A Deeply Satisfying Lie?: Authorship, Performance, and Recognition in 21st Century American Novels

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Abstract

There has been a considerable amount of research done on questions of authorship over the past century or so, and the interest in the subject is still going strong today. This essay takes as its point of departure two seminal poststructuralist essays on authorship—Roland Barthes’s “The Death of the Author,” and Michel Foucault’s “What is an Author?”—as these texts have had a significant impact on the discourse. It examines how scholars like Seán Burke and Jane Gallop have explained this anti-authorial tendency and extended the connection between authors and death, and how their findings relate to a performative conception of authorship. The study will take as its central critical approach the study of authorship as cultural performance as formulated by Ingo Berensmeyer, Gert Buelens, and Marysa Demoor, and Sonja Longolius. It will utilize this approach to analyze four contemporary American novels—James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), Paul Auster’s *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006), Ron Currie Jr.’s *Flimsy Little Plastic Miracles* (2013), and J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst’s *S.* (2013)—and the different ways in which these novels problematize notions of authorial self-invention. The focus of the analysis will be on the author-reader relationship, moments of recognition, and developments in writing technology. These issues have been selected for their connection to current conceptions of the creation of author personae, which can in turn be viewed as reflecting performance as it takes place in daily life and therefore give indications as to the cultural climate in which the novels were produced. Ultimately, the aim is to have illustrated how these novels present the reader with textually traced author personae that are highly aware of their own performances. In addition, it is suggested that authors are dependent on their readers to recognize these personae for them to become felicitously legitimized.

**Keywords:** Authorship; performance; recognition; contemporary literature; Barthes; Foucault
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Introduction
What happens when you produce a text, be it by putting pen to paper or fingers to lettered keys? Have you created something which communicates completely independently from you as its originator, or do you pass into a state of being which surpasses your previous status—do you become an author? Authorship is a subject which has engaged many a scholar through the years, and the interest in authors and what they do appears to have increased in the past few decades. At least part of the reason for this resurge of interest in authorship is related to how the advent and proliferation of digital media and the Internet have impacted the already unstable concept of the author. Although the question of authorship has had many guises throughout the years of the literary tradition and its studies, one of the most iconic texts on the subject is Roland Barthes’s “The Death of the Author,” first published in 1968. It is such a seminal essay in fact, that it appears in what seems like a majority of contemporary texts on authorship. Just the following year, in 1969, Michel Foucault also published an essay about the concept of the author. Both of these texts argued that the time of authors was over, and that it is not a person that speaks through a text, but rather the text itself which communicates with the reader. These essays were not the only ones of their kind to spring up around this time, but can rather be viewed as indicative of a prevalent discursive condition.

The essays by Barthes and Foucault were chosen as a theoretical point of departure for this essay because of the impact they had on the discussions of authorship that followed. Jeremy Hawthorn suggests that the reason behind this impact is the sophisticated and polemical way in which they pose their questions on
authorship, and that they thereby “initiated a theoretical discussion that has enriched and complicated our understanding of the issues involved” (72). While the two essays are commonly discussed in conjunction with one another, one major point on which they differ is that Foucault’s text works to “make ‘the author’ the site of an enquiry” by problematizing the author-figure that Barthes’s text seeks to supersede (Wilson 343). In addition, Barthes displayed considerable ambivalence towards the author-figure in his subsequent publications that contribute more to a nuanced discussion on authorship than does examining this one essay in isolation, even though its provocative rhetoric bids it be read as a manifesto—as do several of the critics referred to below. Looking at a selection of contemporary contributions to the discussion of authorship, it is noticeable that a considerable number of them cite Barthes’ essay—Foucault’s as well, but somewhat less frequently—which seems to point to the influence posited by Hawthorn.

It seems that the concept of the author was never truly buried, but rather only temporarily consigned to its grave. The interest in the author never diminished to the point where readers and scholars lost interest in the elusive originator hiding somewhere within or around the text, and the arguments presented by Barthes and Foucault have therefore been regularly contested. Seán Burke published the first edition of his book which explains and examines these anti-authorial writings in 1992. The third and latest edition of Burke’s book was published 16 years later, and he has been far from alone in taking it upon himself to attempt to resuscitate the author. Jane Gallop also explores the various ways in which the author may or may not be thought of as dead, as well as how the actual author, either dead or alive, can be traced in and through their writings. She does not as readily dismiss the notion of the dead author as Burke—she writes both of theoretical and actual deaths—but instead explores the temporality of authorship both from the position of the reader and the author, and how sometimes “the author’s death haunts the writer writing” (Gallop 86).

If the writer is haunted by the reality of their inevitable passing from life into death and by the knowledge that their writing will be present in the world after their leaving, then it would stand to reason that part of the motivation behind writing may be to be recognized as the subject responsible for producing one, or numerous texts. In a cultural climate in which the act of communicating has changed drastically from what it was at the time Barthes, and Foucault wrote their essays, the notions of authorship have taken many a turn, one noticeable example being that of
performativity. This theoretical turn closely associated with cultural studies has also been adopted by literary critics. Ghent University had a research group with the name “Authorship as Performance” between the years 2009 and 2014, which in part resulted in an open-access journal called *Authorship*.¹ This journal covers many facets of the authorship debate, some of which are directly linked to performance (Feleki; Ladd; Tarantello).

Ingo Berensmeyer, Gert Buelens, and Marysa Demoor (all of whom are on the editorial team of *Authorship* and were the project directors for the abovementioned research project) argue for viewing authorship as cultural performance. They also highlight that it is a concept that is far from homogeneous, as it differs between disciplines and areas of culture (12). They suggest that these performances are “enabled and constrained by social norms and different media configurations” and thus at least in part culturally constructed by the influence of social and cultural determinants. They define performance as reducible neither to utterance nor to representation of something given. They also stress that is should not be confused with agency or intentionality. Instead, it is a process that has the potential to bring forth something new—the sense of ‘performativity’ being the same as that developed in J.L. Austin’s speech act theory, and later applied to cultural studies by Victor Turner—by interacting and engaging with other cultural ‘actants’ (10). As new conceptions of authorship have, and are, emerging as digital writing has become increasingly common, it has been argued that questions of authorship are increasingly becoming questions of collectivity and anonymity. Berensmeyer et al. nevertheless find that our desire for identifiable individuals to whom written work can be assigned is still very much alive. They argue that the study of authorship as cultural performance should be viewed in light of a cultural topography comprised of factors such as “certain medialisation of literary activities, certain technological developments, and certain discursive features like the increasingly relevant distinction between private and public domains of existence” (23). Ultimately, they declare that authorship studies should be empirical, and focus on specific sets of performances, and this is what I aim to perform in this essay (23).

Sonja Longolius’ book *Performing Authorship* (2016) explores this idea of authorship and performance while arguing that “[a]uthors, as agents of self-invention,

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¹ For more information, see [http://www.rap.ugent.be/](http://www.rap.ugent.be/).
have always had agency in inventing their author personae” and that the strategies of this invention has in recent decades also become a theme in the work itself (272)². Like Berensmeyer et al., Longolius also introduces Austin’s speech act theory as crucial for processes of authorial self-invention, and she explores it in connection with Gerard Genette’s discussion of paratexts (10-11). The illocutionary force of a paratext can be attributed to its message, stressing its performative aspects. The power of the performative lies in that a paratextual message can accomplish what it describes—for instance a dedication. Paratexts and the text proper to which they relate are tightly connected, and paratexts can be thought to function as an intermediate threshold between the text and the outside world (38-39). This textual level is one where Longolius posits authorial performance to be particularly visible, as it allows authors to present themselves “as the authors they want to become” (39). She ties together seemingly disparate strands of theory to illustrate the ways these performances can take shape, one of which is Wolfgang Iser’s idea of “literary representation as a performative act” which she argues can be extended from a consideration of the reader to one of the author (34). As the literary representations that will be examined in this essay come in the form of narratives, some narratological terminology will help to clarify the discussion. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan provides such terms in her book *Narrative Fiction*, which presents a pedagogical overview of established theories while also adding to the debate. These terms and concept will facilitate the study of how authors can utilize narrative levels to draw attention to authorial performance.

The purpose of this essay is to analyze four books written by male American authors in the 21st century that thematize authorial self-invention in different ways. While there are various ways in which we can define an author, the type of authorship with which the present essay will be concerned is that of literary texts—primarily such that have been officially published in print, although questions of digital publications, and unregulated authorship will also be considered.³ The literary texts which will be analyzed in the essay are James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces*⁴ (2003), Paul Auster’s *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006), Ron Currie Jr.’s *Flimsy Little Plastic Miracles* (2013), and J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst’s *S.* (2013). While the convention

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² In her analysis she utilizes work of Paul Auster, Candice Breitz, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Sophie Calle as the subjects of her discussion. However, her examination of Auster’s work focuses primarily on his autobiographical and collaborative projects, whereas mine focuses on one of his fictional novels.

³ All four literary texts were at the time of writing also available as e-books on Amazon.

⁴ This book was promoted and published as a memoir, but will in this essay be read as a novel, for reasons that will be further discussed in the essay’s second section, which focuses on Frey’s book.
of studies of authorship as performance appears to be to focus on one or a few authors, and the progression of their work over time, this essay will examine books by different authors from the same country, published over a span of ten years. By so doing, the hope is to find indications of the cultural climate in which the books were produced, and to be able to make tentative claims in regards to possible shifts in our conception of authorship since the writing of the postmodernist classics by Barthes and Foucault. The books will be discussed in individual sections, where the aim is to identify and discuss the manner in which the respective authors are performing their author personae, as well as the way in which the novels problematize questions of the author-reader relationship. There is nevertheless some overlap between the novels, Frey’s, and Currie Jr.’s in particular, which is why they will be discussed in the two middle sections, preceded by a look at Auster’s novel, and followed by the more experimental novel of Abrams and Dorst.

The intention of the selection of literary texts in this project is taken as hopefully indicative rather than exhaustive. It was my initial intention to include a book by a female author in this selection, however, I was unable to find a novel fitting the criteria. That is not to say that such a novel does not exist. The difficulty I had in finding such a novel may nevertheless be indicative of there being something regarding this type of novel and gender worth discussing. This is even so best left for another project since questions of gender are not to be central to the discussions in this essay. My hope is that the legitimacy of my findings is not noticeably crippled by this exclusively male literary perspective. The essay will progress from what can be conceived of as a performance of an embodied, allegorized ‘author-function,’ through fictionalized autobiographical writings calling to the fore the relevance of authenticity, to the author-reader relationship from inward and outward looking perspectives. The final section will then examine the way technological and media related shifts have affected our desire and need to search for the author both within and outside the text.
Travels in the Scriptorium - The ‘Author-Function’ Made Flesh?

Auster’s novel Travels in the Scriptorium\(^5\) offers an opportunity to discuss the ideas of both Barthes and Foucault from the perspective of performativity. In the novel, the reader is presented with an elderly man in a room that is under surveillance. No concrete information is given as to the man’s identity, the location of the room, or who—or what—is responsible for the surveillance, which leaves the novel exceedingly open to interpretation. The man is given the moniker Mr. Blank, as he has almost no recollection of the details of his life—his past, who he is, or how he came to be in the room in which he finds himself. As time progresses though, and as he meets with various characters who visit him in the room, he is prompted to recall parts of his life pertaining to his job. Aside from a brief foray into his childhood, which is never properly followed up, Mr. Blank in fact appears to be little more than his profession, which entailed sending people—some of whom come to visit him—out on various missions. The names of these characters, and the few details that are shared regarding the missions, are intertextual allusions to Auster’s previously published novels. These allusions are the primary reason why Mr. Blank can be read as a version of Auster, as they establish a link between the two through the similarities between the missions and Auster’s novels. In addition, it is interesting to note the reduction of Mr. Blank to the point where he becomes no more than the person who instigated these missions. Almost no information is given about him that does not pertain to his work. It is such a reading of Mr. Blank as Auster that arguably connects the novel to the essays by Barthes, and Foucault.

After posing a series of questions as to who is speaking in a quote from Honoré de Balzac’s Sarrasine, Barthes states that this is impossible to know, as “writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin” (142). He argues that in writing, it is the text that acts—or performs—and not the author (143). The idea that an explanation to a text should be sought in the person who produced it—that the author is somehow “‘confiding’ in us”—is erroneous, as “language knows a ‘subject’, not a ‘person,’” and “the author is never more than the instance writing” (143, 145). The title of the essay is echoed at the very end of the text, and what is easily interpreted as the central argument of the text is that the “death of the author” is necessary for the

\(^5\) Hereafter referred to as Travels.
possibility of the “birth of the reader”—the reader being the one who unites and focuses a text which always consists of multiple writings (148). What this suggests then, is that the author has no authority over the text after it is published—and limited authority even during compositions—as it is language that performs, and that it is the reader who is responsible for tying together the strands of pre-existing writings within the text.

The idea of focusing on allowing the text to speak and looking for evidence of meaning of the text in the text rather than outside it strikes me as a sound argument, although Barthes’s essay is at times a little strongly worded. Foucault is somewhat less provocative in his suggested handling of the author than Barthes, but is nonetheless focused on the text as such and he too underlines the sense of absence of the author as individual. He puts forth the idea of the author as what he terms an ‘author-function’ for which he presents four defining characteristics. The first of these characteristics is that the ‘author-function’ is tied to institutional and legal systems that influence the discourses available. The second states that it is subject to differences in articulation influenced by culture, discursive context, and time, and does thus not operate in a uniform way; the third that it does not arise from a simple attributive link between a creator and a text, but is defined by a series of complex factors and procedures often related to the contemporary cultural climate. Finally, the ‘author-function’ gives rise to multiple egos simultaneously, and therefore does not refer to an actual person, as the positions of these egos can by occupied by a multitude of different people (Foucault 130-131).

In *Travels*, there are plenty of details that support a reading of Mr. Blank as a personification of the author as someone who sends characters out in the world but then loses influence over them. Longolius notes in one of her brief mentions of *Travels*, that characters such as Anna Blume and David Zimmer, who Mr. Blank meets while in the room, are characters that populate Auster’s previously published novels. She also posits Mr. Blank as Auster’s alter ego (250, footnote 78). Mr. Blank sent Anna out on a mission, which she only describes as having been sent to a dangerous and desperate place of “destruction and death” (21). Longolius points out that Anna has appeared in two previous novels, but her description of the mission on which she went hints at Auster’s 1987 novel *In the Country of Last Things*, rather than *Moon Palace* (1989) (250). Now Anna acts as one of Mr. Blank’s caretakers, stating at one point that without him, “[she] wouldn’t be anyone” (Auster 22, my emphasis).
You can read this as meaning that Anna would not exist were it not for Mr. Blank and his mission, although she does not hold him fully responsible for what has happened to her. She lived on even after the mission was over, and at that point Mr. Blank was only indirectly responsible for what happened. Anna says as follows: “You do what you have to do, and then things happen. […] We might be the ones who suffer, but there’s a reason for it, a good reason, and anyone who complains about it doesn’t understand what it means to be alive” (Auster 22). In other words, Mr. Blank—as an author—may be responsible for bringing Anna and her fellow characters into being, but after he has ‘done what he has to do,’ after he has set the mission and sent them on their way they are no longer his to control, but rather take on a life on their own, presumably facilitated by the imagination of the reader. This way, the story emerges as an allegory for the ‘author-function,’ or the ‘dead author.’

The possibility of reading Mr. Blank as a version of Auster is a key reason why I read the novel as allegorical. However, the allegory is not limited to the connection between Mr. Blank and Auster himself but could arguably be read as an allegory of authorship in a more general sense. If those who care for and visit the protagonist in the novel were characters pulled from the body of work of another author, then the narrative would arguably only require minor changes for the role of Mr. or Ms. Blank to be read as a representation of that author instead. However, in the novel, as in the poststructuralist discourse of which Barthes, and Foucault were a part, the question of the author expands beyond this reduction of the author as being someone that produces a text that then lives on completely independently of its creator.

Barthes’s essay, as mentioned in the introduction, was not his final word on the status of the author and Gallop presents an interesting reading of the essay in light of his subsequent work. In S/Z (1970), Barthes again addressed the question of the author, and how, if the originating source—the “Author-God” as he at times put it—is renounced, the author can “become a text” and return that way (Gallop 34). Barthes argued that “the critical enterprise will then consist in returning the documentary figure of the author into a novelistic figure” (qtd. in Gallop 35). I see a connection between this idea of the author being found in the text as a novelistic figure and Longolius’s idea of performative authorship as the activity of becoming an author in and through the writings they produce. Longolius also draws on Barthes when positing that including the author self as a character in a work is one way in which authors can be seen as engaging in an act of performative authorship (10). This is not
a connection that Gallop makes, as she does not venture into the subject of performativity in her reading of Barthes. Gallop instead looks at how Barthes extended his considerations of the author in his book *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (1971) where he continued to develop this idea of the author in the text.

This return of the author as novelistic figure is facilitated by Barthes’s insistence that every text contain a “subject to love” (Gallop 42). So, in spite of the text destroying every subject, it must also contain a subject—an author—that the reader can love, which creates a “twisted dialectic” where the theoretical author is both dead and alive simultaneously (Gallop 42-45). What traces there are of the author in the text are nevertheless dispersed and reducible “to a few details, to a few tastes, to a few inflections, let us say: some ‘biographemes’” (qtd. in Gallop 45). It seems, therefore, that a ‘biographeme’ is to be thought of as a small unit of biographical detail which can be found in a text, but which is not to be conflated with the author. It is by virtue of being contained within these small units that the author in the text can affect and reach the reader as an other (Gallop 50). In *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) Barthes wrote that “[l]ost in the middle of the text (not behind it like a god of machinery) there is always the other, the author” (qtd. in Gallop 50). Not even Barthes, then, seems completely ready to give up on the author, in spite of what his manifesto suggested. His subsequent writings thus proposes a less radical view of authorship than that presented by Foucault’s author-function, and I see many parallels between Barthes’s conception of the author lost in the text, and thinking of authorship as performance. Nevertheless, his “twisted dialectics” still insists that the author is theoretically dead, something which Burke takes issue with in his book *The Death and Return of the Author* (2008).

In his first chapter, “The Birth of the Reader,” Burke focuses on this part of Barthes’s arguments, and I read Burke as positing the most basic reason for this call for the interpretive rights of the reader as stemming from the notion of the authority of the “Author-God.” He establishes the background and implication of the idea of the “Author-God” to give context to how Barthes’s insistence on his death is a reference to “The Death of God” found in Nietzsche’s *The Joyful Wisdom* (22-23). However, Burke finds a major flaw in this postulation of the author-as-god as “we can, without contradiction, conceive of authors who do not issue ‘single theological messages’, who do not hold univocal mastery over their texts” (24). He moves on to present examples of critics who have presented similar calls for problematizing authorship
without conceiving of the author as the ‘father’ of the text. Burke states that by essentially ignoring these alternative positions of the author in favor of a theocentric conception of authorship, Barthes employs “a tactic which naturally lends to the death of the author a greater urgency, a more direful necessity” (25). Thereby, by calling for the author’s theoretical death, what Barthes is really doing is participating in the construction of the “Author-God.” “He must create a king worthy of killing” (Burke 25).

Adrian Wilson draws conclusions similar to those of Burke when examining Foucault’s essay. Burke posited that “the concept of the author is never more alive than when thought dead,” and Wilson identifies this as a significantly important point (qtd. in Wilson 348). Wilson highlights many of the internal contradictions in Foucault’s essay, one of which is that he shifts between the position that the author is in some way tied to the work, and that the author-figure arises from “our way of handling texts,” thus suggesting that the author is external to the work (Wilson 352). Furthermore, the handling of the author’s name and the similarities and differences it has to a proper name is also something that shifts ultimately resulting in the resemblance of the two being suppressed—“a resemblance which is in fact the very condition of the ‘author-function’, for it is precisely as the bearer of a name that ‘the author’ performs the cultural role which Foucault is attempting to disclose” (Wilson 357, emphasis in original). Wilson’s ultimate conclusion posits that the achievement of Foucault’s essay was to expose the concept of ‘the author’ as an interpretive construct, and that this achievement was considerably masked by the language he used, as the ‘conceptual figurations’ with which he was grappling—“author”, ‘text’ and ‘work’ being just three examples—“prove extremely recalcitrant to elucidation, precisely because we normally get along by employing them unreflectively” (360, 363). Gallop, Burke, and Wilson all seem to come to similar conclusions in their discussions of these texts by Barthes and Foucault, which is that we cannot quite conceive of the author as dead and buried, or as a mere function, and that in fact these essays only pique our interest in the problem that is ‘the author’.

It seems noteworthy that the protagonist of Auster’s novel is never given a name, if we are to consider him an author. There are three readily available possibilities as to why he is left nameless; first, since he has no memory of who he is, he remains nameless as whatever name he might be given holds little meaning for him; second, his name is given somewhere within the narrative—Fanshawe the author
being the most likely candidate—but the ambiguity is left open to the interpretive privilege of the reader; and third, the name Blank is itself allegorical and signals the character standing in for the emptied out author. However, as Wilson’s discussion suggested, and as Foucault posited at certain points in his essay, the name of an author does matter—the author being the bearer of a name and thereby performing a cultural role, as mentioned above—and the other author in the narrative, Fanshawe, is identified by name as well as his profession.

Longolius has an entire section on names in her chapter “Staging,” which seems to suggest the importance of names to performing an authorial persona. A somewhat amusing twist to the character Fanshawe comes when he is first mentioned to Mr. Blank, by a Mr. Flood—whose name might also be interpreted as allegorical, hinting at Auster repeatedly utilizing allegory in his work. Mr. Flood has come to ask for Mr. Blank’s help, as Fanshawe is another one of the people who Blank has sent out on a mission and produced a report about but cannot remember. Fanshawe has also written a novel, which Blank has supposedly read, in which Flood figured as a character. When asking Flood about Fanshawe, Blank questions whether he survived the ‘perilous’ mission he was sent to do, to which Flood answers: “No one is sure. But the prevailing opinion is that he’s no longer with us” (Auster 51). We are given no information as to what the mission was that Fanshawe was assigned to do, but in the report Blank wrote he reportedly stated that Fanshawe had written a number of unpublished books. This begs the question if it was something that happened during the mission, or if it was the fact of writing these books itself that made Fanshawe pass on, giving the meta-textual reflections on narrative and authorship yet another level. In addition, the comment that ‘no one is sure’ is an interesting remark on the ever ongoing debate on the issue of whether the author is alive or dead, both figuratively and literally.

Flood asks Blank about the novel in which he appeared, bringing on some further interesting dialogue during which Blank questions the practice of referring to ‘real’ people in a fictional work. Flood answers that, supposedly, “writers do it all the time” (Auster 52). This results in a back-and-forth in which Blank takes the stance that fiction is nothing more than “pure invention” while Flood insists that he is “literally nothing” without the dream that he dreamt in Fanshawe’s novel but cannot recall (Auster 53). Whereas earlier we found Blank and Flood to bring up the question whether the author is to be thought of as living or dead, here we find them discussing
the issue of fictionalizing the real. Once the elements of the author that in some way comes from their life outside the text, what Barthes called ‘biographemes’, are incorporated into the work, does that affect the person wielding the pen, or the word-processor? Mr. Blank is suggesting that it changes nothing, but Flood on the other hand experiences a sense that he is nothing outside the text. If Blank represents the author, then his knowledge of the reality of his being remains secure even without the text, while Flood, standing in for what can be though of as the author persona, knows that his existence will never be acknowledged without the text.

For while Mr. Blank might be thought of as an allegorized version of the ‘author-function’, he is presented as fully embodied, while not in living color, then certainly in living flesh, with all the flatulence, stiff joints, and erectile-dysfunction—or mysterious lack thereof—often associated with being an elderly man. Mr. Blank has yet to realize his part in the story, how he connects to the other characters, to the stories placed atop the desk in his room, and that he is under surveillance. It is not until he picks up a manuscript which shares the same title as Auster’s novel, purportedly authored by Fanshawe, and beginning in the exact same way as his own story that Mr. Blank seems to realize just what a problematic situation he is finding himself in. The majority of the narrative is shaped like a report, similar to those presumably authored by Mr. Blank himself, and the most prominent break from this comes at the very end of the novel, and lasts for roughly a page. While the narration does seem to have a somewhat odd insight into the thoughts of Mr. Blank, given the detached and impersonal tone of the report in general, in this last page the reader is presented with a moment of a narrating ‘I’, which appears to belong to one of characters—or “charges”—that Mr. Blank has sent out on his missions. The narrator answers Blank’s plea for an end, stating that there will never be one—he is one of ‘them’ now—as he will now go on to “outlive the mind that made [them], for once [they] are thrown into the world, [they] continue to exist forever” (Auster 129). Mr. Blank, the author of all those reports, has become a character, lost in the text, and doomed to exist forever in that room, created by the words on a page, and in a sense existing only by the grace of the characters he has created (129-130).

What my analysis seems to indicate, ultimately, is that this novel can be read as a fictionalized meditation of a theoretical authorship debate in which Auster is performing a persona well versed in literary criticism. Furthermore, bringing the complex relationship between author and reader in fictional texts to the fore, he
problematizes an awareness of the at times precarious position authors occupy in the face of their work. This type of reading, however, requires consideration of surrounding paratexts—such as the blurb usually found on the book jacket, just inside the cover, which in the case of the edition I have read states that Auster attended Colombia University, lived in France, and has worked with translation—as well as a familiarity with critics such as Barthes, Foucault, or Maurice Blanchot, the latter with whom he is reportedly familiar. In lieu of this, it may be difficult for a reader to recognize the theoretical elements in the novel, but one who is more familiar with Auster’s previously published work may very well pick up on nuances which elude me. There appears to be a connection here to Iser’s concept of representation as a performative act, rather than one of mimesis, mentioned in the introduction.

What the reader is presented with in the novel is not a mimetic representation of the dynamics between reader, authors, and certainly not the characters that the author creates, but rather a performative act through which Auster is representing these relationships in an obviously fictionalized fashion. Iser posited that this activity involved the two acts of selection and combination, the first of which breaks up each field of reference as “the chosen elements can only take on their significance through the exclusion of others” while still depending on the functions of those fields (qtd. in Longolius 35). Combination, in turn, facilitates on a lexical level diverse possibilities of association (35). What emerges from this type of representation is thus something new, rather than a depiction of something that already exists, and Iser states that this new thing unfolds in the mind of the recipient through a kind of imaginative role play. Longolius argues that this role play works for authors as well, when they stage themselves as author, by appearing in their own texts or through various kinds of paratexts (36-37). While the appearance of Auster is not explicit in *Travels*, and could be contested, I would say that it is difficult to argue against it being a novel about authorship.

While Mr. Blank might be a little lacking in the description of his psychology, he is a fully embodied character. I would argue that Auster dramatizes the authorship question by positing even the author-function as embodied, making it more difficult to separate the concept of the author from the body in the world beyond the text. This is accomplished through performing his authorship in the text by still self-consciously

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6 This fact was brought to my attention by Dr. Giles Whitely, who informed me that Auster has translated work by Blanchot from French into English.
being self-effacing. These are the traces of Auster’s performance within the text that the reader can identify and recognize as an authorial persona. In the next section, the question of authorship is not addressed in the narrative, like in Travels, but rather presents an opportunity to discuss the issue as it pertains to the attempt at portraying an author’s interior from an angle more dependent on the personal, and delve deeper into the performative aspects of authorship.

**A Million Little Pieces - Recognizing Believable Pieces of a Life**

In Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces*, the reader is presented with a story that portrays the struggles of the author trying to conquer a variety of substance abuse problems while in a rehabilitation facility. The book is labeled, and was promoted, as a memoir and as a factual account of the experiences of the author. Readers might be tempted to believe that in a book which purports to tell the lived events of the author through a first-person account, the issue of authorship is more straightforward than in an overtly fictional text. As the case of Frey’s book came to show, however, questions surrounding authorship are never as simple as they may appear at first glance. In 2006, three years after the book had first been published and a couple of years after it had become a success in part because of its inclusion in Oprah’s book club, it came to light that several events in the book had either been extensively altered or completely made up. This caused the whole narrative to be called into question, and many readers felt deceived by the book having been marketed as a memoir (Barton n.p.). This arguably raises questions regarding the relationship between author and reader, what obligations and privileges they have in relation to one another, and what happens when a discrepancy is found between what the audience expects from a text and what they receive. These kinds of questions will however not be the focus of this section, but will rather be given more attention in the next section of the essay. In this section, the focus will instead be on the formulation of an author persona through the kind of narrative where the author writes themselves as a character in a text, of which autobiographical writing is just one example.

As was mentioned in the introduction, this essay will approach Frey’s book as a novel rather than a memoir and the main reason for this is that the discussion at hand takes little interest in the actual life of the author in the world beyond the text. For that

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7 For more details on this, and for an interview with Frey, read Laura Barton’s full article.
reason, the referential veracity of any one event or statement is of little consequence. Longolius proposes that autobiographical writings are not to be read solely as personal narratives, but as explicit and self-conscious ways of authorial self-invention (52). She puts forth that “[i]n the writing process, there is a clear distinction between the person – the somatic being with feelings, thoughts, and physical needs – and the narrated author figure” (56). There seems to be a prevailing consensus amongst critics writing on authorship that such is the case. The ‘I’ becomes fictionalized once it narrates itself, and the authorial identity—much like the general understanding of identity as fluid and continuously reinvented proposed by Deleuze among others—is constantly performing and creating new versions of itself (Longolius 56). In this sense, Longolius is suggesting that identity, both for people in the world outside the text and the author to be found in the text, is a simulacrum in the Delezueian sense of there not existing any original or copies, but rather a series of images of the self that differ from one another to varying degrees. What we think of as identity, then, becomes possible and visible both to others and ourselves only through autobiographical expressions (56-57). The discussion of Frey’s book will therefore focus on how the persona of the author is created in, and through, the text, and how the narrative techniques of the book strive to portray the interiority of this version of Frey’s authorial self.

The novel starts with James the protagonist and narrator—not to be mistaken for James Frey the person, or even the author—waking up on an airplane, having no memory of how he got there, and not knowing where he is going. He is informed that he was put on the plane by a doctor and two men, and finds that he is covered in various bodily fluids, has considerable injuries to his face, and four teeth missing (1). The underlying cause for these injuries and his inability to recall what has happened was that he ingested considerable amounts of drugs and alcohol. This particular incident is the straw that breaks the proverbial camel’s back for his friends and family, who decide to get him into a facility to get help. It is in this facility that the majority of the narrative takes place—only when James leaves and proves to himself that he has conquered his addictions does the story end. On the last page of the narrative, James tells his brother with what seems like absolute conviction, that he will never drink again (511). This strong conviction in his own truth is a recurring element throughout the book that becomes especially prominent when he is prompted to follow the Alcoholics Anonymous program at the facility. As addiction—like
cancer—is an affliction of which you are typically not considered cured, but rather in remission, this conviction is in line with how James the narrator and author persona considers the often complicated issue of truth.

When imagining what will be written in his obituary, James claims that he knows who and what he is, and goes on to list many of the bad things he has done in his life (111-112). When he is finished with his version of his obituary he comments that “[i]t tells the truth, and as awful as that can be, the truth is what matters” (112). He states that after he is gone, “the truth of [his] existence will be removed and replaced with imagined good” by the people who loved him (111). This seems to suggest the position that those close to him do not know, or do not want to see the ‘true’ James, and that people essentially are what they do. So, if you abuse drugs, you are an addict, if you commit a crime, you are a criminal. James put it as follows: “I am a drug Addict and I am a Criminal. That is what I am and who I am and that is how I should be remembered” (111). By extension then, if you write a book you are an author, and not only that, but he also seems to be of the opinion that there is power in controlling the narrative. Once someone else is tasked with writing his life, his existence will be rewritten. He wants no tears, no fake sentimentality brought on by “happy lies,” as he finds he deserves nothing more than to be portrayed honestly (111). He does not reflect on how his family might honestly perceive him or how their subjective experiences of him relate to how he defines himself. Instead, we might say, the narrator James takes the matter into his own hands and writes his own story, becoming an author in the process and also generating the truth of that narrative existence. This hinges extensively on the autobiographical structure of the book since, as Longolius puts it, “the author figure appears simultaneously as the author, the narrator, and the protagonist” (52). Performing an identity or persona in a text makes it real in the Deleuzeian sense of becoming—and to some extent also the simulacrum— even if that persona is not true in an overtly referential manner.

Both Longolius and Berensmeyer et al. display an ambivalent stance towards the term ‘implied author’ as presented by Wayne C. Booth. Longolius states that she finds Booth’s implied author to be quite passive, as it is drawn from the text by the reader (8). Berensmeyer et al. in turn argues that even some narratologists find they can “do without” the term, and that authorship as performance need to be distinguished from the debate of the implied author (8). There nevertheless appears to be some overlap between the author persona and the implied author. The performance of an author
persona is distinct from the real author as is the implied author. Rimmon-Kenan discusses how for Booth and Seymour Chatman the implied author substitutes the real author whom always remains outside the narrative transaction proper (87). In spite of focusing on narrators and narratees in her discussion, Rimmon-Kenan does acknowledge the importance of such a participant in narrative fiction to determining a reader’s attitude to certain narrative components. Chatman posits the implied author as silent—voicelessly instructing the reader through the design of the narrative—and Rimmon-Kenan finds it odd to cast a voiceless participant in a communicative situation in the role of an addresser (88-89). This is part of why books in which the author writes themselves as characters in the work present an opportunity for discussion of this issue.

Regardless of whether one considers Frey’s book a novel or a memoir, it seems safe to claim that the corporeal James Frey is different from the James Frey in *A Million Little Pieces*, at least to the extent that one is flesh and bone and the other is textually constituted. Even if they share the same name and seemingly share the same personal history, a textual character and a corporeal person can never be the same. In this sense, even autobiographical writing is a performance where there are inevitable differences between ‘the real’ and the written. The concept of the performative author persona can thus be viewed as a more complicated and self-consciously structured version of the implied author. In the diegesis of Frey’s book, the narrator James is a homodiegetic narrator, i.e. he is narrating a story in which he himself appears as a character. While it appears that the narrator and the protagonist are one and the same, a commonsensical understanding of writing tells us that the narrator and the implied author—or author persona—cannot be the same. Rather, the implied author is structuring and performing itself as a persona through the narration.

These kinds of textual, authorial self-inventions are not a new practice, as Patricia F. Tarantello shows in her article on Benjamin Franklin’s self-representation in his *Autobiography*, and *Poor Richard’s Almanack* (1732-1758). She begins by pointing to how literary personae—primarily invented characters or personalities—in this period are often perceived by scholars today as a means by which authors could distance the text from the personal, and the author from the audience (1-2). She argues

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9 These terms are presented in Rimmon-Kenan and come originally from Gerard Genette. The term ‘diegetic’ essentially means ‘within the story’ (92, 95).
that what Franklin did was to create a sympathetic and engaging author-figure that allowed him to connect with his readers, and that could also be utilized for self-representation and self-promotion (2). Ultimately, she finds that through the invented character of *Poor Richard*, Franklin developed strategies to portray engaging personalities, and interplay between related personae that were essential to his revealing himself as a “particularly stylized self” through his created identities (11). The element of this argument that relates most clearly to Frey’s book is the notion of creating an author-figure that is engaging and sympathetic. Although there are admittedly few parallels between reading a longer narrative and reading the kind of almanac that Franklin produced, the idea that the audience will be more invested if the author-figure reads as authentic is of relevance to both types of texts. Franklin accomplished this, according to Tarantello, by creating a character that his demographic can relate to and who speaks in their register, and by that character’s readiness to reveal his inner thoughts and motivations (6).

There is one passage in Frey’s book which in particular raises the question of performance and authenticity, as it reads as rather implausible. After having settled into the facility and made it through the first step in his physical recovery, James is sent to the dentist office to get his broken and missing teeth fixed. I would argue that this scene—as it is one of the most visceral episodes in the narrative—is a crucial part of establishing the character of James, as how he deals with pain and adversity is a central issue in the story. Since he is in the process of being weaned off drugs and alcohol, he is informed that he will not be receiving either anesthetics or pain relief, and that his double root-canal surgery will be “incredibly painful” (75). The stoicism, with which he faces this pain, and that of fixing his two other teeth, is juxtaposed against his insistence to have a children’s book on his chest under the straps that are holding him down during the procedure. The procedure and James’s experience are described in great detail over the course of seven pages (77-83). What makes this scene seem obviously embellished is the coherency with which the experience is narrated. One short section reads as follows:

The pain is greater than anything I’ve ever felt and it is greater than anything I could have imagined. It overwhelms every muscle and every fiber and every cell in my body and everything goes limp. I moan and the instrument goes away, but the pain stays. […]
James?
I take a deep breath.
Do what you need to do. Just get it over with. (78)
While every narrative is inevitably constructed, and the coherency of the scene may be viewed as connected to this constructedness, the scene reads as a performance of male bravado. It is easy to get pulled into the intensity of the sensory way that the scene is described, while simultaneously raising the question of how such intensity can be believably sustained by the experiencing narrator.

While the pain does get intense enough for James “to fade into a state of white consciousness” from which “[his] body won’t let [him] come back,” he nevertheless continues to narrate (82). He is still aware of the pain, even when he occupies this state of being separated from his body, and this is my main point of contention with this scene. Narration in writing allows its author more leeway when describing events than oral narration of the present would, as they can narrate events after the fact to create the effect of being told as they were happening, but with the added benefit of temporal distance which allows events to be manipulated. Frey’s entire book is narrated in the present tense, which creates a sense of immediacy when reading, but which also highlights the constructed nature of the writing. The reader knows that the book could not have been produced under the circumstances that James finds himself, but suspends the disbelief of the coherence of this man in pain because his story is compelling in its intensity and momentum. The book is written completely without dialogue tags so that it is at times difficult to tell if another character is speaking, or if James is thinking something. This relates back to Tarantino’s claim that Franklin’s readiness to share his inner thoughts connected him with the audience, as the same thing happens in Frey’s novel. The immediacy of access to James’s interior formed through the narrative techniques used creates the illusion that he is indeed confiding in you, which might to a considerable extent be an effect created by the marketing of the book as a memoir.

By creating the illusion of the author communicating something true and personal to the reader, the structural and formal elements of the book simultaneously make visible its constructedness and distracts from it. As discussed in the previous section, this notion of the author confiding in the reader is one that Barthes and Foucault opposed, as do many other literary critics. Michael Martin, however, puts forth an acerbic argument to move past postmodern criticisms aversion to human beings as the originating sources of literature. He entreats that “[w]e must not forget that the impulse to write and the reciprocal impulse to read are underwritten by a desire for communion with the other” (86). To consider authorship in performative
terms allows for this communion, while retaining certain elements of postmodernist ideas that Martin opposes. He writes of how we are moved by utterances that ring of authenticity, even if they are fictitious, and that this is a form of communion between human souls that postmodern criticism does not allow because of its radical skepticism towards an ‘authentic Self’ (86-87). For postmodern criticism, Martin writes, the character of a work is a “constructed self”—considered the byproduct of a culture or metanarrative, but rarely the product of another human being,” and this constructed persona has no ‘Self’ available to commune with the reader (86, 87).

If, however, we conceive of the author persona as a consciously constructed performance, then this persona—always fictional to some extent as it is narrated—should be capable of communion with the reader. As Martin later suggests, a text or work is “a frequency by which we can discern and attend to the ideas of another” (89). These ideas can arguably be expressed via a constructed author persona, and if the reader finds sufficient authenticity in the work, this may result in an experience of communion between author and reader, as two human beings rather than as functions or cultural byproducts. The author persona generated in and through a text—especially if they are explicitly present in that text as a character—is never to be confused with the person of the author living in the world beyond the work. Nevertheless, it is a construction, often highly self-conscious, generated not only by the text and all the associated elements of language and culture, but also by a person. While Martin opposes many postmodern ideas I find that his desire to reinstate a sense of communion between author and reader might still allow for some elements of postmodern theory as adopted by a performative approach to authorship. So, if we can accept the Deleuzeian idea of identity as unfixed, perpetual becoming and thus essentially a simulacrum without any original as it applies to human beings in general, then as Longolius suggests, we should be able to apply this to the authorship question as well.

A portrait or exploration of the self always inherently contains within it the presence of the ‘other,’ Longolius argues as she continues to draw on Deleuze and his proposition that it is only through difference and repetition in relation to the “Other-structure” that individuation arises (101). I see a connecting factor between the idea of communion between author and reader, and the interplay between the other and the individual as both being dependent on recognition. Bo G. Ekelund discusses the poetics and politics of recognition in literary works in light of authority and social
logic. In terms of poetics, Ekelund takes as his point of departure Terence Cave’s 1988 study of the development of recognition from the Aristotelian concept of ‘anagnorisis’ through its decline with modernity, and how it has changed as a narrative device. He posits that when seen in conjunction with modernity’s social transformations, recognition “emerges as a concept that points beyond the internal development of poetics” (92). Having developed from a time when individuals were important for what they contributed to a societal order heavily regulated by kinship, the modern individual “claims an autonomy that must be confirmed by recognition of the true self, through the disclosure of character” (Ekelund 92). Ekelund looks at two alternatives that Cave posits for modern literature that illustrate this internalized recognition—individual psychology and self-becoming through self-discovery on the one hand, and metafictional revelations where recognition is transferred from characters to readers on the other. Ekelund suggests that these modern turns of recognition can be read as “symptomatic of a social logic of reification” (93).

So, how do these ideas relate to Frey’s book and his performance of an authorial persona? I cannot help but see a connection between reification and Deleuze’s simulacrum, which makes something real by virtue of its having no original. If something, or perhaps more relevantly someone, is recognized by a reader or a character within a work, I would argue that the particular version of that persona is then reified, given that there is enough textual evidence to support the interpretation. The reification of authorial identity—which is constantly in flux and repeatedly being performed by an author through different textual personae—is thus dependent on the recognition of readers. Ekelund presents a convincing argument that the connection between how we read a fictional world and our own social world is governed by socially conditioned interpretive principles. He posits that to read works of fiction is “akin to the process we enter whenever we reflexively try to place ourselves in social space and make our words and our actions harmonize with or contrast significantly with those offered by others” (103). There are of course significant differences between recognition in social interaction and that inherent in reading, however the social, primary recognition acquired early in life can never be fully displaced by the formal schemas of reading acquired through education (Ekelund 103). In light of these ideas and arguments, I will now look at two instances of recognition in Frey’s book, and how they relate to authorial performance and recognition.
In a therapy session with his parents, James is asked to consider the reasons for his substance abuse problems, and to try to explain them. He comes ready with what the reader has already been introduced to as ‘the Fury’ which he explains as “a combination of rage, anger, extreme pain,” which he has known as long as he can remember, and that he has abused substances in an attempt to kill the Fury. “Even though I knew I was killing myself, killing the Fury was more important,” James states (360). While he does not know where this fury comes from, he knows that it gets worse when he is around his parents (360-361). At this, his parents raise the question of whether this fury could possibly have been brought on by a physical ailment and proceed to reveal that James had very painful, undiagnosed ear problems for the first two years of his life. When he was finally diagnosed, ten years and multiple surgeries followed, which resulted in a thirty, and twenty percent hearing loss in his left and right ear, respectively. James has little recollection of this ordeal, other than having undergone surgery, so this information comes as news to him (362-364). He starts to ponder if he is willing to accept—or to recognize—this explanation as the cause of his problems with addiction. He goes as far as to acknowledge that “[i]t probably holds some weight,” but considers accepting it as a root cause a cop-out (364). This scene, which holds the potential for a moment of recognition through self-discovery, only delivers part of the reconciliation with himself that you might expect from a recognition scene. It nevertheless allows the reader to accept this as an explanation, if they so choose, and the inclusion of it thereby draws attention to the presence of an author figure.

What the above mentioned episode does accomplish is to further cement the authorial persona of the ‘bad boy’ who refuses the control of any authoritarian figure, be they an officer of the law or his own parent. Whether his ear problems were the root cause of his Fury does not matter, because it presents a factor over which he has no control, and therefore does not interest him. He decides that it is a cop-out explanation, thereby reclaiming the control and authority over defining his own situation that his parents’ and the therapist’s reasoning threatened to take away from him. By explicitly exhorting control over these different portrayals of events in his life, and by extension his persona—the obituary, the dentist scene, and the therapy session—James positions himself in opposition to the other, while simultaneously being adamant of his interior perspective through the format of the narrative. The
present tense, the lack of dialogue tags, and the use of capitalization\textsuperscript{10} all work together to create the illusion of an interior monologue, while also putting emphasis on words that seem to carry particular meaning. The only other character whose recognition James readily acknowledges without sarcasm or scorn is a fellow patient at the facility with whom he initiates a questioningly appropriate relationship.

One of the rules stipulated for staying at the facility is that interaction between men and women be kept to a bare minimum of courteous greetings (9-10). Lilly is a girl with her own problems, many of which may be similar to those that James suffers from, one of them being a problem with authority. They initiate a forbidden romance at the facility during which they develop a dependency on one another’s company and recognition. During a meeting in the woods, James is telling the story of ‘a Girl’ he once loved in college who did not reciprocate his feelings. He tells Lilly how he wished this ‘Girl’ would return his feelings, and how he believed that her love could help solve the problems in his life, as he was already at that point, not only a long-time abuser of alcohol and drugs, but also selling drugs to others. Lilly tells him how it was a bad idea for him to think “love could solve [his] problems” (275). This is ironic, as they are both expecting their love for each other to see them through the program, thus playing an important role in solving some of their problems, which does not happen. Instead, their relationship comes to be the reason for Lilly leaving the program, once they are found out and forced to stop seeing each other (410).

James experiences the recognition between them to be so strong that they “speak to each other with the silence that lies between [them]” as their feelings for one another grows (279). Their relationship presents an opportunity for the narrating James to show a side of himself that does not come across as easily as his controlling side—a softer side that takes comfort in silence. While he does have positive relationships with other characters in the book, Lilly is the one whom he accepts most readily. All the events in the novel, as well as its formal elements, and its format as a confessional, autobiographical story work towards shaping an author persona which is engaging and convincingly authentic. This stems, I would argue, both from the immediacy created by narrative techniques employed, and the seemingly honest way James tells his story. He does not hold back on any unflattering details, but rather seems to revel in revealing them. This seems like something of a contradiction, as it

\textsuperscript{10} He capitalises certain words, an example of which is: “He lost his House, his Wife, his Family, his mind” (42).
turned out that the some of the elements that had been altered in the story were to make the character James have a darker past than James Frey the man.

Looking at the paratext of his interview, it is nonetheless interesting to note that one facet of his author persona which is consistent with the persona we encounter in *A Million Little Pieces*, is the unapologetic claiming of wrong-doings, be they real or imaginary. Although the text is not explicitly positing James as an author-figure, he becomes one by narrating his own life, and in the process casting light on the constructed nature of identity by drawing attention to the imagined control of the one who moulds the narrative. As it turned out, the readers nevertheless found that the imagined authority of controlling the shape of a narrative comes not only with the privilege of shaping your own persona, but also with certain obligations. The reader-author relationship will be further explored in the following section, in which digital mediation, as well as metafictional reflections and recognitions, will be discussed in how these can be brought to bear on inventing an author persona.

**Flimsy Little Plastic Miracles - Truth in an Untrue Story?**
The events that surrounded the publication of documents revealing that Frey’s book was not as truthful as its readers had expected find a fictionalized corollary in Currie Jr.’s novel *Flimsy Little Plastic Miracles*.\(^{11}\) The question of truth in fiction is brought front and centre as is the relationship between authors and readers. The novel tells the story of Ron Currie Jr.—not the man, but a character who shares his name—who wants to clear up some things surrounding a novel he wrote by addressing the narratee directly and telling the story of what happened from his point of view. While the narrative is a fictionalized autobiography told in the first person, it is nevertheless quite different from the narrative we encounter in Frey’s book. *Flimsy*'s protagonist and intradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator Ron is very self-reflexive in fashioning his story, which is told in the past tense, and split into narrative strands that are interwoven through short, often fragmented events and ruminations. At the beginning and the end of the novel, the diegetic narratee is addressed directly, while also creating the illusion that the narrating ‘I’ is speaking to the actual reader as they read his story of the complicated relationship between him and the woman he loves.

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\(^{11}\) Hereafter referred to as *Flimsy*. 
Even before you have started reading the novel, as you flip through the title pages—there are three in total—you are presented with both an asterisk note attached to the title, and two paragraphs of text on the epigraph page, that seem to serve the purpose of further blurring the line between narrator and author persona. The tone of the authorial performance is thus set in its adjacent paratexts and both of these reflect to a degree on the notions of “true” stories and on the performance of authors. Differentiating between the diegetic Currie Jr. encountered in the novel and the persona encountered in these paratexts is impossible, and it quickly becomes apparent that the visibility with which he constructs his persona is purposefully employed. This brings to mind one of the types of recognition mentioned briefly in the previous section, concerning what Ekelund identifies as the audience occasionally being expected to “see the fictional edifice of illusions and aporias as itself an object of revelation” (93). I would argue that this certainly applies to the novel discussed here, because of how the author persona draws attention to his presence through the illusion of directly addressing the reader, when in fact he is addressing a fictional narratee.

In a discussion on the political factors surrounding the roles of authors and readers in a digital context, Burke posits that rather than making a claim on the textual centre, authorial ordering is meant to guide the reader through an experience (193). The notion of the author as being the be-all-end-all for textual interpretation suggests a closed text, the problems with which become increasingly evident with digital hypertext. The reader constructs itself as the dialogic counterpart of a text’s author once the text is read, as it then surpasses its authorial and physical confines by living on in their memory (Burke 191). Furthermore, Burke identifies what he calls ‘the biographical imperative’—our willingness to acknowledge that a written work comes from a person and is not something that constructs itself—that it “comes out of a head not a hat” (200). Still, he also points to how we are nevertheless quick to think that to retrace a work to the life of its author is an “unconscionable reduction” (201). This may not be true for all readers, however, which will be discussed further in the next section. Burke ultimately comes to the conclusion that these competing views inherent in ‘the biographical imperative’ bid us to keep both sides in mind without giving either precedence. “Rather than forgetting the personal self for an ontological literary self, or refusing the latter in favor of a multitudinous, ungovernable specificity, the critical impulse should say ‘yes’ and ‘no’ simultaneously to both alternatives […]”
(Burke 211). This is something that I find that a performative conception of authorship allows us to do.

We may never be able to find an author in a text, but if the reader is guided by an authorial performance either through its presence as a character in the text or through adjacent paratexts, we might see how we can consent to the coexistence of these different selves. Not much research is required to find that there is a person in the world beyond the text who fits part of the description of the diegetic Ron in *Flimsy*—he is an author, his father is dead, and he wrote a novel which shares the plot of the ‘real world’ Currie Jr.’s book *Everything Matters!* (2009). The first two pieces of information are on the inside of the dust jacket and the third can be found through a description on page 10 in *Flimsy* and by reading *Everything Matters!*: The events which the diegetic narrator Ron presents as the reason and the impetus for the novel at hand are fictional, as no posthumous novel has ever been credited to the name Ron Currie Jr. outside the diegesis after he was mistakenly reported as having taken his own life. While there is a lot that happens in the novel, my discussion will focus primarily on the issues surrounding the events of revelation for the fictional readers of the reality of the fictional author. Before that though, there needs to be some context provided, so I will briefly recapitulate the events leading up to the aforementioned revelation.

In the novel, Ron has a stormy relationship with the love of his life, which eventually leads to him writing a book about her. This book gets posthumously published after a failed suicide attempt that was considered a success by local police prompts Ron to go under ground across seas, leaving his life and family behind. Eventually, however, he gets caught with a fake passport and is deported back to the US. While he has been away, his book has become a massive hit and readers have interpreted it as the factual account of a man so miserably in love that he took his own life. Once it comes to light that he is not actually dead, the response of the readers is immediate, and forceful.

In a world that had taken God from them and replaced Him with talk of nucleic acids, pilfered from the rush and hum of love and replaced it with the explanation of brain chemistry, [the readers] felt robbed of the one thing that they’d ever been able to bring themselves to believe in with their guts and hearts as well as their brains. And as a consequence, they became angry as hell. (306)
There is an obvious parallel here to what happened after the news leaked of Frey having embellished his story, but this novel problematizes the relationship between authors and readers by calling attention to the constructedness both of narrative and of persona.

As we now find ourselves in an era of digitalization and connectedness, our means of both authoring and consuming texts have changed since the day of Barthes and Foucault, and questions of authorship and readership have to some extent changed with it. Michael Joyce proposes to conceptualize authorship as replacement—as authors are either moving to new positions, “or having their functions usurped” (259). As he is himself an author of fiction, he claims that authors like to think of their endeavors as unique, or at least different from the endeavors of others that they are aware of. Nevertheless, he states that authors must now come to terms with the “collaborative, technological mediascape” today rendering authorship increasingly modular (262). This happens by ‘content’ often being re-placed into different settings, and for purposes that are often not those intended by the author, “and only for as long as it proves useful” (Joyce 263). Even though the discussions in this essay focus on printed work, the digitized reality of much of our cultural consumption is a reality that authors are very aware of and in relation to which they are arguably forced to position themselves, unless they be forcibly ‘re-placed.’

Despoina Feleki looks at how one author has reconfigured his authorial personae through embracing developments in writing technologies and publication. She examines the work produced by Stephen King in light of scholarship on how new ideas on authorship have emerged after the proliferation of digital media. She puts forth that “popular authors working in electronic environments are asked to reconcile literary tradition and technological innovation in strict economic structures,” resulting in the “branding of their names and their products” (4). Moving from his personae established through print publication, King has written both for regulated electronic publication platforms—specifically the Amazon Kindle—and free online spaces. These online spaces present opportunities for authors to interact directly with readers, thereby enabling them to sustain the interest in the author as originator of a work, as well as perpetuating an authorial self-image (Feleki 8-9). This kind of interaction was not possible for the diegetic Ron in Flimsy, for a number of reasons, which is part of why the authorial persona he imagined himself as having established earlier in his career became ‘re-placed.’ Instead of reading his novel as a work of fiction, it was
read as an autobiographical depiction of unrequited love so strong it drove him to
commit suicide. A major contributing factor for this reading was the spread of his
suicide note online (Currie Jr. 269). The possibility for one document to reach
millions of people all over the world in a very short amount of time is new to the
Internet-era, as is the way this causes the limits between the public and the private to
blur.

The diegetic Ron speculates that the reason why so many of his readers were
affected by his suicide note, and his novel by extension, was that he “jammed more
earnestness into a single line of that note than existed in the whole of [his] first book”
(270). He continues:

And in a world where people put on false indifference along with their
deodorant and makeup, […] where they willfully believed in television
characters as a panacea for their loneliness, where they preferred this
loneliness to the vulnerability that could relieve it, […] where they
almost never said how they really felt for fear of being perceived as
strange or weak or plain crazy, […] they each and every one felt
themselves, moment to moment, trembling for something true. […] In
my suicide note, at last, I’d finally stopped hiding. (270)

In a sentence more than half a page long, Ron rants about the how people have
become so concerned with how they are viewed by others that they have stopped
being honest and are all just performing, even though he never uses this word.12
Instead, he calls it ‘pretending,’ seeming to suggest that there is no truth in the
personae of this kind that people present to the world. Nevertheless, his suicide
note—while being the textual event that allowed him to come out of hiding—was also
a performance, as he wrote it after his failed suicide attempt and after learning that
everyone though he had succeeded. In fact, leaving a note “seemed essential now that
[he] planned to fake [killing himself],” suggesting that even his honesty in the note is
a performance (212).

It is only after the issue has been cleared up—after Ron the diegetic author has
risen from the grave—that he addresses a narratee directly, through this new book
*Flimsy*, where he reflects on his own proliferation of an author persona. Because even
though he continuously stresses the importance of his being truthful, he nevertheless
holds the belief that truth is of little consequence when we read. After he has returned
to The States, Ron is faced with two class- action suits from people who felt deceived

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12 This might be said to hold true even outside the diegesis, considering the extensive use of social
media platforms.
by the book and the events surrounding it, and people whose loved ones were inspired
by the death of the author to commit suicide. During the trial, Ron testifies that the
novel was never intended to be read as truth, but rather as “a fictional representation
of very real experiences and emotions that [he] had” (320). The attorney who is cross-
examining him—who was also a fan of the book—is appalled and angered by his
insistence that a novelist is often considered paid to lie. She states that “people don’t
care about the difference between a novel and a memoir. What people care about is
being led to believe in something, and then finding out that what they believed in is a
goddamn lie” (321). I would argue that this is a particularly important point, in light
of the controversy which arose around Frey’s book. It does indeed seem that many
readers care a great deal about the referential truth-value of a book, especially if that
book is shaped in a way that invokes the presence of an author.

Ron continues his defense by bringing up the issue of subjectivity and how our
“perception is faulty and unreliable” and therefore result in two people often having
different impressions of the same event (322). He questions why it matters if it
actually happened, as the readers were so willing to believe in the reality of the book,
and since it moved them. He states: “I felt, and continue to feel, all that I wrote. Facts
notwithstanding” (323). His defense ultimately falls short of convincing the necessary
people and in spite of being given the chance to have the whole proceeding
overturned due to leaked revelations about the judge that compromised her credibility,
Ron goes on to pay considerable sums of money because he “had no interest in being
off the hook” (314). This can be interpreted as the author persona Currie Jr. is
performing bringing to the actual reader’s attention that he is well aware that some
people have expectations of the author persona and that he considers himself obliged
to take responsibility for this to some extent. Nevertheless, he calls into question the
right that readers have to these expectations and to laying any claim to information
about the author’s personal life through the diegetic events in the novel. It would
seem reasonable that an author has the same right to privacy as any other professional
and that this blurring of the boundary between private and public as it pertains to
authors can be quite uncalled for. The diegetic Ron wishes to be judged and
recognized by others for what is in his work, which is most likely why his explanation
of the ‘truth’ also comes in the shape of a novel—the same novel credited to the non-
diegetic Ron Currie Jr.
The diegetic Ron fashions himself as an author by performing the role in the novel of an individual whose life to a large extent revolves around writing. Mark McGurl claims in his book that serious works of fiction produced in the “post-war era” are in some way always “a portrait of the artist” (xi). McGurl writes of a sense that it seems like everyone is writing “their novel,” which resulted in the proliferation of creative writing programs suited to what he calls a “programmatic society” (xi). Today, there is still a sense that everyone is writing, but what they are writing is not necessarily a novel. A majority of us are instead visibly engaged in writing the narrative of our own lives on various social media platforms. The increased access to means of self-publication facilitated by the Internet also means that, as more people come to perform themselves as authors, the concept becomes increasingly destabilized, something that will be discussed further in the next section.

McGurl suggests that the metafictional impulse can be understood as a way that “literary practices might partake in a larger, multivalent social dynamic of self-observation” (12). The performative reality of creating a portrait of yourself as author, or dealing with questions of authorship thematically in your writing, seems to have a social corollary for McGurl. The sense often induced by society in people that they are free to choose, and the results of our series of choices throughout life, coupled with the element of chance, make up our ‘life story.’ We reflect on these choices “across broad swaths of social life” making it a point of worry for many (McGurl 365). He credibly argues as follows: “A rich amalgam of compulsion and freedom, this kind of performance occasions a protracted state of half-belief in personal agency; and it is the role of creative writing, with its ritual suspension of disbelief, to bolster this” (366). This seems to suggest that, while the issue of agency may not be of central importance to the performance of an authorial persona, the visibility of that performance can function to encourage what has been reduced to a “half-belief” in the personal agency of individuals as it relates to performing their personal narratives.

I find a parallel to McGurl’s argument in Ekelund’s discussion of the social logic of recognition. He finds that there is a complementary relation between the sociological-anthropological sense of recognition, and recognition as a plot category. He argues that recognition plots can be read as “indices of properly political values,” and that the plot device of recognition as shock releases “values that must come into play when an order is destabilized” (107). While we might think that the recognition of authors taking certain creative license in the construction of their stories should not
come as a shock to readers, the characters who take *Flimsy*’s diegetic Ron to court appear to feel otherwise. Although, perhaps the real recognition—albeit incredibly tentative—occurs first when Ron ask the prosecutor why, if we concede that subjectivity makes large parts of our experience of the world stand in conflict with others’ perception, the referential truth-value of the events in a book should matter. This seems in some way related to an inability on the part of the diegetic reader of oscillating between the simultaneous presence and absence of both the personal self and the ontological literary self of an author proposed by Burke and discussed at the beginning of this section. He observes that many people fantasize on a daily basis, and find their fantasies important (322). He states: “These things are counterfeit, I continued, complete an utter make-believe, and yet you find them satisfying—perhaps in some instances, more satisfying than your real lives. So why, then, have you turned on me for providing one more deeply satisfying lie?” (323). If a story resonates with the reader, regardless of whether the book has been promoted as a novel or a memoir, should the truth of what has happened to the author in the world beyond the text really be relevant? Ron calls it a ‘satisfying lie,’ and while the issue of him not being dead can rightly be considered an unfair deception, the events in the novel are what his diegetic readers seem the most upset about.

Currie Jr. is performing his authorial persona by bringing up these questions, as it is perfectly possible that he was aware of the controversy surrounding Frey’s book. This would then mean that this is one way in which he situates himself in relation to other actants in the field of cultural production. In addition, he overtly references a large number of public personas, such as authors Philip K. Dick, and Vernor Vinge within the novel, and Vladimir Nabokov, and Seneca in the paragraphs on the epigraph page (27, 142). On the epigraph page, he also anticipates that his choice to write a metafictional motivation for his dislike of epigraphs and how pompous he finds them is something for which he might be mocked. Those who would make fun of him remain unidentified, and we can only speculate that he might be referring to critics, and those writing literary reviews. It is all nevertheless a part of his authorial performance in accordance with arguments presented by both Longolius, and Berensmeyer et al. The formation of Currie Jr.’s authorial identity is not a central theme in *Flimsy*, but it comes about as a result of him writing himself as an author, as well as by his positioning himself in relation to individuals engaged in cultural
production. Perhaps most importantly, he thematizes the importance for authors to be highly conscious of the relation they have to their readers.

The right readers have to lay claim to information about the author beyond the text is questionable, even if they might be said to become a part of the public sphere by the act of getting their books published. Technological developments have repeatedly been part of moving the line between private and public, and the proliferation of digital media is no different. The worry that McGurl posited as being related to our performances in social life and how our agency is reduced has become a considerable issue now that interaction between people is often mediated textually. This calls for interpretation over which we have no influence—similar to the lack or influence authors have over their readers’ interpretation—and while we have the opportunity to correct misunderstandings when communicating with someone face-to-face, this possibility is much more complicated in writing. In addition, digital text has the ability to be copied and manipulated in a much simpler way than printed text, creating the risk of information being taken out of context, and spread to areas in which it was never intended to exist. These media related concerns, and their connection to the search for the author, and the author’s role being re-negotiated will be discussed further in the section that follows.

**S. - Technology, and the Search for the Author**

Foucault posits at the end of his essay that it would be easy to “imagine a culture where discourse would circulate without any need for an author,” where discourse “would unfold in a pervasive anonymity” (138). Perhaps it can be said that this has already come to pass, to some extent, when you consider much of the discourse that is now circulating on the Internet. It is nevertheless far from the case that all textual production in contemporary western culture is of the anonymous kind often found online. Nor is it uncommon that when a text in question is authored under a handle found for instance on social media, or blogs, just to mention a couple of examples, readers take an interest in who is hiding behind the handle. At the very end of his text, Hawthorn suggests that this interest in authors may stem from an inherent curiosity—an impulse to look for more once we reach the end of a text, and the ‘more’ that we look for is often related to the author (88). While the previous two sections focused on books formatted like autobiographical writing, this section will return to looking at a more experimental use of the novel. In Currie Jr.’s book, he utilizes a type of direct
address and format, which is often found on the Internet to explore the relation between authors and readers from the author’s perspective. The novel that will be analyzed below takes a different approach, and explores the search for the author in a written work from the viewpoint of two individuals who straddle the line between scholars and casual readers. They both start out reading the book because they like it, and only later start to approach it and its questions from a more academic angle.

This quest for the author is the theme of the experimental novel written by Abrams and Dorst. In their book S., the reader is faced with a novel called *The Ship of Theseus*, attributed to someone named V. M. Straka. The novel is made to look like an old library book, and is filled with marginal notes written in two distinct handwritings, and with different colored ink. In between the pages you find a multitude of ephemera, spanning from personal letters, newspaper clippings, to a map drawn on a napkin. We are thus faced with a collaboratively conceived novel in which two students help each other to try to solve the mystery surrounding the author Straka, who may himself have been part of a collective. The story in *The Ship of Theseus* is read for overt references to Straka’s oeuvre and to historical events by these students, creating a narrative of their own which unfolds in the margins. They spend a great deal of time and effort researching all possible angles of Straka’s place in the world, taking a particular interest in the only concrete lead they have, which they decode from clues left in the footnotes of his translator and editor F. X. Caldeira. As the elements of the novel pertaining to the attempt to identify the author are made up of the footnotes, the marginal notes, and the ephemera, these will be the primary focus of my discussion.

In the foreword to the Kindle edition of the novel, Abrams and Dorst stress that it is a book best experienced as a tangible publication (Kindle Location 17). It seems to be suggested that something is lost in the conversion into a digital format, and for this particular book, I am inclined to agree. As mentioned earlier, Berensmeyer et al. posit that the cultural performance of authorship is a dependent on medial and social factors (12). In *S.* the medial aspects are perhaps more obviously central to the narrative, and the performance, as the novel relies quite heavily on an intermedial mode of storytelling. The role played by various media in the communication between individuals becomes apparent as the two protagonists in the margins—and what you might think of as the primary level of the novel’s diegesis—at times have some difficulties with their correspondence. The reader is lead to understand that it takes a
considerable amount of time before these two—the undergraduate Jen, and the expunged and disgraced former PhD candidate Eric—meet in person. Eric does not trust e-mail, and does at first not own a cell-phone, so for the majority of the time of the story they communicate solely in the margins of this book (5, 115). What starts as a relationship centered on their appreciation of the work of Straka, and the mission to figure out his identity, transforms into a much more personal connection. The romanticized notion that their relationship would never have come about had it not been for the existence of this book evokes a sense of transgression in that the reader is taking part of something that was meant to be personal. This can only really be achieved with a physical copy of the book, as its production creates a series of simulacra seemingly meant to suggest an indexical, or referential connection between the world in, and the world beyond the novel. While the tangibility of the printed book contributes considerably to the performative elements of the novel, so does the fact that it cannot quite distance itself from developments in reading closely related to the digital. In particular, the fragmented manner in which the narrative is presented—the reader’s attention being diverted in different directions to capture all the strands of the inserted ephemera and the marginal notes—is highly reminiscent of the structure of digital hypertexts and how they call to be read.

The impact that the shift from print to digital culture has had on literature is explored in detail by Adam Hammond. He looks not only at how production and distribution have been affected, but also at how technological changes relate to literary thought in media history. He finds that the anxiety of established cultural values being overthrown or displaced by digital developments was also prevalent during earlier transitions in literary technology, for instance the transition from manuscript to print. The media transition brought about by the emergence of electronic media, such as film, radio, and television can in fact be found as the cause of the greatest growth of the field of literary studies. These periods of change can therefore be said to have facilitated a better understanding of what literature is, and how it can adapt and thrive in new media environments (22). Hammond argues that such times—the present one included—“have tended to be productive moments of literary thinking” (22). It seems safe to assume that these leaps or revelations regarding literature in times of media change are not only a result of scholarly thought processes, but also of the experimentation and exploration of authors of literature, who are inevitably greatly affected by these changes.
Abrams and Dorst could be argued to use the physicality of the printed book as a means to call attention to the novel as tangible object produced and manipulated by corporeal individuals. Part of the perceived threat of digital media is the disappearance of the influence of a human hand. Like in the poststructuralist arguments of the late 1960’s, the risks or possibilities, depending on your stance, of the “pervasive anonymity” of the circulation of text in digital media are a hot-button issue for commercial authors. The consequences of digital publication are another issue that Hammond discusses. In a manner similar to authors having their own printing presses and practices, as did Virginia Woolf and her husband, digital text presents the possibility to “short circuit” an otherwise heavily regulated publication process (Hammond 137). The direct channel kept open between an author and an almost globally reachable audience without the interference of intermediaries with their own interests makes it possible for writers to focus of personal aesthetic interests (Hammond 137). However, one considerable risk of digital self-publication is to disappear in the cacophony of voices, as almost everyone now has the option to publish their work for others to read. Issues of originality come into question when this borderline open access to such a staggering amount of textual works makes the likelihood of originality slim to the point of non-existence, while also being a major contributing factor to the possibility of finding an audience (Hammond 139).

Fan fiction and alternative literature, or Alt Lit as it is commonly referred to, are two forms of digital self-publication that Hammond looks at. Both of these practices have enough nuances to warrant their own projects, and are not particularly significant to the study at hand. It is nevertheless worth noting that while many Alt Lit writers regard originality and the expression of one’s individuality as secondary to the potential beauty to be found through mining the immense quantity of digital texts available, constructing an ‘author-function’ is of considerable importance (Hammond 144). For fan fiction writers, on the other hand, anonymity is far more common, as one of the central concerns is to expand or alter a story world already established through an original work, of which both authors and readers are often fans. The idea of originality therefore, according to Hammond, “makes an awkward fit with most fan fiction” (141). There are also collaborative elements to fan fiction writing. If a story is published serially, which is a common practice, and because many fan fiction platforms have functions that establish a direct channel of communication between
author and reader, stories can be reworked as they progress to accommodate feedback from the readers (Hammond 141-142).

One element of fan fiction that I find Hammond to neglect is brought to our attention by Maria Lindgren Leavenworth. She finds in her study that, while the function of authors has gone through changes owing to the contemporary digital developments, there are still many similarities between the features of digital and print literature. For instance, authors of fan fiction often enforce specific lines of interpretation through summaries, epigraphs and author’s notes, suggesting that they still attempt to have some influence over the reading. In addition, the dialogic relation between authors and readers, while indeed highlighting the collaborative potential of some forms of digital publication, also blurs the line between public and private spheres, which is “belied by the supposedly anonymous digital environment” (42). This is achieved in the event of the author leaving the pseudonymous author persona momentarily to converse with the reader about personal issues that might be affecting the rate of publication (Lindgren Leavenworth 55). This brings to the fore the reality of the person behind the text, and makes it difficult to ignore that without the author of a particular story, there will be no text of which the reader can take part. Furthermore, the guidance and communication between fan fiction authors and readers establishes and maintains the authorial presence, which draws attention to the vulnerable position of authors of print literature (Lindgren Leavenworth 57). Authors of certain forms of digital literature may therefore be thought of as more clearly connected to a text, in spite of its potential “pervasive anonymity,” than are authors of print literature.

So, how do these factors relate to the authorship as performance and to the novel S. more specifically? Longolius has a chapter in her book where she examines the collaborative play between authors. She suggests that authors can play with their authorial personae in public appearances or through social media, thereby satisfying the readers’ desire for the author. More specifically, she argues that contemporary authors are challenged to self-reflexively perform their authorial selves to a greater extent than authors of earlier generations (208). To successfully perform their authorial becomings, authors must play against other actants that are part of the field of cultural production. They must position themselves in ‘difference’ to others, as well as collaborate in ‘repetition’ (Longolius 225). This is not a new practice by any means, but one that has perhaps become more necessary as the field has expanded.
The image of the white page which has previously been closely associated with the creative writing process is not an accurate depiction any longer, and arguably never was. Today, it is through this play, or positioning, of a text in relation to other work that an author might be thought to most efficiently establish their author persona. The page is therefore not blank, but rather crowded by stories already written (Longolius 263-264)\(^\text{13}\).

The pages of *S.* are similarly crowded by multiple voices and narrative strands, as they ponder the position of the author. At several points, the impulse of the more emotional reader Jen to read autobiographical details into the text is rebutted by the ‘more serious’ scholar Eric, who urges her to be “careful re: linking everything in a book to the author personally. Sometimes fiction’s just fiction” (17). She counters by pointing out that he does the same thing on several occasions, indicating that this is an impulse that can be difficult even for the most diligent readers to suppress (17). The only thing that justifies their reading of the novel as referential is the communication in the footnotes between the translator Caldeira and Straka that Jen and Eric eventually decipher, eventually leading them to locate Caldeira, who is still alive. Although initially thought to be a man, Caldeira turns out to be a woman, now well into advanced age, and although there is nothing wrong with her memory beyond its natural limitations, she is unable to confirm the identity of Straka, as she herself has never known for sure (239). She does however confirm the feelings they had for each other that Jen in particular identified early on in her reading.

There is one set of annotations in the margins which is written in pencil. Eric identifies this as the notes he made before they started to pass the book between them. In these notes, he was convinced that Caldeira was a hack, and that her reasoning for discouraging the search for Straka’s identity was less than convincing (vii, xiv). The notion that Caldeira endured all the dangers that reportedly came with working with Straka because of their feelings for one another is an idea that does not sit well with Eric at first. As Jen states her suspicion on the last page of the translator’s note, Eric believes she is being sarcastic, as she has no evidence to support this theory (xiv). As the story progresses, and in particular after he meets with Caldeira after having traced her whereabouts to Brazil, he is slowly won over to this explanation (postcard inserted

\(^{13}\) While Longolius draws on Marjorie Perloff’s book *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by other Means in the New Century* (2010) when making this claim, this idea has also been put forth by Deleuze and Guattari in *What is Philosophy?* (1991). They in turn get the idea from painter Gérard Fromanger.
The romance between Straka and Caldeira is not the only one that blossomed through textual communication, but so does the relationship between Jen and Eric. This may very well be a contributing factor to why he is finally converted to believe that part of the motivation behind *Ship of Theseus* was to express and cement the relation between author and translator.

The manuscript for the final chapter of the book missed a number of pages when it came into the possession of Caldeira, and so she had to recreate the parts that were missing for the book to be published. In one of the footnotes for this chapter, she comments on the choice not to specify where the original manuscript left off and where her reconstruction began. Eric’s stance on this qualification was initially that it was based on unsatisfactory reasoning. However, Caldeira stresses the element of collaboration. In a second notation on this footnote, Eric answers Jen that the reason for his strong feelings about this issue is that he is “a lit guy,” and that he “wants to know” where Straka’s work ended. In a third and final note, written after they found Caldeira, Eric writes that he finally gets it. “Her way of emphasizing that the work was theirs, that they’re co-creating. And not just *SOT*—they’re co-creating their story” (437, emphasis in original). It is interesting to note that he only comes to this realization after he has been engaged in the same kind of process through his relationship with Jen. They have been co-writing their own story in the margins of *Ship of Theseus*, while also solving the mystery surrounding the ambiguous last novel of a notoriously elusive author.

The authors of the novel *S.* are collaborating in a way that does not make it evident in the text who is contributing with any given element. This means that the novel includes collaborative efforts on three levels—between Abrams and Dorst in their production of the novel *S.*, between Calderia and Straka in the hypodiegetic *Ship of Theseus*, and between Eric and Jen in their diegetic narrative in the margins. On the back of the slip-case that the novel comes in, a short description of the book and their collaboration reads as follows:

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*S.*, conceived by filmmaker J. J. Abrams and written by award-winning novelist Doug Dorst, is the chronicle of two readers finding each other in the margins of a book and enmeshing themselves in a deadly struggle between forces they don’t understand. It is also Abrams and Dorst’s love letter to the written word.

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14 Short for *Ship of Theseus*.
15 The narrative level below the level of diegesis presented by the marginal notes (Rimmon-Kenan 93).
This last sentence is, in my view, particularly interesting, as it neglects to comment on the element of mediation. The written word can come in many forms, which the novel itself illustrates. Nevertheless, one of the few authorial comments is amended only to the digital edition—the foreword to the Kindle edition—and argues for the reading of a physical copy. This seems to suggest that mediation is important, and it is certainly an issue difficult to ignore. In addition, it also situates them in relation to other novels that experiment with form, such as Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000), and Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Tree of Codes* (2010). The story of *S.* is far less experimental, and reads like a mix between a quest for self-discovery, one of redemption, and a modern day academic sleuth story. In tandem with Caldeira and Straka, and Jen and Eric navigating and establishing their connection and identities through writing, so Dorst and Abrams are also performing their authorial personae in the novel, by fashioning themselves as lovers of “the written word”. While all three pairs are authors of some sort, the author personae of Abrams and Dorst utilize the relation between the two diegetic author duos to problematize the search for the author as well as highlighting some collaborative aspects of authorship.

It is never quite clear if Jen and Eric pinpoint the identity of Straka from the list they are working with. Caldeira reportedly tells Eric that she corresponded with all of the candidates at some point (239). These individuals where thought to belong to a secret organization of political activists (9). If Straka was part of this group or a target of their interest is initially unclear, but later on, and based on Calderia’s communication with them, they seem to think that he was a member, and that the organization was a way for them all to protect their interest as well as the identity of the person writing. It is also speculated whether the works attributed to the name Straka were in fact a collaborative effort. They ultimately seem to conclude, however, that Straka was one person, and that there were many people involved in trying to keep him safe, and to keep his identity a secret (334).

Through their conversations in the margins, and through their search for the identity of Straka, Jen and Eric find, not only each other but also, and perhaps more importantly, themselves. Both of them have complicated relationships with their parents because of events that happened in their respective pasts. By telling each other of these events, both of them find the opportunity to reconcile themselves with their

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16 Longolius discusses the latter book in her chapter “Playing”.
past, and to some extent with their parents, making it possible for them to move forward (letters found between 100-101, 202-203, 376-377). Straka and Caldeira do not as explicitly constitute their personas through writing, apart from the one element that we have confirmed, which is their romantic feelings for each other. These are expressed in the coded footnotes, and in the narrative of *Ship of Theseus* as represented by the relationship between the protagonist S. and a woman named Sola (360). Abrams and Dorst perform their own author personas by the novel being attributed to their names, and through their performance in various paratexts, such as the authors’ note in the digital edition, and the note on the slip-case. They are thereby becoming authors by staging themselves as authors, as Longolius argues (141). This is particularly true for Abrams, who has no credited novels to his name before the publication of *S.* but is better known as a director. Through the publication of their collaborative novel, Abrams becomes an author, even if his role was to conceive the idea and not to actually write the book.

Collaborative writing practices have taken on a new significance in current cultural production, as was discussed above, and this is far from the only way in which digital writing technology has impacted our reading. Hammond convincingly argues that e-books and other digital textual forms have given us a new appreciation for the physical, printed book. It has helped defamiliarize a form of cultural expression we had perhaps come to take for granted (206). Nevertheless, there is no way to escape the reality of the pervasive presence of digital technology, as even a novel such as *S.* exists and was most likely produced in a digital format. The categories of print and digital can thus be seen as complementing each other, rather than one posing a threat to the other (Hammond 206). The cultural reality that we find ourselves in has come to a point where the digital is not only inescapable, but now also makes up a considerable part of how we communicate with one another. We can not only communicate with other readers in comment sections, or on book review sites, but there are also possibilities to communicate with authors directly, through services like Twitter. This gives authors a greater number of avenues through which they can perform their authorial identities, as these are still of great interest to readers.

As my reading of *S.* shows, books present opportunities for authors to problematize questions they find of particular import or interest at the time of writing. For Abrams and Dorst—as self-professed lovers of words—this manifests itself in an exploration of the meditation of these words, perhaps brought on by the proliferation
of digital writing technologies. They also problematize how the search for the author can never be truly solved, but that instead we can consider our identities as constituted by the texts we produce. This might allow us both to better see ourselves, and to understand and recognize the people with whom we communicate. We perform various personae increasingly through text in our everyday lives, as we potentially connect with people from all walks of life, and from all over the world. By so doing, these personae become part of who we are, while never presenting a fixed identity. The position of the author is always shifting, and interpretation always plays a significant role in how we perceive our fellow beings.

**Conclusion**

Like all subjects on the receiving end of scholarly attention, the interest in the concept and issue of authorship has swung back and forth, passing between positions of privilege and burden, and all its many intermediaries in the process. In the academic swells caused by such movements as New Criticism and structuralism, poststructuralists such as Barthes and Foucault were creating for themselves a position they could occupy that would set them apart from both their predecessors and those yet to enter the field of literary criticism. A performative conception of authorship lends us the possibility to consider how authors perform this positioning of their texts in relation to others, without granting them the interpretative authority that has been the source of much of the concepts contestation. The novels that have been analyzed in this essay present us with different ways that authors can be viewed to negotiate their own place in the prevailing cultural climate, and in relation to their readership. Interestingly, they all stress the bodily reality of authors and books. Auster performs his persona through his theoretically oriented ruminations of the voided author concept as still being highly embodied. Frey, and Currie Jr. explore the author-reader dynamics from introspective and extrospective perspectives, respectively, also focusing on issues of authenticity and the writing of truth. Finally, Abrams and Dorst’s novel illustrates how media shifts caused by technological advancements affect the reader’s search for the author both inside, and outside the text.

As these novels were all written during a time of medium shift, we might read them as examples of how authors have taken this opportunity to re-negotiate the formulation of their author personae, and in the process reflect on the changing position of the author concept. While the collaborative tendencies of writing and
reading in a digital context, as well as the dissemination of authorial control in an increasingly appropriating culture, might present some initial growing pains for the literary industry, it does most likely not pose as big a threat as some might fear. Change presents an opportunity for experimentation, and this we know to be a well-established tradition. As my reading of these novels show, these authors are experimenting, problematizing and drawing attention to questions not only relevant to themselves as authors but to people in general. Performance is, and probably always has been, a part of our everyday life, and negotiating the reality of those performances is a constant struggle. In an era where we are constantly connected, we have also become more dependent on the recognition of others. The potential pool of people who might provide that recognition has extended far beyond our surroundings to cover almost all places with access to the Internet.

We have the option of creating for ourselves a persona which corresponds more to what we wish to be than to what we actually are, to some extent becoming that other person in the process. It is therefore by writing ourselves, either in text or through imagery that many of us come to manifest our selves in the digital sphere. These manifestations require the recognition of an other, much like a literary text being dependent on a reader, and we are thereby in a manner constituted by the texts we are part of producing, much like Barthes and Foucault suggested. So, can people be said to have become nothing more than ghosts in the linguistic machine? Is our digital presence slowly taking over to the point where our technology can do a better job at being human than we can? The novels discussed in this essay seem to suggest that the body of the author, and the physical book still has an essential part to play in our current western culture. Authors position themselves in relation to other cultural actants much like how we must always situate ourselves in relation to other people both in our private and professional lives. The authorship concept is still worth exploring, as authors are still finding new ways to dramatize their function and position within the field of cultural production. Our interest in authors has not died down as this study and others before it have shown. Readers seem to find some resonance with their own lives, in the struggles of the author to write their own personae. Future studies of the questions surrounding authors and readers have many potential angles of approach, and continued developments in writing technologies should ensure that the author is not thought dead, so much as elusive and constantly mobile.
Works Cited


