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## **“Making Sense of the Lunacy: Synesthesia, Paratextual Documents and Thoughtless Memory in John Dufresne’s Deep in the Shade of Paradise”**

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## Making Sense of the Lunacy: Synesthesia, Paratextual Documents, and Thoughtless Memory in John Dufresne's *Deep in the Shade of Paradise*

JOHN DUFRESNE'S MOST EXPERIMENTAL NOVEL, *DEEP IN THE SHADE OF Paradise*, presents the stories of a star-crossed Southern family—the Fontanas—their ontological quest for love and their epistemological search for meaning. Through the construction of an intricate, genre-blurring and self-referential narrative, this reinvention of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* plumbs the intersections of communal and personal memories and explores the powers of the senses. It revels in the visual and, more importantly perhaps, ruminates upon both the methodologies of memory and the shortcomings of living lives devoted to logic or causality.

Linear narratives are artistic constructs neither entirely natural nor wholly representative of the ways we experience the world. Despite attempts to create causal narrative threads for the events of our daily lives, tidy patterns are elusive. Existence often defies direct sequence and provides, instead, nonlinear and seemingly random encounters. For example, as I write this paper in my living room, my lunch is heating in the microwave. I hear the familiar beep and trudge toward the kitchen to retrieve my meal. Suddenly, I hear the all-too-familiar crunch of one car colliding with another and know instinctively that the second of those cars is mine. In this real life, my meal and the collision are not directly related, yet.

Back in my living room, I grab the phone, dial 911, and march outside to wait for the police to arrive. My lunch grows cold—unrelated to the actions curbside. Any immediate attempt to make such connections would seem absurd. Over time, however, I may recall the accident when I choose to microwave another frozen lunch. Who knows? These

connections and memories happen after a period of reflection—but it is in hindsight and over distance that these linkages are established.

However, if these events were to be recorded in a story by a fiction writer, my lunch and the car wreck would be forever linked in a narrative sequence. Students reading such a story would ponder long and deep about the profound connections and the unifying significance of Kung Pao chicken and a smashed red Ford Focus. This is what we *do* in our discipline. If John Dufresne were to record this event, he would write about the microwaved lunch and the car wreck and would fully annotate the narrative with an End Note about a lawsuit undertaken against the Stouffer's Corporation by a distant relative of mine who burned herself trying to cook her Lean Cuisine using a blowtorch and lighter fluid.

Perhaps in another note, Dufresne's reader would learn how individual characters would forevermore conflate a red Ford with a craving for Chinese food or would recall a similar auto wreck every time a microwave would "ding." Melodramatic? Certainly. But it *is* narratively believable within a literary context. Dufresne's readers reflect on events and become aware of the passage of time by their active engagement in the reading process—turning pages and traversing back and forth throughout the novel—and gaining a literary hindsight via the process. Ultimately, the overarching paradox of this book is that by trying to make the narrative more life-like—that is by making big and little connections between events and people—it grows more seemingly absurd. Moreover, the more absurd the novel grows, the more life-like it becomes.

Dufresne brings his readers into the novel by assuming an intimacy with them. He incorporates the reader into the family as his narrator clearly is, and, if I dare to say, he likes his readers. As such, he comfortably allows his narrative structure to become synonymous with the way family storytellers digress, circumnavigate topics, retell communal memories, double back on stories, and fill in gaps that they feel we, as more distant relatives, may have. He even trusts us enough to talk about the nature of stories in the first place. One might say that this novel's form is somewhat foreign to those reading for narrative continuity, but extremely familiar to those who have large families and have taken part in the kinds of oral stories that people share at family

weddings. There is therefore a dualistic kind of continuity among the discontinuity.

Dufresne writes, "Nothing is random. Everything connects. Not chaos, incongruity, and agitation, but design, significance, and harmony, thank you very much" (24). The author's methodology of representing the absurdity of realistic events and the realism within the absurd is skillful. He appropriates two motifs: (1) an innocent synesthete to store and share communal memories and (2) scattered paratexts which represent the nonlinearity and atemporal nature of connections. My concomitant difficulty in writing this essay reflects Dufresne's use of paratexts, palimpsests, overlapping chronologies, and narrative digressions. I strive to present my thesis in a logical progression so as to render sense for a text that revels in its nonlinearity and embraces its contingencies. The irony is rich.

### **Boudou as Synesthete**

Boudou Fontana is a young child who serves as one of Dufresne's protagonists and who experiences life as a synesthete—indulging in the textures of this world—with all of his senses engaged simultaneously. Boudou is the ultimate reminder that there are multiple systems by which we may make sense of our world and our memories—systems both man-made and God-given. Most humans gather facts about how the world works as the result of inductive or deductive reasoning. We sometimes use empirical data to ascertain physical properties or laws of nature. When questioned whether he has completed his morning shower, for instance, Boudou tells his mother, Earlene, that her "banana shampoo smells like . . . triangles, sparkly, spinning triangles" (48). In the first paragraph of the Prologue, the communal narrator offers that Boudou has "got all his mental apparatus as well, and then some. He can taste sounds, smell words, things like that" (21). This is not to say that Boudou is the only synesthete in the novel—he is not. Other characters—all related to Boudou (Earlene, Grisham, and Adlai)—exhibit tendencies toward synesthesia, though they are not as saturated in it as Boudou is.

Reading a Southern gothic riff on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* through a third person omniscient lens (of a synesthete child and his synesthetic family) clearly provides opportunities for moments of startling epiphanies and stunning descriptions. Dufresne's Boudou does

not disappoint. Overhearing a conversation about the new town physician whose office is on a road named Felicity, Boudou thinks “about how a word like *felicity* worked because all the colors of the letters blended so nicely—you could get stuck on a lovely word like that, watching the colors shimmer and float like fireworks, feeling its warmth wash over you like heated syrup, and not hear anything else” (67).

Ultimately, though, Dufresne does not write about synesthesia to provoke a flurry of “oohs,” and “ahhhs” from his reading audience. Boudou’s talents are the methodologies of memory. They are, therefore, both the crux of this novel and the mechanism for making meaning and strengthening community. Acting very much like the paratexts that Dufresne deploys, Boudou is the repository for individual, family, and community memories. He staves off oblivion for Royce, in particular, and (as long as he does not fall victim to the Fontana “curse”) will transmit those memories and stories to future generations of Fontanas and Loudermilks.

#### “I’ll remember for you”: Boudou as Personal and Communal Savior

By serving as the conduit of and repository for memory, Boudou embodies Hegelian reverence for history as an epistemological tool. He remembers everything and comes to understand the world by sifting through snippets of facts, combining them with various vignettes and, by the synthesis, makes meaning for himself and for others. The communal narrator expresses the social fascination with Boudou’s abilities, and shares the fascination with a sense of familiarity and intimacy:

And he can tell you that that day was a Tuesday, September 24, or whatever. And he can tell you what he ate for breakfast that day and how it tasted. He can tell you what was playing at the cineplex, and if he happened to have read the business page of the *News-Star* while eating his grits, he could repeat every quote from the New York Stock Exchange. (21-22)

Juxtaposed with Boudou (with his *voracious* memory) is his second cousin Royce Birdsong (with his *failing* memory). Royce has fallen victim to Alzheimer’s and carries a “memory sack” stuffed with tokens and totems designed to provide him with a sense of historicity: “The sack was [his wife] Benning’s idea, her way of enabling Royce to cart along his past, a way to keep remembrance and identity portable, tangible, and

evocative" (56). The items in the sack (a gold-plated watch, a pen, a photo of his deceased child, a letter, a sachet of wisteria) are pungent with the past—they are tactile, visual, and olfactory. The sack acts very much as an artificial or external stimulus for synesthesia. It is, in some ways, an objective correlative for Boudou.

However, as Royce descends deeper into the void of forgetfulness, the sack loses its efficacy for conjuring the past. As he loses neurological pathways, Royce incrementally loses his history, his sense of self and, ultimately, his purpose for living. Dufresne's collective narrator posits that there is something

called the narrative theory of memory, which imagines a life as a succession of impressions . . . concepts . . . images . . . desires . . . emotions . . . expectations . . . recollections. . . . A life, then, is a chronological sequence of events. But chronology isn't meaning. It's memory that provides the missing framework, gives structure and coherence to our lives. Memory is our plot, our story, our reason, our sense, our future. Without it, we are nothing. (59)

As the readers follow Royce and other family members on their journey to their nephew's wedding, he is losing himself and becoming lost to his family. To all except Boudou, that is.

Meeting as they do, Royce and Boudou become fast friends. They explore, go fishing, play games, tell stories and indulge in the enjoyment of each other's company. Boudou, in his youth, and Royce, in his age, share a growing camaraderie in their mutual sensory challenges. While learning about Royce, Boudou gains a missing father figure. Royce gains both an admirer and a living, breathing memory sack. Boudou proposes to act as that living jump drive for Royce, "Whatever you tell me, I'll remember, so you won't need to bother with it, and you can just concentrate on getting better" (107).

Boudou's offer to hold Royce's memories is an act of innocent, loving kindness and familial adoration. Along with this self-assumed task, however, Boudou has inherited the karmic burden of being the last living male in the Fontana line. He must either succumb to the purported Fontana curse or victoriously redeem the family that has been identified as "the sickest and the most executed white family in the history of Louisiana" (23). In the paratextual Prologue, the communal narrator expresses a collective love of and concern for Boudou: "we do have our fingers crossed because we all love that child to death" (24).

Over the course of this long novel, the reader, too, grows to care about this young child—hoping that he does not fall victim to the curse and experience the absurd deaths that have plagued his male ancestors. Dufresne has created a motley crew of Southern grotesques who, in their tragedies, prompt laughter at their outrageous deaths. The reader laughs at how Boudou's uncle Doak died after reaching for a persimmon and landed "onto the spear point of a wrought-iron fence . . . impaling him through the gut," and how "James in Flames" was set afire not once, but twice, the second event (being blown up by a stick of dynamite that his hunting dog fetched and chased after him with) becoming the fatal blow (23). However, while it may be important what the reader attributes as the causes of these experiences, it is more important "what Boudou makes *of* them" and whether he can put an end to these kinds of events (24, emphasis mine). It is by his so-called "reckless memory" combined with his synesthetic processing that he will either claim his victory or suffer his defeat.

### Privileging the Reader and Extending Community

Despite the sensual pleasures of reading through Boudou's perspective, Dufresne's characterization of the synesthete-child-savior is not entirely innovative. For example, Lois Lowry employed a similar device in creating the character, Jonas, for her novel, *The Giver*. Dufresne's creation is made new through the reader's active involvement with the child's ontological and epistemological quests. Dufresne accomplishes this manipulation of the reader by utilizing what Gérard Genette refers to as paratextual elements. Genette recognized that paratexts exert influence on the readerly process. Consequently he classified paratextual border documents according to their placement, function, and intent; this categorization lends insight into the value and effectiveness of Dufresne's own paratexts. Genette writes:

the paratext is . . . always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that—whether well or poorly understood and achieved—is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies). (2)

Dufresne's paratexts serve multiple functions. They mediate the story to the reader, frame the novel's elements, and lure the reader into a shared confidence with the author, the narrator, and the eccentric characters who inhabit the text. Within this shared confidence, community and collusion are established between the reader, the communal narrator, and the characters.

Boudou engages in his *ontological* quest to connect with his long-dead father—who is rumored to have committed suicide by snake poisoning—and his *epistemological* journey into the mysteries of God and the universe. As the reader follows Boudou's journeys, Dufresne fosters a phenomenological relationship between reader and Boudou by peppering paratextual devices throughout the novel. Some of these paratexts include: two family trees (which cause the reader to flip from one source to the other to confirm or rebuke a disputed genealogical "fact"); authorial and narratorial asides (written in Pirandello-esque exchanges); embedded photos; line drawings; graphs; charts; blank pages for the reader to fill in; and a thirty-seven-page Appendix that reads more like a short story sequence than a compilation of End Notes. There are even End Notes on endnotes.

These paratexts present an achronologic accumulation of memories and offer the reader a privileged and ironic unity with Dufresne's motley assemblage of eccentrics. The reader learns about births, deaths, suicides, murders, menu items, song lyrics and so on that are not in the text "proper." But these annotations add layers to stories, resurrect long-forgotten memories, and nurture a sense of familiarity that borders on kinship. The reader becomes as fluent in Fontana folklore as are the members of the clan.

Additionally, the End Notes and other paratexts entice the reader through a series of multi-media encounters that prompt her to continuously zigzag back and forth through the novel's pages. The very processes of reading and wrangling with memory and plot are permanently altered by the various functions of the paratexts. Dufresne writes, in a chapter entitled "Plots are for Graveyards" that

storytellers by nature are collectors of irrelevant and inconsiderable information and are in the habit of making impulsive and intuitive connections between the world and memory, between the *here and now* and the *there and then*, and since a story is not a logical construct, but is instead arbitrary, opportunistic, whimsical, unpredictable if inevitable, then it would seem that digression will be inescapable, significant, and illuminating. (91-92)



Dufresne constructs his digressions as paratexts (though this is not to say that narrative digressions do not occur in the text as well). If a reader refers to the paratextual references (usually marked by asterisks) and accesses them when prompted, then they participate in those very “significant and illuminating” digressions to which Dufresne refers. And, they do so when the author desires such information to be revealed. Other readers may choose to read the Appendix *after* reading the narrative. These readers receive the same information as the guided readers—but do not read the remaining narrative through progressively privileged eyes. Genette asserts that readers who avail themselves of these paratextual documents “read [the] work differently from people who do not and that anyone who denies the difference is pulling our leg” (8). Of course, however, there may be readers who choose not to read the notes or paratextual documents. However, those readers are not reading the text thoroughly or closely.

The thorough reader engages with the first paratextual documents (two somewhat inaccurate family trees for Boudou’s ancestors) *before* the narrative even begins. In consulting these charts, the reader acquires privileged (but contested) information out of narrative sequence. Additionally, by page 56, the reader is signaled by an asterisk to consult the Appendix to complete a narrative thread. By disrupting traditional linear narrative progression with diversions, the reader accumulates meaning by a process of nonlinear narrative accretion and while doing so, bonds with the increasingly familiar Boudou.

For example, Boudou discusses with his great-uncle Royce (who in counterpoint descends into a state of Alzheimer’s-induced dementia) about how each literally *sees* things through his eyes. Royce says,

“Some days I can see clearly—the details, the colors, all in focus. Some days the world is gray and blurred. . . .”

“Me, too. My senses are all scrambled.”

“How so?”

“I see colors of sounds, shapes of smells, pictures of numbers.”

“Like number *one* is a flagpole; *five* is down and around and a hat on top?”

“*One* is a man who lives alone, wears overalls and a straw Stetson. *Eighty-Two* is a white feather quill. *One thousand two hundred and fifty-six* is the man in the overalls and his four brothers are having friends over to a party. There’s a pig roasting on a spit in the yard, a raggedy black dog under the porch”\* (70)

The reader traverses these sentences and cannot imagine what Boudou is talking about and where he came up with that seemingly absurd progression of numbers, a party, a pig, and a dog. At the end of the excerpt, however, the reader notices the asterisk for the End Note and turns to the Appendix. Here the reader encounters a full-page excerpt from one of Boudou's sessions with the scientists at the Institute for the Study of Memory (session of May 6). In this note, the reader learns that Boudou is undergoing intense scrutiny and that his seemingly off-topic interludes are not mere digressive absurdities or non-sequiturs. They make "sense."

One cannot help but laugh at the absurdity of digressions like these. Yet, through those diversions, the reader shares in authorial secrets beyond the knowledge of other characters and grows intimately familiar with Boudou—as one would come to know a friend or one's own child: through *his* stories and the stories told *about* him.

John Dufresne has created a hybrid literary genre with interlocking and overlapping narrative layers, co-existing and atemporal chronologies, alternating protagonists, conflicting destinies and nonsequential, acausal plots. Additionally, the reader engages varying modes and senses to ascertain not only *what* is being said and *how* it is delivered, but also how it is to be understood. The diligent Dufresne reader embraces the constant narrative disruptions, enjoys the banter of wordplay and willingly suspends her disbelief. By joining Boudou on his synesthetic, epistemologic, and ontologic quest for understanding, the reader enters into a privileged kinship with this motley assemblage of lovable eccentrics.

Ultimately, the reader comes away having felt empathy for the characters, having laughed out loud, and having engaged in philosophical discourse while doing so. Yes, the story may have been *about* a wedding but, as Dufresne writes, "There's always at least two stories, the one you set out to tell and the one you discover along the way; the one you know about, the one you don't" (27). Ask me what this novel is about, and it will take quite a while to convey. What is most important is the journey the reader undertakes, experiencing the kind of synesthetic narrative that is akin to Boudou's experience. Hence the blurring of genres, like the blurring of senses, is not merely some clever experiment, but rather a grand statement of the inextricability of discontinuity and storytelling, of humor and sadness, of logic and

absurdity. That is what this book is *about*. That is what the reader has “discover[ed] along the way.”

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