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Framing the Global Moment: A 21st Century Writer’s Approach to Narrative Craft

An argument is made for using the “story-within-a-story” frame approach to literary narrative construction for writers seeking to write a Global novel. Narrative is defined in terms of a “thematic architecture” that conveys a particular organization of a story. And Jorge Luis Borges’ *The Immortal* (1947), Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000), and Giovanni Boccaccio’s *The Decameron (TD)* (mid-14th century) are all analyzed for their usage of the frame, and for how the frame works to conveys each work’s themes.

Robert Powers

Fiction 2012

Tabish Khair

November 29, 2013
There is no longer any such thing as fiction or nonfiction; there's only narrative.¹

O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.²

At the very beginning of Jorge Luis Borges’ *The Immortal* (1947), a short passage explains the story itself as having been found inside the last volume of a copy of Alexander Pope’s *Iliad* (8th century BC) – sold in London to a young French noblewoman in June 1929 by an enigmatic rare book dealer. The story contained in the manuscript is a first-person account of a Roman soldier who learns of a “City of the Immortals” from a mysterious man who dies near his campsite one night. Anyone who drinks from the City’s nearby river, the mysterious man claims, will become immortal. The soldier raises a small army to find the City, and soon is the only survivor of the expedition. Delirious from thirst and injury, he finds the City, but finds it unpopulated:

I wandered the staircases and inlaid floors of that labyrinthine place. (I discovered after that the width and height of the treads on the staircases were not constant…) This palace is the work of the gods, was my first thought. I explored the uninhabited spaces, and I corrected myself: The gods that built this place have died. Then I reflected upon its peculiarities, and told myself: The gods that built this place were mad. … a chaos of heterogeneous words, the body of a tiger or a bull pullulating with teeth, organs, and heads monstrously yoked together yet hating each other—those might, perhaps, be approximate images (Borges 187-188).

The soldier describes the City as “more intellectual horror than sensory fear” as if its existence is completely incomprehensible or indescribable. The City appears as if it should be an impossibility, yet it exists.

In striving to write a Global novel – a long-form work of fiction that manages to successfully incorporate elements of all the world’s literary traditions³ – any writer is likely to

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² Hamlet, Act II, Scene 2.
fear a result not unlike the perplexing spectacle of Borges’ Immortal City. The problem: crafting a truly Global novel necessitates complexity; it requires a certain narrative structuring that plays on the parallel existence of what one could consider multiple “realities” – the multiple grand narratives that coexist and blend among different peoples, populations and societies. These conflicting, subjective expressions of a comprehensive worldview or universalized headspace have become increasingly relevant to literature largely due to the extremely compartmentalized and fragmented nature by which information is sought out, accessed and received in the 21st century.

A renewed focus on such a heterogeneous narrative form could also be considered a byproduct of the continuing technological advances responsible for generating unprecedented amounts of data and meta-data on individuals and communities. The continuing growth of the internet and its growing relevance in everyone’s lives demands equal attention is paid to an adaptable narrative structure to accommodate the current complexity of the Global moment:

The danger is that the Global novel has to imitate chaos: loaded guns, bombs, leaking boats, broken-down civilizations, a hole in the sky, broken English, people who refuse connections with others. How to stretch the novel to comprehend our times—no guarantees of inherent or eventual order—without it falling apart? How to integrate the surreal, society, our psyches? (Kingston 40)

How is a 21st century author meant to contain such a mess while also keeping it readable? What is the makeup of the appropriate narrative lens through which the 21st century Global novel can be written and read? How can an author recreate the long-form fiction equivalent of Borges’ City without it senselessly horrifying the reader?

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3 Such a novel could also be defined as one that enjoy success across cultural divides, be it commercial or critical.
4 Recent figures state nearly 40% of the world will be online by the end of 2013 (“ICT Facts and Figures”).
5 Presumably in translation in at least one of the 10 most widely spoken languages other than English named by the UN: Mandarin Chinese, Spanish, Hindi, Arabic, Bengali, Russian, Portuguese, Japanese, German and French. (http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/guide/languages.shtml)
Story vs. narrative

All writers are storytellers. A writer’s most basic craft is conveying story through the written word: fashioning sentences that are strung into paragraphs, which build up into scenes or sections, then chapters, volumes, etc. until the completion of a literary work that delivers a story in its totality. *How a writer conveys story to an audience, how the written word is organized on a large scale to achieve this goal, is a crucial element of this craft. It is a vital part of ensuring a story that remains compelling throughout the length of the writer’s work – especially in larger works, which by their nature necessitate more intricate and complex story organization. This question of *how* is the question of what role narrative plays in writing literature: how writers structure and shape the expression of a story.*

The elements of narrative craft available to a writer are intrinsically linked to how a story is organized and delivered. Film and narrative theorist Rick Altman describes an instructional theory of narrative that groups these moving parts of narrative into three categories – narrative material, narrational activity and narrative drive:

- **Narrative material** encompasses the minimal textual characteristics necessary to produce narrative. **Narrational activity** involves the presence of a narrating instance capable of presenting and organizing the narrative material. **Narrative drive** designates a reading practice required for narrative material and narrational activity to surface in the interpretive process (Altman 10).

For a writer, narrative material constitutes at a minimum plot and character; narrational activity is the voice of the story’s narrator; and narrative drive serves as all methods used to compel the reader to keep reading. An even more fundamental approach to narrative craft can be found in the *fabula* and *syuzhet*\(^6\) paradigm first promulgated by Russian formalists. Fabula refers to a narrative’s story content, while syuzhet denotes the content’s narrative arrangement; aka: the *what?* and *how?* of narrative (Alber and Heizne 7). This approach becomes especially evident

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\(^6\) “фабула” and “сюжет” in the original Russian; the two words translate roughly as “story order” and “plot order.”
the more one differs from the other, whereby a logically consistent fabula (Richardson 23) is cut up, jumbled, rearranged, etc. in its presentation on the page, leaving the reader to separate for themselves the story from its achronological telling.

Working toward a writer’s definition of narrative for capturing a Global moment is at best a nebulous affair. Crafting narrative architecture is essentially the art of making concrete storytelling structures that are otherwise abstracted and protean. Any comprehensive overview of narrative as craft is inexorably linked to questions of why we write and read in the first place, and is not necessarily an area of study confined to literature. As cognitive linguist Barbara Dancygier puts it, definitions of narrative “…consistently stress temporality, causality, representations of minds, relationship to spatially and temporally defined storyworlds, problem solving, and the construction/resolution of some conflict” (Dancygier 23).

Narrative then can thusly be defined as the thematic architecture that houses a story; it is the vessel through which story is related by an authoring voice and processed by its audience; it is a story’s shape, its authorial organization. Narrative is the pervading lifeblood of story, the aggregate momentum of all its various elements working in concert to provide forward movement, the reason story is or isn’t compelling. Narrative scholar Brian Richardson explains the nature of narrative in terms of “dynamics” that “refer[s] to the movement of a narrative from its opening to its end. This includes the beginnings of both the story and the text, the temporality of the telling, the movement and shaping of the plot, and the functions of the ending” (Richardson 1-2).

Narratology exists as a purely epistemological field that examines the conceptual structures comprising the human transmission, reception and processing of information. Every academic endeavor requires some form of narrative so exchanges of knowledge of any kind can take place. From a literary standpoint, narrative should be considered the transmission, reception and processing of story.
Defining narrative as “thematic architecture” is meant to emphasize its nature as an element of writerly craft to be manipulated in service of storytelling. Breaking it open, examining its inner workings to better get a sense of what exactly it is and how exactly it works on behalf of authorial intention, is also closely related to investigating the makeup of the writer-reader relationship. Narrative as an intermediating medium should be considered a constructed textual space that exists between writer and reader for the purpose of delivering a story.

To author narrative is to wholly leverage constructed, conceptual textual spaces as if doing so were like any other available element of writerly craft. To be capable of doing so, a writer must be aware of and take advantage of pre-existing narratives – the stories that are already out there; tales the reader will have already read and/or been exposed to. Crafting narrative requires interacting with grand blends of narratives already extant in the consciousness of the reader. An author of narrative must be capable of exploiting or negotiating these existing narratives even as a new one is being fashioned.

The frame

One could argue that narrative as craft has never been a more important element of writing fiction. Increasing fragmentation of the modern reading experience is leading writers to look closer and closer at how readers are processing information on a daily basis and how that information is being packaged and presented. Continuing permeation of digital, fugacious text has made examining narrative approaches in literature all the more important, especially as the novel looks to make sense of an increasingly befuddling and rapidly evolving Global moment. The elimination, mixing and merging of borders of all kinds has seen a slow ebbing death of

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8 This includes the historical Canons as well as any story from popular culture or lore.
authoritative grand narratives, and has made for the seemingly unstoppable advent of a heterogeneous meshing of narratives big and small, macro and micro.

Genre as entertainment narrative continues to remain globally relevant (and should always continue to do so\textsuperscript{9}) since its form serves to entertain, and is built to shed alleviating light on a mired, desolate world. But amid growing cosmopolitan concerns, non-standard narrative shapes (non-genre, post-Freytag), whereby the nature of the narrative itself becomes a primary facet of the literary work, deserve renewed focus.

Classically, these techniques have been utilized in the form of narrative frames, embedded narratives and unreliable narrators, in which the writer plays with textual juxtaposition, recursion and narratorial authenticity – all of which call into question the narrative structure underpinning a story. Taken to their extreme, we find an entirely different class of narrative which Richardson refers to as “unnatural”: “Anti-mimetic texts that move beyond the conventions of natural narratives” where a natural narrative is defined as “the mimesis of actual speech situations” (Alber and Heizne 3). Richardson also argues that these narratives do have a foundation in tradition, even if it is hidden: “…unnatural narratives in fact constitute an entire alternative history of literature…” (Richardson 24). These are narratives that “have a defamiliarizing effect because they are experimental, extreme, transgressive, unconventional, non-conformist, or out of the ordinary” (Alber and Heizne 2).

Literature that doesn’t (only) entertain defamiliarizes the familiar; it calls into question deeply held convictions, and changes the way we look at the world and our daily lives. It connects us to facets of the human condition we have never known or experienced. The frame is one of a writer’s most efficient means of achieving such an impact on the reader.

\textsuperscript{9} As long as there is a need for entertainment.
Mixing realities

Realities and unrealities intertwine, coexist and mix in Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves (HoL)* (2000), an expansive and ergodic\(^{10}\) treatment of multiple nestled storyspaces, each of which follows a primary character’s or set of primary characters’ descent into unexplained and indeterminate forms of psychological ruin and crippling physical decline – either at the hands of entirely plausible or wholly supernatural factors. The text’s most immediately striking feature is its intentionally elaborate and circuitous design\(^{11}\), though this facet of the work serves to further heighten the nature of its narrative as a seemingly insurmountable labyrinth. To read *HoL* is to navigate an aggregate narrative blend of three discrete constructed realities (or narrative frames), all of which are simultaneously at play at any given point in the text. It is through these three frames that Danielewski projects three modes of thought\(^{12}\):

1) In the first frame, we follow a drug-and-drink-addled tattoo parlor employee named “Johnny Truant”\(^{13}\) who finds a mysterious and incomplete manuscript written by an old and eccentric “blind as a bat”\(^{14}\) recluse named Zampanò. Truant discovers the loose collection of texts looking through Zampanò’s extremely slovenly apartment not long after the octogenarian’s death. *HoL* is purported to be this “found” text.

2) In the second frame, we follow the labyrinthine, academically digressive and heavily footnoted and sourced manuscript itself – assembled, altered and annotated by Truant\(^{15}\) – which concerns the making of, supposed public reception of, and subsequent aftermath

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\(^{10}\) “…ergodic literature requires the reader to undertake ‘non-trivial’ effort in order to traverse the text…” (Wardrip-Fruin)

\(^{11}\) Aside from a strikingly non-traditional formatting of the text in many of its sections, *HoL* often loops back on certain passages and future sections are often referenced well before they are presumably meant to be read.

\(^{12}\) It could argued that Danielewski’s use of the frame is more “mind-within-a-mind” than “story-within-a-story.”

\(^{13}\) Toward the end of Appendix II.E, it is strongly implied that “Truant” is an adopted last name. We never learn Johnny’s “real” last name.

\(^{14}\) Truant’s own words as written in the book’s introduction, attributed to him. (Danielewski xxi)

\(^{15}\) Which in turn has also been assembled, altered and annotated by an anonymous team of editors whose presence is only made obvious in sporadic footnotes attributed to “Ed.”
following release of a nonexistent documentary film, *The Navidson Record* (*TNR*), “made by a Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist who must somehow capture the most difficult subject of all: the sight of darkness itself” (Danielewski xxi). Zampanò’s manuscript maintains an impeccable veneer of reality throughout with copious references to both real and invented high- and low-brow culture. Truant’s take on the manuscript:

“…Zampanò’s entire project is about a film which doesn’t even exist. … As for what’s cited in the footnotes, a good portion of them are fictitious” (Danielewski xix-xx). At times, Zampanò’s writing becomes highly self-referential. So much that what he is writing about often appears to explicitly refer to Danielewski himself composing *HoL*.

3) And in the third frame, we follow the characters involved in and affected by the making of *TNR*, namely the photojournalist Will Navidson and his former model wife Karen Green, who at a difficult point in their marriage move with their two children and two pets into a seemingly normal two-story house in a rural part of Virginia. Navidson intends to document his family’s relocation to the countryside and sets up cameras throughout the house to capture the experience, but focus soon shifts to the house itself when it begins to exhibit uncanny\(^\text{16}\) physical properties: its length is measured to be slightly larger inside than on the outside; the spatial dimensions of walls inexplicably and repeatedly change; closets and crawlspaces appear where none were before. The paranormal occurrences take on a decidedly sinister bent following the abrupt discovery of a “dark doorless hallway which has appeared out of nowhere” (Danielewski 57) on an

\(^{16}\) To give a sense of just how extensive is Danielewski’s maze-like interweaving of reality and unreality between different narrative frames: as soon as the house begins to exhibit “uncanny” properties within the #3 narrative frame, Zampanò as author suddenly quotes at length an actual passage from Heidegger’s *Being and Time* in the original German about the nature of “unheimlich” (German for “uncanny”) and how it relates to a sense of “not-being-at home,” the English translation of which and subsequent layman’s analysis of is provided by Truant in a footnote attached to Zampanò’s footnote sourcing the Heidegger passage (Danielewski 24-25).
outside-facing wall in the living room. Following a spat with Green, Navidson decides to explore the cold and foreboding hallway on his own and discovers it leads into a labyrinth of entranceways, corridors and rooms that become impossibly large the further he explores. A pervasive and unsettling growl follows Navidson the deeper he goes, leading him (and later others) to believe some kind of monster lives inside.  

At the end of the book’s 23 chapters, numerous appendices of various “found material” further flesh out Truant’s tragic past (including letters from his committed mother who eventually hangs herself in her hospital room), provide additional obscurantist Zampanô writings, and even suggest the actual existence of the TNR film in a puzzling “Contrary Evidence” section with several illustrations and artworks purportedly inspired by the film, as well as a single still-frame from one of the documentary’s “Exploration” sections.

These three narrative frames function not unlike a series of Russian nestling dolls, starting with the larger Truant frame down to the Navidson one, and at first appear to be completely separate from one another. Within the Truant frame we learn about the odd circumstances of Zampanô’s life and death, as well as the unconventional circumstances surrounding the composition of the manuscript, and within the manuscript we learn of Navidson and Green moving into the house, their personal problems, as well as the subsequent ruinous explorations of the impossible labyrinth with family, friends and hired hands – some of which constitute the bulk of the book’s more adventurously thrilling sections.

But it does not become readily apparent, however, until the book’s end that all three frames share a common theme of extreme psychological deterioration and physical decline: Navidson at the hands of the house (which eventually kills his twin brother after its inexplicable

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17 The house, one could argue, figures as the “unseen monster” at the heart of HoL’s layered frame narrative.
18 Referenced throughout the book by the team of editors.
implosion), Zampanò for unexplained reasons (other than his old age, one is left to assume his created story of Navidson is meant to mirror his own mental and physical demise), and Truant at the hands of a series of physically and mentally traumatic episodes, including the horrific scarring of his arms, his mother committing suicide, his friends dying, and his newborn baby dying (which he recollects in the final moment of his final appearance in the text). *HoL* is ultimately about the deepest recesses of the human mind, its infinite permutations and its intentionally and unintentionally unexplored spaces.

Taken as a whole, *HoL* is an intentionally challenging work that does not lend itself to straightforward analysis of its authorship, as the author himself writes: “It would seem the language of objectivity can never adequately address the reality of that place on Ash Tree Lane” (Danielewski 378-379). One even gets the sense that Navidson’s initial exploration of the house is actually a metaphor for the reader struggling to make sense of what is being read:

> Navidson carefully nudges his flashlight into this new darkness and discovers an even longer corridor. ‘This one’s easily … I’d say a hundred feet.’ A few seconds later, he comes across a still larger corridor branching off to the left. It is at least fifteen feet wide with a ceiling well over ten feet high. The length of this one, however, is impossible to estimate as Navidson’s flashlight proves useless against the darkness ahead, dying long before it can ever come close to determining an end (Danielewski 64).

In structuring his book and narrative in such a self-referentially difficult way, Danielewski puts the arrangement of the text and its narrative frames – their inherent complexity – front and center in the mind of the reader. His complex arrangement of the material mirrors the devastated mental states of his characters; Danielewski construction of the book’s complex, multi-faceted narrative is thusly closely linked to his characters’ psychology. He is essentially imploring the reader to treat every single sentence, within the context of each frame, as if it were symptomatic of a psychology in decline.

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19 The road where the house was located.
This recursive, embedded take on character – the idea that a certain aberrant psychology repeats or echoes throughout each narrative frame – factors heavily in the arrangement of the book’s more purposefully convoluted sections. Of particular note, Chapter IX, which immediately follows an apparently disastrous expedition into the labyrinth by three explorers hired by Navidson, continually loops back onto several passages that lead nowhere, one of which explicitly refers to what Danielewski seems to be doing with his arrangement of how the story is being read:

Having already discussed in Chapter V how echoes serve as an effective means to evaluate physical, emotional, and thematic distances present in The Navidson Record, it is now necessary to remark upon their descriptive limitations. In essence echoes are confined to large spaces. However, in order to consider how distances within the Navidson house are radically distorted, we must address the more complex ideation of convolution, interference, confusion, and even decentric ideas of design and construction. In other words the concept of a labyrinth (Danielewski 109).

In the same chapter, we are also introduced to the first obvious changes Truant has made to the Zampanò manuscript: entire sections struck-through and colored red that “indicate what Zampanò tried to get rid of, but which I, with a little bit of turpentine and a good old magnifying glass managed to resurrect” (Danielewski 111). The chapter is exhausting, containing several ludicrously pointless lists that sometimes required changing orientation of how one holds the book just to read the text. In Chapter XVI, in which Navidson and a friend seek out a geologist to analyze the composition of wall samples taken from deep within the labyrinth, a majority of the text is missing because Truant admits in a footnote he inadvertently leaked an entire bottle on ink on this particular section of the manuscript.

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20 Which begins with an epigraph attributed to Virgil in the original Latin and translated into English in a Zampanò footnote: “Here is the toil of that house, and the inextricable wandering” (Danielewski 107).

21 One section requires the use of a mirror.
The “altered” state of the narrative and the nature of the text as a “found” artifact\textsuperscript{22} is closely related to questions of what is “real” and what is “not real” between each frame. For example, the shape-shifting house may be “real” to Navidson but is still a fictional construct in both the manuscript and Truant frame\textsuperscript{23}. Navidson’s profession as a photojournalist affords Danielewski the opportunity to channel through Zampanò numerous meditations on the nature of “authenticity” as it relates to the appreciation and analysis of artistic works:

While enthusiasts and detractors will continue to empty entire dictionaries attempting to describe or deride it, ‘authenticity’ still remains the word most likely to stir a debate. In fact, this leading obsession—to validate or invalidate the reels and tapes—invariably brings up a collateral and more general concern: whether or not, with the advent of digital technology, image has forsaken its once unimpeachable hold on the truth (Danielewski 3).

So utterly thorough is Danielewski’s real and fake sourcing of the Zampanò manuscript that at times it can be easy to forget that \textit{HoL} is a work of fiction, and not an academic study. Again, through Zampanò, Danielewski channels a prophetic meditation on the nature of the “reality” inherent in the \textit{TNR}:

While in the past, live footage was limited to the aftermath—the oral histories given by survivors or photographs taken by pedestrians—these days the proliferation of affordable video cameras and tapes has created more of an opportunity for someone to record a plane wreck or bank robbery as it is actually taking place. / Of course, no documentary is ever entirely absolved from at least the suspicion that the mise-en-scene may have been carefully designed, actions staged, or lines written and rehearsed—much of which these days is openly carried out under the appellation of “reenactment” (Danielewski 140).

\textsuperscript{22} Found by Truant and whoever happens to pick up the 700-plus-page tome in real life to read it. It’s worth noting that an e-version of \textit{HoL} couldn’t exist without severely altering the textual arrangement of some of the book’s more ergodic sections.

\textsuperscript{23} Worth noting: Zampanò’s corpse is found surrounded by deep scratch marks in his wood floor, the same kind of scratch marks Navidson and others come across exploring the deepest parts of the labyrinth.
Zampanò never once admits *TNR* is a fictional creation, even though we know it is right from the beginning\(^{24}\). Whether or not anything is real or imagined, again, plays into Danielewski’s method of placing the mentality of his characters at the forefront.

Danielewski’s treatment of narrative in *HoL* reflects the constructed realities of his character’s ruined minds. The more “fictional” the story his narrative tells, the stronger the reader is able to understand the depths of the characters’ mental strain. Of course we are meant to assume that Navidson is a cipher for Zampanò’s mental decline; but by having both frames in the same text juxtaposed with a third, unreliable narrator, we are given “all sides” of the same tale – the possible and the impossible, the real and the unreal, the congruous and the inherently contradictory. It’s only fitting then that the Zampanò manuscript ends on a note of charmingly pedestrian suburban life. Navidson is maimed and traumatized, but finds himself placidly filming young children in Halloween costumes. Truant has left the narrative, as has the fiction of a terrorizing phantasmagoric house. All that’s left is for Navidson to “wrestl[e] with the meaning of his experience … even though it has literally crippled him” (Danielewski 527). The reality of the book ending eventually catches up to all the characters in all the frames, and we’re left much in the same state as Navidson, wondering what the make of the experience we’ve just been through:

> Strangely then, the best argument for fact is the absolute unaffordability of fiction. Thus it would appear the ghost haunting *The Navidson Record*, continually bashing against the door, is none other than the recurring threat of its own reality (Danielewski 149).

**Universality**

If multifaceted, heterogeneous narrative shapes are a necessary part of authoring a Global novel, understanding how to use the many shades and nestled varieties of the narrative frame becomes

\(^{24}\) The fictional Truant says as much very early on. See the Truant quote on page 2.
essential. The frame is a demonstrably universal facet of narrative construction across all historical eras and ethnographic composites of the literary canon. And it should be considered essential in helping to capture the nature of what it means to populate an increasingly immediate and interconnected world rife with fundamental contradictions.

In Giovanni Boccaccio’s *The Decameron (TD)* (mid-14th century), a classical literary work that makes use of the frame, the world happens to be ending. The author begins with a journalistic section detailing the ravages of the Black Death on individuals and society as it sweeps through Europe: “…bodies were here, there and everywhere… no more respect was accorded to dead people than would nowadays be shown towards dead goats… all behaved as though each day was to be their last…” (Boccaccio 2399-2422). Facing annihilation, formerly restrictive social norms are loosened or obliterated, and suddenly many find themselves at a loss with what to do with their remaining days. Simply wait around to die? Or make the best of what time you have left? Boccaccio, as author and framer of *TD*’s narrative, writes: “Some people, pursuing what was possibly the safer alternative, callously maintained that there was no better or more efficacious remedy against a plague than to run away from it” (Boccaccio 2354-2356).

Here he introduces the young heroes and heroines (the storytellers) of his ten-day cycle of 100 stories: seven women and three men who collectively decide to flee their dying city for the countryside, presumably to die amid more pleasant and peaceable surroundings. One of the young women describes their destination as a veritable *locus amœnus*:

There we shall hear the birds singing, we shall see fresh green hills and plains, fields of corn undulating like the sea, and trees of at least a thousand different species; and we

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25 The translator of *TD* notes in his introduction to the text: “…[Boccaccio] was himself present in Florence during the plague of 1348, which is estimated by historians to have claimed the lives of two thirds to three quarters of the city’s 100,000 inhabitants…” (Boccaccio 525-526).

26 A Latin phrase for “pleasant place” with literary roots in the Classical and Medieval texts Boccaccio drew heavily from in his composition of *TD* (Boccaccio 1068-1069). In his era, the phrase was commonly used to allegorically allude to an idealized paradise.
shall have a clearer view of the heavens, which, troubled though they are, do not however deny us their eternal beauties, so much more fair to look upon than the desolate walls of our city (Boccaccio 2489-2492).

She later adds: “A merry life should be our aim…” (Boccaccio 2555). Their goal becomes to put their minds at ease with the apparent arrival of the End Times, and they decide to take turns telling each other stories and singing songs to pass the time, to entertain one another.

They arrive at their destination and the bleak and deathly urban setting they fled fades completely from the narrative, thus seamlessly mixing a historical and factual reality with a fictional series of moralistic and diverting tales which some have called the “Human Comedy” companion to Dante’s *Divine Comedy* on account of the stories’ often profane lampooning of human vice and folly. Over ten days, each member of the group tells one parable-like story each day, some of which frame even deeper nestled tales: one of the young storytellers may be in the middle of narrating a story about a character who then disrupts the narrative to begin telling his or her own story within the storyteller’s story.

This “stacked” mode of narrative is a universal component of the Global history of literature. Other notable examples of this classical form of the frame include Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (end of 14th century) and the anonymous *One Thousand and One Nights* (8th to 13th centuries).

Other variations of the frame form accomplish layered narrative movement through the juxtaposed usage of contrasting textual styles, i.e.: placing fictional newspaper clippings beside stream-of-consciousness narratives, as was done in Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* (2000).

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27 Boccaccio and Dante were contemporaries.
28 Common targets are corrupt and bumbling Church figures.
29 “Stacked” in the Tower of Hanoi sense of the word, whereby disparate narrative levels are layered on top of each other for the purpose of achieving narrative depth and complexity.
In the same vein as Borges’ *The Immortal*, a commonly employed framing device is a fictional preface preceding a text that establishes a “text-within-a-text” narrative, as seen in Jan Potocki’s *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* (1804-1810), François Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532-1564), Cao Xueqin’s *Dream of the Red Chamber* (18th century), Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767), and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818).

Blended micro narratives that combine and share the same narrative universe have become an increasingly common means of accommodating representations of narrative fragmentation; some examples include: Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923), Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* (1990), and Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010).

A Global shape

The nature of how the frame functions in a text is the exact same nature of how storytelling functions as an art form. The frame activates the mind and demands the reader’s scrutiny of a text’s existence, its intention; everything embedded within a textual frame becomes enriched or laden with new meaning and purpose. Beyond the text itself, there is the mindset the reader brings into the text. This reality, which could be called the “reader frame,” should be considered the initial reference frame for any text. Considering that narrative is a kind of configurable platform for delivering a story, one could argue that framing overlay narratives readers bring into the text include the reader’s contemporary historical phenomenon. The present time period in which a text is composed by an author should be considered a vital part of this initial reference frame, the initial layer through which the proper context of a work can be determined.
The definitions of narrative and story are not restricted to the arts; discussing the past, present and future in any aspect requires telling a story, and telling a story required some form of organization (narrative). Looking at the usage of narrative and story in other scientific, academic and professional fields can help to inform the creation of a new kind of literary narrative – one that exploits the reality of a text’s creation and the reality of the reader’s reading of the text as integral to the experience of how the text is read and appreciated.

This is not, however, an argument for the over-systemization of how to compose narrative, but an argument for the acceptance of including narrative structures of all kinds in single works of fiction to create fundamentally heterogeneous texts that eschew convention as much as they embrace and exploit it. This would, again, mostly likely result in an intentionally contradictory narrative shape analogous to something not unlike Borges’ City, but would nonetheless would shine as much light as possible on the capabilities of the human mind: everything it is capable of experiencing and conceptualizing, everything it can be said to be responsible for.

The 21st century calls for narrative experimentation in long-form fiction to simply keep up with the new ways in which the world is changing. To make the narrative construction of the novel more heterogeneous, more multifaceted will be an enduringly complex process, but will nonetheless be a necessary one. And by establishing the proper framework through which a truly Global novel can be written, it becomes possible to explore what kinds of stories best fit a new mold:

The contemporary expatriate novel describes a worth of conflict, antagonism, and affection—a world in which space is politically marked, even if a specific political ideology is rarely affirmed. … The resulting narratives of partially acknowledged links and chance connections may not be political novels…Yet they are arguably proto-political in their recognition of the formative effects of the global inequities on travel and the mobile subject. … This new form reveals a distinctive spatial, social, narrative, and
ethico-political orientation, significantly different from its twentieth-century predecessors (Irr 677-678).

A Global novel written in the 21st century will need to accommodate chaos, disorder, the transcending of boundaries, and will require a narrative shape most conducive to encompassing the myriad literary traditions of all cultures; it will require an authorial platform that can simultaneously support contradictory representations of reality, as if one stands for fact while all others stand for fiction, and vice versa. It will require a shape that allows the reader to find the familiar within the unfamiliar, and vice versa. For the 21st century writer writing today, creative approaches to using the narrative frame is the solution to meet these challenges. As the nature of the Global moment becomes more and more convoluted and complex, as it becomes more fleetingly lucid, the more the simplicity of how the frame functions as a narrative tool for entering and exiting textual spaces\(^\text{30}\) becomes an appealing approach. If the goal is to capture in fiction everything and everyone as they are now, everywhere on Earth – all pasts, presents and futures – it will require the frame.

\(^{30}\) Bearing in mind what this thematically entails in terms of any given textual space’s capacity for exploring individual mental spaces.
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Work Cited (continued)
