot or structure but by encompassing a broad set of qualities,” such as “a full account of technology or science” (1270), “an account of an art outside the real of written fiction” (1270-71); 6. “[A]ll encyclopedic narratives name a vast number of jobs and professions, all the varieties of work and labor (1271); and 7. “Each encyclopedic narrative is an encyclopedia of literary styles, ranging from the most primitive and anonymous levels of proverb-lore to the most esoteric heights of euphemism” (1271).

Mendelson’s definition is vast and pre-dates Wallace by several decades; it also focuses on what is capable in the encyclopedic novel, not shorter narratives such as “Good People”; pared down, though, much of Mendelson’s criteria can be seen in “Good People” and The Pale King, of which it eventually became one section, as well as many of the texts discussed herein, though they
would likely not fall into the conventional categorization of “maximalist” or “encyclopedic.” Though “Good People is only one very short piece of Wallace’s oeuvre, it can microcosmically point to the larger structural strategies in Wallace’s works, and in maximalism as a style. What Wallace does with Lane's thought process in “Good People” is a short introduction to what he does with the maximalist style. Through maximalism, Wallace increases interaction with the reader, engaging her in the same sort of epistemological meaning- and decision-making as the protagonist of the work himself. The reader has all of the information--to an encyclopedic level--as Lane, and she, like Lane, must sift through it to fine meaning.

Published over eighty years apart, Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants” and Wallace’s “Good People” both approach the topic of young couples struggling with unexpected pregnancies, but the two authors use antithetical styles; Hemingway uses his signature minimalist iceberg style, whereas Wallace is maximalist in his retelling. Hemingway’s story closely follows the Freytagian structure, beginning with a fairly explicit exposition describing location both in the world and more specifically in the train station bar, time of day, and the players in the story--the unnamed American and girl. From there, though, he does not give much other than dialogue with very few speaker tags; so few, in fact, that it is sometimes difficult to to keep track of who says what, requiring some backtracking. Due in part to the story’s 1925 publication, but even more productively because of Hemingway’s style, the word “abortion” is not used by the narrator nor spoken by either character. Hemingway’s ambiguity of language--his minimalism--creates “a series of indefinite pronouns whose antecedents, like the story’s unspoken abortion, bust me inferred. The story’s first ‘it’ has to b the abortion; the second, the pregnancy; and the third, the child” (Wyche 64). Hemingway's imprecise language thereafter is
productive, though, as it leads the reader to consider the “it” that the American and the girl are discussing as one, two, or all three of those possible antecedents.

Wallace’s retelling, on the other hand--or more accurately perhaps, on the other side of the same hand--does not include any imprecise language, but perhaps imprecise implications of importance of detail. Whereas in Hemingway’s “Hills” the reader clings to every word in order to engage with and produce the Text, Wallace’s reader must determine what is not integral to plot building and production. The importance of some of Wallace’s detail is that it is there--it is there to remind us of what we are inundated with on a regular basis, and in the case of Lane, the things that he must deal with in addition to his current situation with Sheri. “Good People,” unlike “Hills,” includes no dialogue and an omniscient narrator limited to the thoughts of Lane, a nineteen-year-old junior college student in a relationship with Sheri Fisher, whose last name could be a possible nod to Lane and Sheri’s deep Christian values--though obviously not deep enough to prevent them from engaging in pre-marital sex. In Wallace’s retelling, Freytag has been all but forgotten and every detail of Lane’s thoughts and surroundings, significant to the forward movement of the plot or not, has been included. Even insignificant people around the park where Lane and Sheri sit get attention, leaving the average reader wondering who they are and what significance, literal or figurative, they might have. It turns out to be likely none--that I or any published critics have been able to discern, anyway. Lane and Sheri never have a discussion like Hemingway’s American and girl do, at least not in the text that we have access to. They must, as they exist in later sections of The Pale King, but in “Good People” as a standalone, all we have from Sheri is what Lane anticipates that she might say.
Both stories end unresolved, but with the American and Lane in their own ways removing agency from the girl and Sheri. The American does not seem to care what the girl wants; he claims that he does, but continues to insist that an operation that he has never and will never experience is “awfully simple” and not a big deal. Similarly, Lane internally negotiates the situation without Sheri’s input, thinking only about the impact on himself, not on her, and he hopes that she will “carry this, and have it, and love it, and make no claim on Lane except his good wishes and respecting what she has to do,” letting him off every possible hook. He would not have to take responsibility for the child, but he also would not have to be part of an abortion, clearly against his strong Christian beliefs. Each story in its own way engages the reader’s artistic sense and depicts an equally unlikable protagonist. Wallace’s, however, allows for more empathy as we see into Lane’s mind and know the reasons for his selfish thoughts, whereas we know nothing of the American’s thought process. This difference is indicative not just of the difference of style, but of the historical moments in which the pieces were produced, and the type of reader-engagement expected and desired by each writer in their time.

Hemingway’s modernist impulse lead him to resist the traditional realism that ruled in the nineteenth century before him not to confuse his reader or to impinge comprehension or Textual production, but to increase engagement. But as as reader gets used to a particular style and format, it becomes second nature. For Wallace, then, maximalism was the reaction to the emptiness of early postmodernism that preceded his writing. In a similar way, then, the metamaterial style reacts to the empty materialism of the 1980s and 1990s, such as Bret Easton Ellis and the Literary Brat Pack, and the hyperdigital of the 1990s and early aughts. The metamaterial texts propose to engage the twenty first century readers, insistently demanding
physical attention at a level similar to how Hemingway and Wallace’s use of minimalism and
maximalism demanded attention, awareness, and intellectual interaction in order to participate in
the production of the Text. Just as the initial readers of minimalism and maximalism were aware
of the roles that they must take in constructing meaning through engagement of their “artistic
sense[s],” the reader of a metamaterial text is acutely aware of the physical book that she holds in
her hands.

In the twenty-first century, reader engagement requires more and different strategies that
go beyond even the previously thought of as infinite maximalist or encyclopedic narrative. The
twenty-first century reader is constantly inundated with myriad and sometimes simultaneously
arriving stimuli, which makes reading a traditional realist, linear narrative not something that she
works to create with the author, but rather something that she receives from the static work. Such
traditional narratives rely on more traditional linguistic devices and do not in themselves invite
the reader to participate in the creation of the Text in a writerly way, one with which the reader
must actively engage to help create the Text from the work. Twenty-first century readers need
different strategies and structures to defamiliarize the reading process; writerly fiction has always
been arguably revolutionary, untraditional; the major strategy implemented in the twenty-first
century to defamiliarize readers and create writerly texts has been the move toward more
insistently and self-consciously material texts, in other words, metamaterial texts, texts that, like
metafiction does predominantly through its linguistic or printed content, reminds readers of their
material form and existence in the material world, establishing themselves as artifacts in the
actual, real world in which the reader herself exists. Twenty-first century texts must engage in
metamateriality in order to fully immerse the twenty-first century reader in the most productive,
writerly ways possible; the more the materiality of a text insists on its own physical form, the more interaction the reader must have with the work. The materiality of such texts ultimately gives the reader a sense of control over the text while simultaneously controlling her: if she wants the whole story, there are certain actions in which she must engage, or she will not produce the full Text.

For Roland Barthes, work and text are not identical terms. In his 1971 “From Work to Text” (translated to English in 1977), Barthes clarifies that “the work can be seen (in bookshops, in catalogs, in exam syllabuses), the text is held in language, only exists in the movement of a discourse (or rather, it is Text for the very reason that it knows itself as text)” (157). In other words, Barthes posits, “Text is experienced only in an activity of production” (157, emphasis original). It stands to reason, then, that the reader must participate in production of the Text. The Work is the object, the static artifact produced by the author, but the dynamic product created by the reader interacting with the author’s creation becomes a dynamic Text, changing with each reader and even when each reader reads at new times of her life. Near the close of the chapter, Barthes insists “that the Text requires that one try to abolish (or at the very least to diminish) the distance between writing and reading, in no way by intensifying the projection of the reader into the work, but by joining them in a single signifying practice” (162). When Barthes wrote in the 1960s and 1970s, he was aware of early metafiction, such as the stories of Jorge Luis Borges’s Ficciones (1944) and Vladimir Nabokov’s Pale Fire (1962). However, he was unlikely to foresee the metamaterial works and Texts that were to come, particularly in light of his argument in “The Death of the Author,” published with “From Work to Text” in Image - Music - Text (1971).
In “The Death of the Author,” Barthes predicted the falling away and future diminishment of the author based on the trend of authors absenting themselves at the time during which he wrote his argument. With such an stance, Barthes would likely not be of the camp of the constructors of the metamaterialists who have a history and a bibliography that we are interested in and that we learn about. Instead, he sees “the modern scriptor” as “born simultaneously with the text” and as “in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing” (Barthes, “Death” 145). As soon as a word takes form on the page, Barthes says, a “disconnection occurs, the voices loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins” (142). While the metamaterial texts do encourage us to question the authorial force behind a book, the author that exists in the material world is inherently part of that conversation, asserting himself as part of the world of the book; Jonathan Safran Foer has done so in his short work “A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease” (2002), which features a protagonist named Jonathan, and even more so Everything is Illuminated (2003), whose protagonist is named Jonathan Safran Foer and goes on a journey virtually identical to one that the material world’s Foer goes on while in college.

The move from the privileging of work to the privileging of Text leads to, for Barthes, the “Death of the Author.” Barthes admits that the “sway of the Author remains powerful” since “the new criticism has often done no more than consolidate it” (143). Such an argument seems contradictory to the above argument of the importance of the reader’s writerly involvement in construction of Text. But, he continues, “[I]t is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality (not at all to be confused with the castrating objectivity of the realist novelist), to reach that point where only language acts, ‘performs’, and not
‘me’” (143). Barthes diverts agency from the Author once the words leave his pen—or more accurately for the contemporary novelist, his keyboard. The language “suppress[es] the author in the interests of writing” (143). However, the contemporary author has reasserted himself in the work while simultaneously asserting the reader and insisting that she, too, do some work as well. The author is no longer “the past of his own book” (145) as Barthes suggests, but right there creating the Text along with the reader. The reader and author must work together, now, to create the Text. The work may indeed now be in the past, but the Text is ever-present, and the author is ever-present with it, even if he brings along with him questions of author, authority, and authorial voice.

Materiality at the End of the Twentieth Century

In a forthcoming collection on American Fiction in the 1990s, Mary K. Holland explores materiality in the midst of the digital age, when “our late twentieth-century anxiety” led to the fear that “technology [would] make art, its testimony, and perhaps the material world disappear” ([1]). As a result, Holland posits a meta-explosion at the end of the twentieth century resulting from textual materiality necessarily “redefin[ing], if not defend[ing] itself” against the digital materiality of the 1990s, and becoming “a literary aspect demanding consideration by authors and readers alike” ([1]). Holland points to two main types of textual materiality in the 1990s: “texts that recognize the physicality of the medium that contains language, pointing to and often distorting the material aspects of the traditional print book; and those that emphasize the visual and physical properties of language on the page, and its ways of acting materially in

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3 While not ideal, in spite of using feminine pronouns to refer to “the reader,” I use the masculine pronouns to refer to “the writer” here merely because all authors discussed at length in this essay are men.
the world or materializing the world in language” ([2]). I am primarily concerned with the twenty-first century metamateriality that aligns with Holland’s first organizing type: texts that recognize their own physicality. In a hyper-digital world in which texts are becoming materially transparent or metaphysical, it is important for readers and critics of those books with material, physical bodies to be aware of and acknowledge those material bodies.

As Holland argues, this first type “draws attention to the physical properties of the printed texts as works of art, as things in the world, rather than allowing literature to become synonymous with transparent textuality” ([2], emphasis added). The rise of early metafiction did not allow for texts to hide their own structural forms--Freytag’s triangle was revealed; likewise, the rise of this new form of metamateriality does not allow for books to hide their own physical bodies. The reader is no longer permitted to forget that she is holding a book in her hands; when the book’s creator--whether that involves author, visual artist, digital creator, or any other number of people involved--produces the metamaterial object effectively, it reminds her of that object’s physical body in ways that enable her to produce the Text. Even in the 1990s, for example, with David Foster Wallace’s nearly three-pound *Infinite Jest* (1996), it is impossible for the reader to forget that she is holding, in essence, a brick of paper through which she must navigate, often flipping from main text to paratextual end notes and back again. The physical heaviness of the book mimics the emotional and intellectual heaviness of the text. The 1990s ushered in the trend of “physically assertive literature” (Holland [2]) some of which has become more so since.

Holland as well as N. Katherine Hayles in 2008 and Jessica Pressman in 2009 all mention the anxiety felt by print authors in the digital age, more specifically the “ongoing anxiety about ‘the death of the print book’” (Holland [5]). Pressman calls the result of this anxiety the
“aesthetic of bookishness,” the response to the drive toward the digital and away from print “book-bound” objects. Pressman explains, “[T]he genre of the novel remains novel only by constantly innovating in relation to its contemporary environment of popular culture and media,” and therefore, “these novels expose how the literary books needs the threat of its demise as stimulus for its defense” (466). Pressman assumes that books have a “preoccupation” with their own “impending mortality,” and that “digital technologies” are one threat to that mortality (465). She insists that the “aesthetic of bookishness” is the “emergent literary strategy”--as of 2008, when her essay was published--that speaks to our cultural movement by “exploit[ing] the power of the print page in ways that draw attention to the book as a multimedia format, one informed by and connected to digital technologies” (465). Rather than in response to or informed by the electronic and the digital, though, it is possible that many twenty-first century metamaterialist texts are mimetic of the increasingly fractured lives of the twenty-first century reader (and author, for that matter), as David Foster Wallace suggests of the aforementioned *Infinite Jest* endnotes in a 1997 interview on the *Charlie Rose* show. When Rose asks Wallace what the purpose of the endnotes in *Jest* are, after some awkward hesitation and preoccupation with possibly looking pretentious, Wallace finally answers:

*There's a way, it seems to me, that reality's fractured right now, at least the reality that I live in. And the difficulty about...writing about that reality, is that text is very linear and it's very unified and you -- I, anyway, am constantly on the lookout for ways to fracture the text that aren't totally disorienting. I mean, you can...take the lines and jumble them up and that's nicely fractured, but...nobody’s going to read it, right? So... there's got to be some interplay between how difficult you make it for the reader and how seductive it is*.
for the reader so the reader's willing to do it. The end notes were, for me, a useful compromise. (“David Foster Wallace”)

In the thirty years since Wallace’s interview with Rose, reality has become increasingly fractured and in multiple ways for readers and authors alike, both digitally and materially. Twenty-first century Americans are expected to multitask at alarming levels, professionally, personally, and academically. To then allow their literature to be only digital or only linear and print would be disingenuous to the reality of contemporary Americans. In order to replicate the reality experienced by contemporary Americans, the literature composed for them needs to reflect not only this experience of fragmentation, but the multiplication that they experience on a daily basis.

In 2012, Nicholas Carr, former executive editor of the Harvard Business Review, wrote about the impacts of multitasking, often digitally-driven, on the human brain. In his empirical and secondary research, Carr found that the human mind is not yet properly built for extreme multitasking, and to attempt to accomplish many tasks at once causes our minds to become distracted. More concerning, though, is that our unwillingness or inability to allow our brains to rest and engage in slow concentration and contemplation “indicates that the more distracted we become, the less able we are to experience the subtlest, most distinctively human forms of empathy, compassion, and other emotions” (Carr). While Carr’s research is incredibly worrisome, and perhaps enabling a knee-jerk reactor to imagine a world full of multi-tasking non-empathic serial-killers, he later assures that a world full of empathy-less serial killers will not be the case as our brains will undoubtedly adapt eventually, and we see such adaptation already in our art, in particular our literature: The metamaterial literature of the twenty-first
century demands full attention from the reader, eliminating the opportunity for the reader to multitask. A more traditional, linear text may allow for distractions via looking up from the page since it is easy to find one’s place when returning or even the many distractions that come from reading on a screen--be it laptop, smartphone, tablet, or ebook. Contrastingly, the metamaterial book offers no such reprieve for its reader. If the reader looks up from a page of a metamaterial book, see figure 1 for example, it is easy for her to get lost and unable to find her place again. The metamaterial book and its many forms of physical and intellectual engagement does not afford the reader opportunity to look elsewhere for distraction; in Abrams and Dorst’s S. (2013), for example, the book is stuffed with myriad objects that must be carefully examined, analyzed, contextualized, and kept track of. The reader’s mind is too engaged and kept too busy for multi-tasking to even be an option. Because she cannot divert her attention, her full attention is on these books, it is unlikely that she will misread due to carelessness. However, works of metafiction and metamaterial ask for and at times insist on re-reading, upon which they become a new or alternate Text. The reader of a metamaterial text is not a perfect one; the books create their own challenges that are new in ways that the challenges of metafiction were new during its apex. But the determined reader will rise to the challenge and come out a stronger reader for it, and be able to look back at previous works and see the ways in which they insist on their own material bodies, much in the same ways that metafiction and postmodernism have done to older texts for their readers.

From Hyper-Digital to Hyper-Material in the Twenty-First Century
N. Katherine Hayles, in her 2008 essay, “The Future of Literature: Complex Surfaces of Electronic Texts and Print Books,” poignantly posits, “Nothing is riskier than prediction” (180). Nonetheless, Hayles offers a “prognostication”: “Digital literature will be a significant component of the twenty-first-century canon....[A]lmost all contemporary literature is already digital” (180, emphasis original). Superficially, it seems that Hayles is giving in to the fear that print books cannot survive the hyper-digitality of the twenty-first century. She clarifies, though, that “print literature consists of digital files through most of its existence.... The digital leaves its mark on print in new capabilities for innovative typography, new aesthetics for book design, and, in the near future, new modes of marketing” (180). We have seen these new modes of marketing already with David Mitchell in 2014; he disseminated via Twitter a short story, “The Right Sort,” which, it turns out, was publicity for --and a free sample of--his upcoming novel *The Bone Clocks*. The story’s Twitter reveal was not as successful as Jennifer Egan’s 2012 “Black Box,” published by the *New Yorker*’s Twitter profile and a story made for Twitter; “The Right Sort” was instead rearranged and tweeted. Whereas Egan’s use of the strategy--and arguable absence of material text--contributes to the message of the story, Mitchell’s does not benefit from its Twitter reveal, other than as an attention-grabbing gimmick for *The Bone Clocks*. However, in no way has it become a norm for “new modes of marketing.”

By disseminating her story entirely via Twitter, the only materiality of Egan’s “Black Box” is the digital object on which the reader chose to read the story, for which there is no guaranteed consistency. Whereas the writer of a print book, particular one insisting on its own physical form to the point of metamaterialism, has nearly complete control over where ever word, symbol, and object appears on the page, in the index, and on the cover page, Egan had no
control over whether a reader would view her story on a computer, tablet, iPhone, Google phone, or other device. The text itself, though, is about a cyborg spy’s lack of control; the tweets serve as her instructions for how to she must use her body and sexuality to get information from a male enemy. The missing materiality, then, aligns with the fact that there is nothing material for the cyborg to hold on to. She only receives telecommunications into an earpiece, presumably the communications that we, too, receive in the form of tweets, and her own memories from her life prior to conversion into a cyborg spy. Were Egan’s protagonist to keep a written journal like Foer’s Oskar or written communications like Abrams and Dorst’s Jen and Eric, it would certainly not bode well for her spy career. The lack of materiality in her existence and in her mission aligns with her existence in the world that Egan has created in “Black Box” and makes sense in context.

For works like “Black Box” and “The Right Sort”, the reader has no control over the work; it is given to her in smaller parts as determined by its assigned technology. She could not access the next set of tweets from *The New Yorker* before those in charge were ready to release them upon the story’s initial publications. These digital-born works retain their control over the reader in ways that she will not feel with a book that insists on its own digital form. Hayles confirms of the “computer-mediated text,” “The reader is not wholly (and sometimes not at all) in control of how quickly the text becomes readable; long load times, for example, might slow down a user so much that the screen is never read” (196). However, the same can be said of the print book when a page is so crowded or nonsensical, as we often see on the pages in the books that I have mentioned; we must slow down to attempt it, but sometimes actually reading, rather than just viewing, is impossible.
Whereas my argument views and, in a way, privileges the unique writerliness that comes from the hypermaterial, print book, Hayles sees the print and “digital born” work as “best considered as two components of a complex and dynamic media ecology....The ontology of computation marks the surfaces of the [print] texts..., leading to complex interactions that bring into question the importance we might otherwise attach to the boundary separating digital and print literature” (181). Hayles’s focus is on the digital creation of the book and the resulting digitality implicit in the print book. Such implicit digitality is especially apparent in Jonathan Safran Foer’s die-cut book *Tree of Codes*, for which the production three-month process for one printing can be seen on the *YouTube* page of the book’s publisher, Visual Editions. Her argument that all works, even print books, utilize and take advantage of the evolution of what digital can do isn’t without merit; however, once the material book is in the reader’s hands, it’s a whole new story. Since the publication of Hayles’s argument (2008), the physical body of the book, such as *Tree of Codes* and *S.*, has taken on even more metamaterially, which can in turn force us to look back at previous books, such as *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and *House of Leaves* in ways that show them to be increasingly and insistently material. What was once viewed as metafiction and metatextual can now be additionally viewed as metamaterial. The texts are not only aware of themselves as texts and as works of fiction, but they are aware of and insistent on their own physical bodies, and they ensure that the reader is as well, never allowing her to forget that she holds a book in her hands.
The Move toward Materiality in the Twenty-First Century

Hayles argues that “[g]ood realistic fiction is often called ‘immersive’” and that only digital literature can be “literally so” (182). The insistently material texts of the twenty-first century, though, do not request silent immersion in the reader’s mind, but instead coexistence and its own kind of immersion via integration into the material world, also inhabited by the reader who holds the book in her hands. The reader is therefore simultaneously in control of and controlled by the work in her writerly co-creation of the Text. Hayles and others point to the “anxiety about the obsolescence” of the material book, particularly from “younger white male writers” (190), such as Jonathan Safran Foer, Mark Z. Danielewski, and Doug Dorst. Hayles explains:

On the one hand, print authors fear that print might be regarded as old-fashioned and boring in the face of new media....On the other hand, print itself is capable of new tricks precisely because it has become an output form for electronic text. If the seductions made possible by digital technology are endangering print, that same technology can be seen as print-in-the-making: We have met the enemy and he is us. (190)

The books previously mentioned may very well be crafted by the younger male writers whose anxieties about the death of the print book medium drive their experimentation forward. But the ways in which they use the metamateriality central to their works’ structure and form is what makes their work insistently writerly; they encourage and demand attention from the reader in a way that traditional realist fiction often does not, instead allowing for readerly reception of the text. The reader of the metamaterial is aware of the book that she holds in her hands, and she is often simultaneously controlled by and in control of the writerly creation of work to Text.
Untraditional Material Bound in the Traditional Book-Bound Object

One such work that insists on reader-control while simultaneously asserting control over her is Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. Foer’s sophomore novel is controversially set with the backdrop of 9/11, featuring a child-protagonist and narrator, Oskar, whose father has died in the falling towers. While *ELIC* is arguably *not* a 9/11 novel, it certainly explores the aftermath and the trauma felt by an individual during an event that was often presented as America’s tragedy or New York’s tragedy rather than the tragedy of the individuals affected. The aftermath of 9/11 was incredibly disorienting on both the mass-scale and on the individual level, as many civilians and first-responders were missing, their loved ones and others not knowing for days, weeks, even years if they were dead, or alive and missing. The Twin Towers, a signifier of the United States’ self-perceived and asserted power and financial prowess, fell. More accurately, they were knocked down. The void left a void in signification in a way similar to the void left by the absence of Oskar’s father. Just as The United States’ idea of itself revolved around its idea of its own power, Oskar’s world revolved around his father. The void remaining as a result of 9/11 sent the US and Oskar’s individual world into chaos; no book could contain such chaos using only traditional narrative techniques.

Superficially, *ELIC* appears to be a traditionally book-bound object, to borrow Pressman’s term; however, once the front cover opens, that changes. Before encountering even the copyright or title pages, the reader first must gain entry through a page showing only a photograph of a doorknob and a keyhole. A reader thus far unfamiliar with the novel will not yet understand the significance of the image, but, as Holland comments on a similar strategy implemented in Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*, the book-bound object has “cross[ed] the
threshold from text to world...the one in which we are reading” (Holland [10]). While the reader does not physically have a key to enter this locked door, she could instead see herself as the key to enter this book-bound object; she is what enables the book to cross the threshold from text to material world. While in the material world a locked door is exemplary of the ultimate control--it allows or disallows entry--the reader now controls her own ability to enter the text and engage with it in the material world.

Of more controversy, though, is the jarring inclusion of the image that has since been named “The Falling Man” (59). The image first appears early on in the book, unframed by any sort of media branding as we would be used to seeing in print or on live or replayed media coverage of the events during and following 9/11. In the United States, once media outlets realized that the objects being ejected from the Tower windows were, in fact, human bodies, they stopped showing close ups, and only long shots were aired on televisions. However, independent photographers did not adhere to such practices, nor did newspapers later. The falling man was a part of the material world during the time of the novel’s setting and was therefore part of both our material world and Oskar’s fictional world. It is another bridge across the threshold between text and material world, which is part of its controversy. Many critics felt that Foer was capitalizing on a tragedy. But those critics clearly do not understand the context of Foer’s use of the image. Though the image first appears early, on page 59, the more salient and memorable instance is on the novel’s last pages, when Oskar imagines that the falling man could be his father, and images a reversal of the falling. In the novel’s final passage, Oskar wonders about the falling man:

Was it Dad?
Maybe.

Whoever it was, it was somebody.

I ripped the pages out of the book *Things That Happened to Me*.

I reversed the order, so the last one was first, and the first was last.

When I flipped through them, it looked like the man was floating up through the sky.

And if I'd had more pictures, he would've flown through a window, back into the building, and the smoke would've poured into the hole that the plane was about to come out of.

......................................................

We would have been safe. (325-326)

Following Oskar’s revisionist retelling of the night before and events at the beginning of 9/11, what he calls “the worst day,” the book includes fifteen images of the falling man in reverse order: another, more extreme and insistent example of the reader’s simultaneous control of and being controlled by the book. Of note is that the first and last image are both devoid of the falling man and show only the blurred image of the side of the tower; unless the reader is previously aware of the framing of the photo of the falling man, she will not know what is to come. It is her job to flip the pages to make the falling man un-fall. She controls the way that she views the end of the book by the way that she treats the material body of the book’s last pages.

Although Oskar has made clear that he wishes that time would reverse and go back to the day before the worst day so that his father could come back home and that he himself has reversed the images in his own book, “Things That Happened to Me,” it is within the reader’s
ultimate power to make that happen with those images in this book; she can imaginatively allow herself access to that option, at least for the length of those fifteen images. The critics who have derided and accused Foer of gimmickry to capitalize on and profit from the tragedy of 9/11—as some accused likewise of his use of the Holocaust in his debut novel, *Everything is Illuminated*—ignore the writerly productivity that such reader-participation forces. The reader’s interaction with these final fifteen pages is productive, and engages the reader so that she produces the Text in a way that merely reading Oskar’s diegetic description would not sufficiently accomplish.

Over the course of 326 pages of book-bound text and image, the empathetic reader has come to find Oskar endearing and lovable, even if at times precociously bordering on pretentious. As a result, Oskar’s directions seem difficult not to follow; because he “reversed the order, so the last one was first, and the first was last,” the reader is inclined to follow in kind, reading the pages as Oskar intends her to. But it is ultimately up to her: Does she want to follow Oskar’s instructions, or does she want to assert her own control over the work, creating ultimately her own Text? Is it even possible to defy a narrator who has endeared himself to us for so long? In these ways, the reader is controlled by the book in the same ways that she is controlled by any other traditional book-bound object—she follows the expected norms of reading the work, from left to write, and follows possible prompts by a narrator as she might in a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book.

More accurately, though, and more importantly in the writerly production of the Text, are the ways in which Oskar’s flip book at the end of *ELIC* enable the reader to control and therefore meaningfully create the Text. Without the reader’s initiation of the flip book, there would not be one. On first encountering the falling man images, the reader may recognize them from the media’s portrayal following 9/11, or even from the author’s inclusion and her turning of the
pages may be akin to the traditional method, one page at a time. When she realizes what the images are, though, she will be inclined to at first follow Oskar’s instructions and engage in the flip book technique to see the falling man fall upwards, back into the building. She may have even experimented with the flip book before reading the book, as many of us flip through unexplored, unread pages before really delving into the work. But when she finally realizes the significance of the images and the control she can assert over it and therefore the Text’s ending, she learns just how much control she really has, and thus how much writerly control she has in the Text’s production. She determines the direction of the falling man, the speed at which he falls or un-falls, and how far up or down he goes. She must realize that she is involved in perhaps one of the book’s most poignant moments: she actively makes the falling man un-fall. She is physically un-doing an action that exists in the material world: The falling man and his signifying image exist in the material world, not just in Oskar’s literary world. With all of this in mind, then, it is unfair to accuse Foer of merely capitalizing on the tragedy of 9/11. The productive nature of this metamaterial moment of work turned Text is enough to assure that this part of the material book-bound object is no gimmick. The reader has taken a very tangible role in Textual creation. Her control over the ultimate fate in the falling, or in this case un-falling, man likewise controls the ultimate fate of the Text’s ending. She is in material control of the book, and therefore of the Text.

A fleeting moment that may be passed over as it is not as flashy as a flip book is Oskar’s instance that the falling man, even if it is not his father, is “someone.” Throughout the novel, Oskar’s (and Foer’s) use of the image is in the insistence that he is “someone.” He was not “a person” as the New York Times labeled him on page seven on September 12, 2001. It was not
even until five years later--2006, a year after *ELIC*’s publication--that the public made a concerted effort to identify the falling man. In Oskar’s world, though, the man is always “someone.” Even if the man is not his father, he is never no one, but “someone.” The mainstream media of the material world capitalizes on the sensational image of the falling man, ensuring his anonymity by referring to him as “a man” and making no effort to determine his identity; how could they in less than twenty-four hours between the image’s first mass production and publication? Unlike Foer and Oskar and ultimately the reader, the media of the material world cashes in on the jarring image, even today. In contrast, it is up to the reader to use the metamaterial construction of the un-falling man in Oskar’s flip book to give back live to the man by allowing him--if she chooses--to fall upward. The mainstream media of the material world--the televised news that constantly showed his image, the newspapers that published him--never allowed that. Likewise, Foer never appropriates the man’s identity; he never definitively identifies him as Thomas Schell. He permits Oskar to continue to wonder, to have hope that he has found his father, that he knows how his life ended. But even at the novel’s close Oskar admits that the man may be his father. Though the man becomes signifier for Thomas Schell, he is far from empty signifier, as his empty coffin is earlier in the novel. He is full of signification: Oskar’s hope, and even the reader’s ability to produce a writerly Text through positive metamaterial interaction. While she now controls the fate of the un-falling man, her control is resolutely productive. Even if she ultimately fulfills Oskar’s wish, she has done so of her own volition, interacting in the material world with the material form of the book. The falling man is no longer an anonymous image to gain ratings or newspaper sales; he is a signifying image in a metamaterial production of a writerly Text.
Five years after the publication of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, Foer’s limited release *Tree of Codes* proves even less traditional in a still traditionally book-bound object. Externally, *Tree of Codes* looks like any other book. However, once the cover opens, the reader encounters pages even stranger than *ELIC*’s lock and doorknob image. The pages of *Tree of Codes* are full of holes in the most literal of all possible senses, shown in figure 1. Foer takes one of his favorite novels, Bruno Schulz’s *The Street of Crocodiles*, and “create[s] a die-cut book by erasure, a book whose meaning was exhumed from another book” (Foer, *ToC* 138). Foer has literally cut apart Schulz’s pages in an effort to create a new story. In Hayles’s analysis of the novel, the only one published so far, she identifies several ways to read the book, all of which must acknowledge the presence of the book’s physical, material holes. These holes also serve to

![Fig.1: Image of pages within Tree of Codes showing surface holes and many-leveled holes (“ToC by JSF”).](image)
metafictionally make the reader aware of the book’s material body. Very much unlike the possibly haphazard flip book style ending of *ELIC*, the reader of *Tree of Codes* must very carefully navigate the pages of *Tree of Codes*, turning them carefully lest she rip them, treating each page like a delicate piece of lace. Were she to flip quickly or try to turn them into a flip book as she has with the final fifteen pages of *ELIC*, she would no doubt rip and ruin the pages. It becomes Foer’s reader’s responsibility to make meaning with, through, and around the holes that she encounters in this text. In this sense, the material book control’s the reader’s actions as she must be careful so as to preserve the book’s material form.

However, as with *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, the reader asserts writerly control over how she reads and constructs the Text. There are several ways to read the material book, despite its outward appearance as a traditional book-bound object. Works of metafiction also invite multiple readings, but the metamaterial do so in much more physically assertive ways. In
the case of *Tree of Codes*, the reader must first decide which words to read. As Figures 1 and 2 show, there are several levels to the text. The novel opens with a page only of holes—the only visible words are those viewed through the holes, beyond the book’s initial page. So the reader is now primed to view the words through the material holes, immediately introduced to the option of having options. On that first page, the die-cuts do not align entirely with the following page’s, blocking certain words, most notably, and perhaps ironically, “mask” (8). If the reader were to read only what is on that immediate page and not what can be viewed through the holes, the first page with its own text reads, “The passerby / had their eyes half-closed / . / Everyone / wore / his / mask / . / children / greeted each other with / masks / painted / on their faces / ; they smiled at each other’s / smiles” (8). If the reader chooses to read this way, she must then carefully turn pages, as described above, being careful not to damage pages, thus making the material book less readable in the future, at least in its original or intended form.

With this method of reading, the reader can then close-read and interpret as she might any other work, though likely more slowly than a book-bound object filled with more traditional content. Difficult to decode at first, *Tree of Codes* as a material object begins to get easier to read as the reader learns how to navigate the material gaps; as the novel progresses, because she has had to acclimate herself to not only the object itself but to the style and syntax of the writing of this particular metamaterialist artifact, she becomes, in a way, naturalized to it and more readily adept at understanding it as a Text. However, the text of *Tree of Codes* does not show diminished gaps or more syntactically complete sentences as the novel progresses. In fact, the

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4 I have chosen to stay consistent with Hayles’s use of the poetic slash, here, to indicate holes between words for clarity and also because it feels appropriate as Foer’s exhumed text feels like a prose poem once the words that are left are compiled into sentence form.
final page of the exhumed text has fewer words and more holes than the first: “Left to itself, it /
withered away amid / indifference. / richer by one more disappointment / , life returned to its
normal course. / my father alone was awake, wandering silently / through the rooms / .” (134).
Worthy of note is that there are fewer holes between words by the close of the novel. Unlike the
first page, the novel’s last now has longer strings of words between its exhumed material holes.
The holes are physically larger, but the content around them is more complete. The first page has
twice as many gaps as the last. Foer himself admits, “The experience of reading the book [Tree
of Codes] probably changes as you move through it” (Foer, “Tree of Codes by JSF”
00:00:48-00:00:52). While it is not possible nor entirely relevant to know if the changing
experience is Foer’s intention, it is undeniable that such change in reading experience mirrors the
metafictive and metamaterial Textual change in the physical book.

Instead of choosing to read only the words on the current page, the reader could instead
read all words visible on and through a given page, but a less writerly Text is available with such
a reading, at least in my experience. The story produced by reading both the words on the
current page and the hole words is less of a story and more just a jumble of words; at most, it
could be considered a pleasant sounding array of words, but I have not yet found it to resemble a
coherent story, where as the words on the “current” page comprise a full story from beginning to
end, despite frequent capitalization errors and pronoun disagreement, which we can forgive for
the sake of art. Still, all of this is at the reader’s discretion. She ultimately has the final power to
decline how--and if--she will read the book, and what she will make of it. Unlike the choices that
she may have with reading a work of traditional realism, though, Tree of Codes and others like it
force and expect this type of decisions. As ironic as it may sound, deciding is not a choice. One
method of reading gives the reader power to reunite and undo an original artifact’s un-doing, like
the ending of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. Similar to the falling man image that Foer
implemented in *ELIC*, the source material for *Tree of Codes*, Bruno Schulz’s *Street of Crocodiles*
is tragic. The family is torn apart, the father, community, and society altogether. By eliminating
over 90% of the text, though, through die-cut erasure (Hayles, “Combining Close and Distant
Reading” 227), Foer removes what tears the family apart in Schulz’s and brings them back
together. He engages in a Freudian erasure, creating a value void. Still, the value is in the
reader’s hands, literally and figuratively. She literally holds the book in her hands, and must
decide what to make of the voids. She can choose to navigate through them, over them, or ignore
them entirely. How she reads the book, how many times, and the care she takes to do so
determines the value assigned to the voids created by Foer from Schulz.

Foer has physically removed the plot points that tear a family apart, which figuratively
brings them together in the text. As Hayles points out, “Schulz’s translated text contains 37,483
words, Foer’s 3,815, so about nine out of every ten words have been eliminated” (227). While
Hayles is not wrong, such phrasing implies an all too scientific approach to analyzing and
interacting with the book. It is true that Foer’s novel retains only ten percent of the original text,
but he also creates the pages’ voids, which “resemble lace” (227) and which alter the story. If the
reader does not take her time, she will miss words and punctuation and risk physically, literally
damaging the book’s material body. After completing one of the many possible readings of *Tree
of Codes*, the reader has no choice but to feel bonded with the writer(s), and even the book itself;
she has accomplished something, even if that something is as simple as getting through the book
without physically damaging it. The alteration of the physical, material body of the book mimics
the changed reader-writer roles; such physical alteration must similarly occur in the reading
process. The way that the reader has had to carefully read the material book may begin to mimic
the care with which Foer has exhumed parts of Schulz’s book to reunite the family. Just as Foer
had to take great care not to eliminate too much or too little, and to ensure that the proper
portions are removed and remain, the reader must also ensure that she carefully finds the “right”
way to read the book to produce the “Text” that allows the most writerly engagement. The reader
has the ultimate control as the work, once in the reader’s hands, never goes back to Foer, but
after creating the material object, the reader adds the “meta” by participating in writerly
meaning-making and metamaterial Textual construction.

The Book as a (Meta)Material Object in the Material World

Although it was published ten years before Tree of Codes and five before Extremely Loud
& Incredibly Close, Mark Z. Danielewski’s House of Leaves further insists on its physical form
in more experimental, material ways. It defies the idea of the “traditional” book-bound object.
While it may initially seem traditional, that quickly proves not the case as soon as the reader
glimpses the cover with a more than superficial gaze. As Holland explains, “House is a book
made of many documents—including letters, poems, newspaper clippings, photos, and drawings—and is aware of the importance of things, and of documents’ and texts’ abilities to act, like things, on the world” ([10]). House of Leaves, similar to Foer’s novels, appears to be a traditional book-bound object. The book looks traditional, with no immediate things—letters, poems, newspaper clippings, collages, photos, drawings—making themselves known. However, when the reader
ventures into the book, her first bridging of the threshold between material world and book, she
notices that the cover falls short of fulfilling its job of covering by a half inch. Holland explains the consequences of the cover’s material shortcoming: “Before we open the book, it warns us of this connection [between the representation and real world], the front cover half an inch shorter than the rest of the book, so that even when closed the things of the book and the horrors that represent spill out at us, as if crossing the threshold from text to world” ([10]). Unlike Foer’s novels, *House of Leaves* does not wait for the reader to open the cover of the book to assert its material form and metamaterial importance; it “can’t contain itself” (Holland [10]). In this way, the book does not grant the reader any modicum of control over the text’s initial entrance into the material world. Even if she does not open the book’s cover, she is confronted by its internal image-driven representations. However, the images peeking out from that half inch prepare the reader for the constant straddling of that threshold, never allowing the contents of the book to exist in a bubble of “fiction”; the reader is therefore acutely aware of the book’s existence and material presence in the material world. That constant metamaterial reminder perhaps naturalizes the reader on another level. Holland points to the dilemmas “about the incommensurability of language and the real world, and the necessity of electronic remediation to recuperate identity and meaning in that world” (Holland [10-11]). Simultaneously, the book “asserts, through insistent thematic and visual materiality and use of physical form to embody the linguistic and existential dilemmas of the text, that the material world remains the site where we can best investigate those dilemmas” (Holland [10]). The book’s cover can, in a way, be the site that Holland mentions. It can serve as a site where we can investigate the existential dilemmas because, as the reader will find as she navigates the book and its text, many traditional
textual dilemmas are already investigated by one of the book’s many layers: Zampanò, Johnny Truant, the editors, or even the author, if there is one.

Once the reader passes through the half-inch-too-short cover, she may notice that it includes a flap that she can then unfold, making the cover longer than it needs to be, now expanding into the material world. The flap is not new to publishing and book construction; it has a summary of the book, letting the reader know what she will get into. But it is now the first piece of text that the reader must question, as it is not a description of Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*, but, as the book’s possibly confusing title page describes, “*House of Leaves* / by / Zampanò / with introduction and notes by / Johnny Truant / 2nd edition / Pantheon Books New York.” Of the words on the title page, the only “true” words are the publisher, city, edition, and title. Zampanò and Johnny are fictional characters, creations by Danielewski, whose name only appears on the preceding page on the right. The cover flap describes *The Navidson Record*, Will Navidson, and Karen Green as if they exist in the real, material world, and when the flap emerges from the cover and into that world, it’s as if they do via their linguistic representation on that flap. After negotiating all that, the reader then, if she is still invested in the book, turns to a non-dedication page that we will come to learn from its font--Courier--is from Johnny, which reads, “This is not for you.” So while the cover and first few pages of the book have left the reader completely without control, this cover page is where the reader gets to assert some: even if it’s not for her, she can decide to keep going, and if she does, the book leaves her with many unexpected options.

*House of Leaves* eliminates many opportunities for even the most intelligent reader to pat herself on the back for being an intelligent and observant reader. Zampanò and Johnny, our first
two layers of narrative mediation in the novel, often pre-empt our sense of accomplishment by including whatever connections or clever commentary we might have had either in textual notes, appendices, or footnotes before we are able to congratulate ourselves for our own cleverness. For example, a close reader will quickly see similarities between the house on Ash Tree Lane and the house in Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and no sooner does she see the similarity than the text makes mention of it as well, disallowing the reader to feel any sense of accomplishment in making the intertextual connections that she is used to feeling. So she must instead turn to some other aspect of the book. In the case of *House of Leaves*, since she has already been primed to see the physical form of the book as significant, this is her most logical next step.

Danielewski’s sending the reader throughout the book for footnotes, endnotes, appendices, and paratexts is not a new method to metatextually remind the reader of the book’s physical form and what the material body of the book can do; notably, Nabokov used this method with *Pale Fire*, as did Wallace in 1996 with *Infinite Jest*. Thus, the paratextual scavenger hunt alone is not novel to the novel form. *House of Leaves* often reminds its reader not only of its physical form, but of the action taking place within the text, creating a mimetic metamateriality in which the reader’s experience with the material book object mimics what the text is explaining or exploring at that moment. The first most salient example of such metamaterial mimicry is when the text takes on the structure of a house. The footnotes here come from Zampanò’s original academic text called *The Navidson Record* on the video of the same name. Said footnotes are from “original” academic commentary on the filmed *Navidson Record*, commentary on which the blind Zampanò must rely as he cannot view the film on his
own. They serve as both the foundation of Zampanò’s written analysis, and of the visual house structure in the book. On the far left and right sides of the pages are footnoted columns. The beginning of this page-as-house structure begins on page 120, where we also see footnote 146, the of the column on the left side of the page. Footnotes 146 runs to page 134, which ends, footnoting us to footnote 147, which begins in the bottom left corner of page 135, the end of the book-as-house section. Footnote 147 also takes on a column structure, but upside-down and italicized, so that the reader must now read from page 135 back to 121, where she finds herself footnoted to 148. In textual explanation, this may seem like a confused and confusing run-around, but it is actually one of House of Leaves’s most straightforward uses of metamaterialism. This passage not only makes the reader acutely aware of the book—and an oversized one at that—that she must now navigate through awkwardly, but it reminds her of the book and the house’s
structure, and their similarities. It has encouraged her to consider physical structures in both
presences and absences. The pages that are crowded are overwhelming due to their
overabundance of material which at first seems disparate and disconnected; then the blank pages
at the end are equally uncomfortable because are not used to the words on the page, and the
ways in which they keep the book together—they are and have been what makes the book a book
in the same way that foundations and beams are what make a house a house. When they are not
there, what is it? This section’s ultimate productivity is almost immediately clear: it creates the
structure of the house, the building of which in the material world is somewhat cyclical and
repetitive.

Another unconventional and noteworthy element of the structure of this section of the
book is what I call the ductwork. A blue box almost tunnels its way through this portion of the
text, and even further to page 144 where it ends with a black box, which could signify emptiness
or redaction. The boxes resemble ductwork because their locations do not change, and because
their contents are only in one direction; the words on the even numbered pages—on the left side—are mirror images of what’s on the preceding odd-numbered pages. Like the air through ductwork
in a house, the words flow in only one direction. The blue boxes’ contents is also highly
mechanical, listing items that a house needs internally to function, beginning with discussion of
what one would need for a functioning HVAC system:

Not only are there no hot air registers, return air vents, or radiators, cast iron or other, or
cooling systems—condenser, reheat coils, heating convector, damper, concentrator, dilute
solution, heat exchanger, absorber, evaporator, solution pump, evaporator recirculating
pump--or any type of ducts...; no HVAC system at all, even a crude air distribution system--there are no windows.... (119)

While the house itself does not have ductwork, the book-as-house structure begins with ductwork. It needs to resemble a recognizable house to an average reader at first or the signifier will be lost. However, toward the end of the chapter--Chapter IX--, the structure begins to fall apart, again mimicking the way in which the structure of the house itself cannot be represented consistently, concretely or unproblematically. The support columns and foundations are the first to fall away, then the ductwork, and finally the content in the book and the house it signifies in this section of the book becomes sparse, difficult to recognize as a house, or a book, in any traditional sense, and leaves the reader wondering where everything went. The further we get into the structure of this book and this house, our expectations fall away and it gets increasingly disorienting, just as Navidson and his crew find it impossible to orient themselves inside the house on Ash Tree Lane.

Shortly after the structure of the metatextual and metamaterial house breaks down, the words on the page become sparse. It is unclear whether these blank spaces are left by Zampanò, Johnny, the Editors, or the author(s), but they are there nonetheless and serve productively, as the house structure does in the previous chapter. In Chapter X, the narrator mentions that Navidson’s exploration companion Reston could be seasick (163), which is curious since they are in the depths of the house. However, closer observation of the physical material of these pages shows that the content swaps from the tops of pages to the bottoms and back again. If previous sections of the book are any indication that the book is materially mimetic of the action of the characters, we might assume that they are, in fact, swaying similar to the way one sways on a boat. The void
of content on each page also emphasizes the lack of action in the novel at this point. Zampanò retells fairly static events and asks tremendously complex questions: “Can Navidson’s house exist without the experience of itself” (172). The reader--Zampanò’s and Danielewski’s--needs the blank space of the oversized page of *House of Leaves* to even begin to consider such a question, one she will continue to question throughout the book. It is as if Navidson, or Danielewski, is saying, “Go ahead. I’ll wait.” And then he does.

In addition to slowing down the pace, the sparsity of content on these pages make even more apparent Johnny’s interruptions. Like Charles Kinbote before him in *Pale Fire*, Johnny’s footnotes often digress away from Zampanò’s main text; For example, Zampanò writes of Reston’s seasickness, “Reston’s nausea still reflects how the often disturbing disorientation experienced within that place [the house] whether acting direction on the inner ear or the inner
labyrinth of the psyche, can have physiological consequences” (179). To this, Johnny footnotes, “No doubt about that. My fear’s gotten worse. Hearing Hailey describing my screams on the radio like that has really upset me....” (179 n. 211). Johnny’s digression has nothing to do with The Navidson Record at this point, and his “No doubt about that” is barely necessary. It seems that he would have continued with his own thoughts, which would be paratextual in other conventional thoughts but which take on a more conventional importance in House of Leaves, regardless of what he footnoted here. After dozens of predominantly blank, slow-moving pages chronicling the events and concerns of Navidson and his crew, Johnny’s interruption is even more obvious that perhaps his previous interruptions. The page is now full of his Courier font that continues for two and a quarter more pages before we are reunited with the slow-moving Navidson Record. Johnny’s interruption not only gets us out of the flow of the slowed down action of the text, but interrupts an otherwise slow-moving narrative. However, that is likely for the best as not long after, we encounter a literal page-turner that makes the reader even more aware of the object that she holds in her hands, allowing the book to cross that threshold between the world of fiction and the material world in which the book and its reader exist.

The final fifty-five pages of Chapter X encourage and even force the reader to consider the issue of control more than she has previously with this text. She has not been able to assert her own control over this text yet, as even with the book’s cover, the book’s objects have asserted themselves, spilling into the material world, giving her no choice but to encounter them before even opening the book’s cover. But now, with only a word or two per page, the reader has the option to read slowly, as the previous pages have lent themselves, or to, as the book might
suggest, allow the book to become a page-turner. The invested reader would be wont to do the latter, as the action in Zampanò’s text--and in Navidson’s experience--is picking up. The turning of the pages, then, if the reader chooses to turn them with haste, would mimic the haste with which Navidson travels through the unknown labyrinth of the house. An invested reader would choose the latter--she would choose to turn pages quickly, reading sentences at a quick pace in spite of their vast space--because she wants to know what is happening to Navidson. She is in control, here, of Navidson’s fate. She could put the book down or, like Joey in an episode of *Friends*, put it in the freezer to stop time and not allow anything bad to happen.

In this section, page turns break up not only sentences, but words. There are, at times, single words or syllables on a single page. On a single page, words are sometimes separated by large spaces, making anything in this section difficult to transcribe in a traditional paper. Figure 4 shows the beginning of the second sentence of this section and the way in which the words are spaced, enforcing a chopping yet persistence reading, and allowing the reader to feel like she is covering a great deal of ground at once. The action slows once Navidson catches up with some of his crew, and the events take a dark turn: “Jed crumples, his moment of joy stolen by a pinkie worth of lead leaving him dead on the floor, a black pool of blood spilling out of him” (207). After a few more shots, Tom, Navidson’s brother, admits that he brought the gun because “this place is *scary*” (209, emphasis original). The next page says only, on the very bottom, “Another shot explodes in the tiny room” (210). The explosion can almost be felt echoed on the page, empty other than this ominous sentence, made more ominous by the fact that we know that the men are in essence trapped in an unknown and shape-shifting labyrinth with no windows or light
of any kind. The stark whiteness on the page is mimetic of the stark darkness that the men experience, which is discomforting, to say the very least.

During what can be argued a moment of climactic suspense, each page holds only one word, serving multiple mimetic functions. It continues this trend of speeding up the pace with which the reader turns the page, making the action and pace of reading seem to quicken. But it also mimics the film itself. As with transcription of *Tree of Codes*, I use the poetic slash here to indicate a page break between words for the sake of clarity and space. Zampanò writes, “Neither Navidson nor Reston have any idea where these sounds are coming from, though gratefully the stills reveal what is happening: all those doors / behind / the man / are slamming shut, / one / after / another / after / another, / which still does not prevent the figure from firing” (216-225). In the film of *The Navidson Record*, the figure of an unidentified man is slowly revealed later on the exposed film. Each page, and each single word on the page, linguistically signifies a single frame of the film’s reel. These pages only feature minimal words per page, but they also progressively descend until the last section is on the bottom of page 225. It is a gradual progression showing some retention of organization and normalcy. The next section, however, does not continue that progression, with words jumping all over different locations of pages, mimicking the altercations of the men and the mystery man. Similarly, an explosion of words on the page signifies an explosion of a bullet into a door and possibly the splinters of the scattered door.

At this point, the reader is less in control of the book she holds in her hands, other than the fact that she continues to hold it in her hands. However, the mimetic nature of the words on the page, or lack of words on the page, continues to remind her that this book has a material
body, and that the book’s material body exists with her in the material world. The most she can do with the scattered words on the page in figure 5 is an attempt to the best of her ability to put them together. She no longer has a choice of how to put them together. The book has taken that choice from her, as it does again about two hundred pages later when this page-turner strategy is implemented again, but with further fervor and increased metamaterial implications. In this episode, words are enjambed from line to line, page to page, and the book must be physically turned in order to read the text, reminiscent of the house structure earlier in the book. At first, there does not seem to be much reason behind the directions or shapes that the passages on particular pages take, but that soon changes. The text begins to borrow from concrete poetry, taking on the shape of a ladder when depicting Navidson climbing a ladder seemingly ad infinitum, shown in figure 6. Words on the page expand and contract with the labyrinth of the house, it seems, and the text plays with the page to achieve its own goals. Pages have varying
amounts of text on them, and in various directions. The reader no longer just has to spin the book, but spin, flip, turn, and spin again in order to read the content. Sometimes a page has only a word or two, and other times is half full of text, similar to the unpredictability of Navidson’s journey through this part of the house. Navidson’s journey ends with him possibly seeing a light, and the chapter ends with an entirely white page, perhaps representing that light, giving the reader hope that he has, indeed, found the light at the end of the labyrinth, if the labyrinth does indeed have an end.

The reader feels relief to be at the end of this journey, perhaps not as much relief as Navidson, but as much relief as a reader may feel at the close of a chapter. The only choices the book grants a reader in this section is whether to continue or put the book down and walk away. It is even nearly impossible to pause in this section as the suspense is too much. So the granting
of choice of by the material body of the book is no longer at work. This is not the heartwarming
un-falling granted by Oskar’s flip book nor the reuniting of a previously torn apart family
through carefully die-cut pages. The book has taken control of the reader, here, in ways she may
not realize at first, but it is what makes *House of Leaves* more frightening than other
contemporary novels. Books have not had the ability to frighten us so much since perhaps the
gothic stories of Poe and Hawthorne because we have more troublesome things to worry about
and more vivid forms of frightening entertainment that can take control of us, such as film that
engages both the aural and visual. But film does not typically have the ability to control us in the
way that such strategies do if a reader has become appropriately engaged. In discussing
Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, Holland writes, “This novel is thus not simply one narrative distorting
another to exponentially increase the ways of reading the whole. Rather, it also materializes the
poststructural insight that all texts are remixes of other texts, revised in the late age of print, into
the proposition that all books are constructed of other books” ([9]). Her point is equally valid in
the case of *House of Leaves*. The book is made of of several other layers, all put together by
some authorial power that is never explicitly revealed. Most recently, S. has taken this to an even
further extreme.

The most recent and most metamaterial book thus far has been 2013’s *S.* by J.J. Abrams
and Doug Dorst, a book that explores the concept of a book serving as a vessel for other stories
and interactions. While the book is deemed gimmicky by some critics initially, it is productive in
multiple ways, contributing to the conversation of the value of the metamaterial and its
importance in writerly production of a Text. The book itself comes in a slip cover, clearly marked
*S.*, by J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst. However, the book inside the slip cover looks like an aged
library book called *Ship of Theseus* by V.M Straka, published 1949 by Winged Shoes Press in New York with Dewey Decimal number 813.54 STR 1949. The cover is frayed, worn, and with ink stains, representative of what one would find on a worn library book. Opening the front cover, the reader does not encounter the book’s contents spilling into the material world as she does with *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* or *House of Leaves* in an obvious way; again, the book mimics a standard library book, a red stamped “BOOK FOR LOAN” on the first page. However, the book itself is a substantiation of the world of the book crossing the threshold into the material world. Once *Ship of Theseus* is removed from the sleeve marked S. The reader is now an active participant with the paratextual protagonists Jen and Eric in the hunt to solve the mystery the identity of V.M. Straka. The initiation of the paratextual journey is Eric’s message to anyone who finds “his” book:
Eric’s handwriting is always in neat, block lettering, whereas Jen’s is in near perfect script handwriting. They write in different colors each time, which indicates passage of time. The first time that Eric has read the book, he annotates in pencil; Jen’s first time is in blue pen, and Eric’s responses to Jen’s blue pen are in black pen. So the two are identified by their handwriting, and their relationship is tracked by the pencil or color ink they use. There are many facets to their relationship, and to their story. The relationship on the cover page begins rocky, Eric the typical snarky grad student, shooting down all of Jen’s typical wide-eyed bushy-tailed undergrad ideas on the identity of Straka, shirking her ideas with brush offs such as, “Pretty much every serious straka scholar ever has thought so” and “That’s been pretty well covered, too.” It is unclear why Jen even continues communicating with Eric—which is obviously by choice—a choice she asserts similar to the readers of the previously discussed texts—as she chooses to go back to the library to find Eric’s copy of Ship of Theseus and pick it up to find messages from Eric. On the page after the title page, the “Also by V.M. Straka” page, we catch the first glimpse of the growing relationship between Jen and Eric, shown in figure 7. The change in ink color is eye-catching, and its content makes clear that time has passed, with Eric asking Jen in each if she “still” feels the same way she did in their initial conversation, in short that it is a mistake that they can accomplish anything together, as a “we” (“Also by”).

From just this traditionally paratextual page, one that is typically not useful or only used for a reader to put her own notes, the reader of S. realizes that she has a choice: How does she
read this book? Unlike Kinbote in *Pale Fire* or even Johnny in *House of Leaves*, there is no one asserting himself “in charge” and giving instructions as to how to read this book. Though many readers see Kinbote’s absurd instructions as just that--absurd--at least there is someone to guide us, however misguided he may be. With *S.*, we are wholly on our own. The layers, once we remove physical book-bound object from box, include, in attempted chronological order, *Ship of Theseus* by V.M. Straka, Eric’s pencil-written annotations; Eric’s black pen and Jen’s blue pen annotations; Eric’s green pen and Jen’s orange pen annotations; Eric’s red pen and Jen’s purple pen annotations; both Jen and Eric in black pen, presumably writing together, mainly to each other and about their previous annotations rather than about the book itself; and various paratextual things shoved into the book at various times in their different chronological readings.

The novel is published in 1949, and Jen and Eric do not begin corresponding until 2012, according to a copy of their college newspaper left in the book. She can read the book in the order that it appears in front of her, or in chronological order as outlined above, but some of the paratextual things are chronologically questionable. This book more than any others mentioned thus far and that I have encountered in general insists on its physical boy and therefore as a work of metamateriality, completely destroying the threshold between fictional world and material and blurring its very existence. We very well could have found this book in our own library, perhaps donated from a defunct Pollard State University, though Zach Whalen, Associate Professor of English--significantly digital media and cultural studies--at the University of Mary Washington has set up a Wiki page for it, making a Google search for the fictional university seem, at first, fruitful. My choice in reading privileged Jen and Eric’s story.
over Straka’s, which is unsurprising given that I privileged Kinbote’s story over John Shade’s poem in *Pale Fire*. But my being drawn to Jen and Eric’s formerly traditionally paratextual side story and instead, for me, turning it to text put the mystery of Straka’s identity to paratextual concern. Its lack of resolution, therefore, at the close of the work is not as concerning to me as it may be to other readers. I feel resolution in Jen and Eric’s story in a way that is not felt in many other late postmodern texts and feel oddly fulfilled.

Additionally, by placing focus on Jen and Eric rather than *Ship of Theseus* and the mystery of Straka’s identity, I as a reader am inclined to re-read to get contextual clarification as to Jen and Eric’s relationship built over time. As an impatient reader, I found myself unable to wait until a second time through this somewhat large text to read a green and orange section or a red and purple section, so I read all of Jen and Eric’s exchanges as I found them on the page, often finding their contentious correspondences in conjunction with their more collegial ones or even romantic. Such a reading becomes an incredibly fractured one, more than any of the other works discussed thus far, though that was by my own choice. However, it is unlikely that even the most meticulous reader, choosing to read purely chronologically, would be able to ignore every colorful--literal and figurative--exchange that does not qualify for that particular chronological read.

Jen and Eric spend a year in the book, which we only find out on Jen’s final pass through when she writes “You wouldn’t have said that a year ago” (370) in response to a red Eric section. Over that year, we see them transition from marginal strangers to invested and investigating friends to in-life and in love. The ordinarily sarcastic and ironic Eric admits to Jen, on their first read through the book, “JEN: I LIKE YOU” (83). When Jen doubts that Eric
even knows her, he finds a way to put in words how many readers feel about the books and
characters they read: “I know the you who’s in the margins. I know you’re thinking hard about
what you want + why - more than some people ever do. I know you can take on a challenge +
kick its ass. And I know you’ve tried harder to understand me more than anyone has in a long
time” (83). And all in the margins of a book. Eric and Jen form the bond with each other that
many readers form with a book and its characters within the pages of a book that has become a
vessel for their shared mission: ostensibly to find the identity of V.M. Straka, but more
intrinsically--albeit cliched--to find themselves and each other. Regardless of the way that the
reader chooses to read their journey, she is on it with them and more than Oskar’s or Johnny’s,
feels part of it because of the threshold that’s been crossed by the material, physical body of
the book that she holds in her hands. It is more real, more material, and more tangible than the
previous books have been, though not for lack of trying.

After Eric’s admission, the book’s margins can no longer contain their relationship; more
and more material things, part of the book and part of Jen and Eric’s story, are added to the
book. A few pages after, and so we assume a short chronological time after, Eric’s revelatory
admission to Jen, she decides to tell him about when she disappeared as a child, but “There’s
no way I can tell that story in this space. Here” (100). A four page letter recounting the
incident with ink smudges, cross outs, and what may or may not be tear marks is now part of
the book at page 100. At this point, Jen and Eric are aware enough of each other’s lives
outside of the book; Jen could have gotten her letter to Eric through some other means, but the
book as the vessel for their communication and relationship has become so important to her
and to their relationship that she chooses instead to use the book as her mode of delivery for
this very personal letter, even though, in theory, anyone in the Pollard State library could intercept it. Our relationships with and within texts feel so personal that the idea of someone else interceding seems at times impossible. Such is the case for Eric in the beginning of the book and his relationship with Jen when on the title page in their first exchange he writes, “I can’t believe you wrote all over my book.” Our relationships to particular material books are so sacred that the thought of someone else possibly intruding on that is almost unthinkable. Jen and Eric materialize that for us in ways previously unseen in literature, making us as readers feel almost voyeuristic in their relationship, but also incredibly invested. We justifiably feel that we are part of this now.

As previously mentioned, the story of Jen and Eric has some closure that the mystery of V.M. Straka lacks. It is in the pages of the book that, in addition to mentioning his real-world
feelings for Jen, Eric also admits his love for her. He does so first in the red and purple exchange, and adds to it in the black and black exchange, for which there is evidence they write while together, in the same room, with the book. The full exchange is shown in figure 8. Eric is not the only participant in the relationship writing rather than saying, however. When the two are together, when they write in black and black, Jen underlines a passage in *Ship of Theseus* that reads, “‘Listen,’ she says. ‘We are *we*, and we have been *we* for a long. And in that way, *I am you*’” (419). Like Kinbote and Johnny before her, Jen responds to something in the text in a non-analytical, highly personal way, which is fairly accurate of most readers, educated or not, but which is not always discussed in a critical, analytical atmosphere. She annotates the underlined passage in black pen, indicating that it is while she and Eric are physically together, writing, “I keep wishing we could’ve told her that it was Vaclav, she was in love with *Vaclav*. And then I remembered that it hadn’t mattered to her for a long, long time. The love mattered—not the name, not the dates, not the faces. And then I just start crying all over again” (419, emphasis original). Eric, presumably in the same room responds, “--You can just tell me things like that. You don’t have to write them.” Jen simply and poignantly replies, “Some things are easier to write” (419). Her comment sums up their relationship, which has been fostered almost entirely through writing. But it also sums up the relationship that many of us have with books and with writing.

The reason that I and perhaps many other readers find more value in the story of Jen and Eric than with Straka’s novel is that I can see myself in them. It is not their love story with each other, but their love story within the pages of a book that is so empathically familiar. Our love for books and the love that we often feel from books is not easily explained to those who
do not feel the same, but a love story between people is universally understood. Jen and Eric’s relationship mimics the relationship that a reader may have with a book, and the fact that she holds this one in her hands and therefore feels like she holds her relationship in her hands, physically and figuratively, is comforting. For this reason, the lack of closure in the Straka mystery is not ultimately disappointing as Straka’s novel is not at center of the book’s main purpose; it is mainly the material body by which Jen and Eric’s relationship is communicated, the vessel by which it travels. One of the last things that Jen writes in the book to Eric, though it’s unclear where it lands chronologically, is a question: “So why not believe?” (455). The message is in black pen, so it is when the two are together. They debate whether their ideas about Straka’s identity are worth pursuing, and Eric doubts his convictions. He does not respond to Jen’s question, but after Straka’s book’s last page, Jen writes, again in black pen, “Hey, put the book down. Come in here + stay.” Eric initially responds “OK” but strikes it out, and, we assume, joins Jen (457). While not made explicit, it provides a clean ending and satisfying sense of closure for this to be Jen and Eric’s chronological last moment of the book—the material book has completed its function and now serves as a “scrapbook of us,” as Eric writes (293). At the book’s literal and physical close, the two are together physically. We do not see them, but we can feel them because we have felt their presence, intensified by the physical burden of the material book and its inserts of things in our own material world.

Signifying Power: Questions of Author(ity) in the Material Book

So much writerly creation of the Text between reader, writer, and metamaterial book produces many more questions, particularly of author and authority: who or what signifies power
in these books that so strongly assert themselves in the material world? Is the author someone who is part of this material world, or a character in the fictional world of the book, and the writer on the cover of the material book merely compiler? In the case of Tree of Codes, the answer is less complex and really one of creation: Is the book written by Bruno Schulz, the original author of Street of Crocodiles, Foer, or some combination of the two? The issue of authorial power with the book is less about power and more about copyright, and a question for another paper. In the cases of Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close, House of Leaves, and S., the question is important and pressing, begging to be pondered, if not answered.

When confronting the notion of authorship in Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close it is easy to turn to Oskar as authorial force behind the book as we often turn to first-person narrators as the authority of a story or novel. Oskar is even working on his own scrapbook, “Stuff That Happened to Me,” so the reader is inclined to wonder if this is, in fact, Oskar’s “Stuff That Happened to Me” book, compiled and bound for us to enjoy. However, it’s not that simple--it never is. Foer’s inclusion of letters that were never delivered to Oskar’s father and have since been buried in Thomas Schell’s otherwise empty coffin hints at the idea that Oskar could not be the author of this text. The portions of the book narrated by Oskar could, in fact, be “Stuff That Happened to Me,” particularly given the many things Oskar and therefore the reader does not now throughout, including the identity of “the renter,” that his mother is following him to every Black’s home, and the episodes during which Oskar is crying and does not tell the reader, such as when he speaks through the door to his grandfather, known then as “the renter.” The end of the book follows closely Oskar’s description of what he has done to the end of “Stuff That Happened
to Me,” so it is a reasonable correlation. The inclusion of his grandfather’s now buried letters, though, makes Oskar as ultimate author and therefore authority impossible.

To say that Foer himself is the “author-function” in the text is too easy as well. The multi-narrative construction of both *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and Foer’s previous novel *Everything is Illuminated* each encourages the reader to consider notions of author, authorship, authority, and power, more specifically where the power comes from, and who or what signifies the most power in the novel. More important than solving the question of authorship and power, though, is that Foer wants us to question, and by allowing us to pose that question, some of the power shifts to the reader because through the metamaterial interaction with the text, she has taken some of the author-function in the writerly production of the Text; through her close engagement, she has taken some of the power and authority and become coauthor of this Text.

*House of Leaves* similarly insists on questioning the idea of authorship. Many questions swirl the many communities that continue to discuss the book about who the “author” of this book is, particularly given its narrative nesting doll structure. Though the book’s un-dedication page and foreword may point to Johnny, he in fact admits to his own lack of authority, for example in a footnote questioning if Zampanò has made a mistake: “Fuck if I know. Your guess is as good as mine” (57 n. 68). Each of the book’s contributors has his or her own font with its own contextual significance. The first layer, Zampanò’s *Navidson Record*, is written in the academic Times New Roman font. Johnny uses Courier, implicit of his task as the manuscript’s messenger. The editors use “Bookman,” presumably because they are book men (and hopefully women) and often sign their comments “Eds.” Palefina, Johnny’s mother, writes from an asylum and uses Dante, perhaps a reference to her being trapped in a
labyrinthian Inferno of her own mind. Some decoding--check marks and other symbology--has led readers, many of whom post emphatically on the markzdanielewski.com discussion forums, has lead many to believe that Palefina is the authorial power behind the book. While the Contents and copyright pages use Bookman font, signature font of the Editors, typographical analysis shows that the font on the cover page is Dante, not Times, Bookman, or Courier--though it would be difficult to confuse Courier with the others. The most telling difference is the way in which the J in Johnny dips below the bottom of the other letters when using Dante as opposed to the other fonts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Font</th>
<th>Johnny</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Times</td>
<td>Johnny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bookman</td>
<td>Johnny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dante</td>
<td>Johnny</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given the use of Palefina’s font and the signals throughout the book, the Palefina-as-author argument is not without merit, made stronger by Danielewski’s later publication of all of her letters separately in *The Whalestoe Letters*. While a writer’s later work is traditionally not looked at in tandem with a previous one for critical analysis of that previous work, *House of Leaves* already habitually has made habit of turning paratext to text, so it cannot so easily be discarded. However, like the attempt to signify power in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, to point to a single authority in *House of Leaves* is, in a way, too easy. There are loopholes, rabbit holes, and blackholes every time we think we have found the answer.
S. brings to the forefront this question of authorship by making it the center around which Jen and Eric’s entire marginalia revolve, at least initially. The reader of S. does not need to concern herself tangentially with who the author of Ship of Theseus is because Jen and Eric--and a hoard of other less-than-savory characters they have the misfortune of encountering--are already engaged in the search. It is unlikely, though, that a contemporary reader will question the compiler of the box as we are familiar enough with the mainstream antics of J.J. Abrams to know his experimental, time-shifting style to understand what “[C]onceived by filmmaker J.J. Abrams” on the back of the book’s slip cover means. More prescient is the question of why, and who is in control of this particular copy of this vessel? Eric, at one point, refers to the book as a “scrapbook of us” (293), referring to the relationship between himself and Jen, and it does very well serve that function. Several times, they comment on their previous comments, sometimes wistfully. For example, in an early stage of their relationship--a green and orange stage-- Eric went to Italy to attempt to learn about Straka, and though he would not be able to read it, Jen wrote, “Be safe, Eric.” On their next reading--a red and purple reading--he writes “I love that you kept writing,” to which she responds “What else was I going to do?” (109). Not only do Jen and Eric have a working scrapbook of themselves, but they have a working commentary of that scrapbook. In a digital world of social media comments and text messages, such physical stuff is not the norm.

After a somewhat embarrassing exchange at one point, Jen--in a black and black exchange--writes, “Have you ever thought we might need to get rid of the book at some point?” Eric, arguably heartwarmingly, responds “I won’t do it. Ever” (153). Jen is often sarcastic, and is likely only asking ironically now due to her embarrassment with this page’s comments from a
previous exchange, but Eric’s sincerity provides an indication of the signifying power of authority in *S*. The Derridean death drive toward archiving is at play with Jen and Eric. The threat of our own mortality, Derrida argues, drives us to save what is most important; “[T]here is no archive fever without the threat of this death drive, this aggression and destructive drive” (19). What begins for Jen and Eric as anonymous communication and ease of communication in written form becomes a drive toward archive. Derrida continues, “There would indeed be no archive desire without the radical finitude, without the possibility of a forgetfulness which does not limit itself to repression” (19). The “possibility of a forgetfulness” beyond repression is what encourages Jen and Eric to keep everything in this book, even their non-book, material stuff. In this case, then, the signifying power is the drive to archive, driven by Jen and Eric’s own mortality.

During their green and orange exchange, Eric takes a trip to Europe during which he is followed and his life is threatened. As a result, the pair’s drive to archive is heightened, and they begin to comment on their previous annotations. An exchange in *Ship of Theseus* reads:

“I’m right here,” he says.

“I am, too,” she says. (193)

Eric boxes the sequence in his green pen and writes “I’m right here.” Jen responds, in orange pen, “I am, too.” At a later time, Eric writes, in red pen, “Still,” and Jen responds “Still” (193). These are the only annotations on the entire page, making them all the more poignant and, though cliche, heartbreaking. Reminded of their own mortality, they return to their archive and build on it, ensuring further archivization and a more complete archive of their relationship.

Aside from the J.J. Abrams slip cover, the question of authorship has a fairly clear answer in the
case of S. The book is a “scrapbook” of Jen and Eric, and whoever possesses it (i.e. whomever pays the $35 for their copy) is now in control of the archive, just as anyone who purchases a used book with old sticky notes, marginalia, or other notes shoved in is now in control of that archive. This very personal scrapbook is lasting and can be for generations, but where it exists is another story altogether.

What Next?

Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, published in 1865 by Lewis Carroll, featured some at-the-time experimental typesetting. Carroll was limited with what typesetters could do at the time, and would likely be enthralled with the possibilities that hyper-digitization allows for today.

Few, even Hemingway or Wallace, could have predicted books like House of Leaves or S. and the feats of readerly Text-production and reader interaction that they could accomplish, though

Fig. 10: Experimental typesetting in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (Carroll 37).
both--or at least Wallace--would admit that they could not possibly know everything that there was to know.

Close interaction with a literary text is, according to David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano of The New School for Social Research, precisely how readers of literary fiction gain the ability to understand and empathize. Kidd and Castano set out to determine the benefits of literary fiction, determining that “Fiction seems…to expand our knowledge of others’ lives, helping us recognize our similarity to them” (377). Further, they submit, “[F]iction may change how, not just what, people think about others” (377). They define literary fiction in the Barthean sense, as that which engages the reader in a writerly sense, and “unsettle[s] readers’ expectations and challenge[s] their thinking” (377). Such interaction is one goal of metafiction and metamateriality, forcing readers to closely engage not only with the linguistically-based text, but also the material body of the book. They classify “stimuli” from literary fiction as “heterogeneous and complex” (380), which is unequivocally true of each book discussed herein. While Kidd and Castano did not use any metamaterial books in their study, published in 2013, the theory applies and it would be interesting to see a follow-up some decades down the line.

Holland argues that writers of the hyper-material “make...us aware of the effort and reward of looking awry, as well as of the body that is part of every act of reading, every act of reading an embodied translation” ([8]). In other words, like the forms that came before it--metafiction, postmodernism, irony--metamaterialism will make readers more aware of the physical body of the books they read going back to pre-poststructural texts, even those that did not previously insist on their own forms. Such attention will forge new readings in such texts that were not present before, just as looking at contemporary texts through the postmodern lens
encouraged a postmodern reading of pre-postmodern texts, finding new and productive meanings in those texts. A poststructural reading of Shakespeare would have been unheard of several decades ago--and perhaps still is by some traditionalists--but reveals valuable readings of feminism, gender, and other issues that may not have been revealed otherwise. To involve the reader on further engaging levels is nothing but positive for literature and will allow for exciting readings of contemporary and classical readings. As Hayles warns, “Nothing is riskier than prediction” (“Future of Literature” 180), though one prediction is safe: writers will continue to do what is most likely to engage their readers in writerly endeavors, even if it is scary or unpopular in the moment.
Works Cited


