

# The Puzzle Novel and Richard Powers' *Prisoner's Dilemma*

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## Abstract

*This study seeks to establish a new type of novel: the "puzzle novel". It relies on the groundbreaking, and still valid, theories of the novel from Gyorg Lukács and Mikhail Bakhtin. The puzzle novel construct tries to provide a new direction for novel criticism: it should follow certain broad characteristics, but is open to more specific definition for certain analytical purposes. Just such a specific definition is provided to guide a particular reading of an excellent example of a puzzle novel, Richard Powers' *Prisoner's Dilemma* (1988). The general conclusion of the reading is that the novel highlights the question "who is the author?" on many different levels.*

*Keywords: theory of the novel, novel, Richard Powers, *Prisoner's Dilemma*, Gyorg Lukács, Mikhail Bakhtin, postmodern literature, 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, American literature*

## 1. Introduction

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Gyorg Lukács and Mikhail Bakhtin established a definition of the novel that is realistic and also impossible. The novel is connected to lived life in a way other genres are not, which means it is much more open to natural change and innovation than other literary genres. The novel in fact has to innovate to be called a novel. As the only originally written literary genre, it is unique in not being defined by the kinds of characteristics we usually use to designate literary genres.

It is almost a century since Lukács and Bakhtin's groundbreaking work and today we unfortunately still do not understand how to analyze novels in a way consistent with these ideas. Even in his time, Bakhtin made it clear that the modes of criticism available were

not sufficient for studying the novel. Unfortunately, this situation has not changed substantially since then. New ways to study the novel have mostly gone in a horizontal direction, considering the contributions of different social and psychological categories. The vertical direction – developing the theory of the novel – has remained largely dormant.

This situation is one of the motivations of this study, although directly establishing a theory of the novel seems to be a project doomed from the start. Instead, I try to establish a flexible genre of the novel as an example of the kind of study one might undertake having in mind these earlier ideas about the character of the novel. That genre is called the “puzzle novel”, which is meant to be a construct that can be used in different ways for different purposes. Indeed, much of this study is devoted to using the puzzle novel construct to produce a useful reading of *Prisoner’s Dilemma* (1988) by Richard Powers, an excellent example of a puzzle novel, although one excellent example among many.

## 2. The Puzzle Novel

A puzzle novel is structured in such a way that the reader must piece together the basic story in order to understand the plot of the novel because neither are given to the reader in a clear way. The novel presents itself as unfinished, and requires a reader’s input. A traditional novel does not require this construction: the story and plot are clearly explained (even if the story and plot are complicated).

The puzzle metaphor refers to a jigsaw puzzle. When you construct a jigsaw puzzle, you assume that the pieces provided can create a coherent picture. You assume that there are the right number of pieces: not too many and not too few. You assume there are boundaries to the puzzle, and moreover border pieces, corner pieces, and interior pieces that clarify those boundaries. You assume that the pieces are the correct pieces, that they do not belong to some other puzzle.

The most familiar type of jigsaw puzzle is the mass-produced commercial puzzle. The metaphor is more exact if you consider an original puzzle painted and cut by an artist, a puzzle that has no duplicate. In this case there is less certainty about the prospect of finishing the puzzle. You may not have a representation of the finished image; you may not be certain that you have all the pieces; the pieces will not follow established types like a mass-produced puzzle; fitting the pieces together is difficult but not impossible, so the puzzling is never so hard as to appear random; the pieces already fitted may change character and cease to fit or fit better elsewhere upon finding other pieces; the pieces fitted together add to the confidence that success is possible and/or the process is worthwhile; the initial interest in puzzling gives way to the satisfaction of the already fitted pieces, etc. With an original puzzle, one has more of a feeling of struggling with another consciousness, a consciousness that may or may not be trustworthy in upholding the “contract” between the puzzle maker (author) and the puzzler (reader). However, the basic metaphor works with either a mass-produced or original jigsaw puzzle.

We could think of the reading process of a traditional novel under the puzzle metaphor. As you read a traditional novel, the pieces of the story are given to you one by one, along with directions as to where in the puzzle you should fit the pieces. The novel itself presents to you a system to complete the puzzle. There is a process of puzzling, but the reader is not active in solving the puzzle. We would probably not call it a puzzle at all. Even a traditional

popular novel is a long text and contains many pieces of data. Probably most important in the traditional novel is neither the amount nor the type of material that is included in the story, but rather the cues the novel provides to the reader to put the right pieces in the right places in the right order. These cues are traditionally expected of narrative; in fact, some have a hard time describing something as narrative if these cues, which can come in a variety of forms, are partially absent or inconsistent. These cues are analogous to a guide to the jigsaw puzzle that tells you piece by piece how to construct the puzzle.

This “puzzling” of a traditional novel does not make it a puzzle novel in the way that I would like to define the term. The puzzle novel asks the reader to pick up the pieces of the narrative after reading the book and construct the story. In this way, the puzzle novel sees reading as necessarily a process of re-reading. The first read-through of a novel is just data-gathering; it is not yet reading the story. It is like opening the box and spilling out the pieces. The process of re-reading opens up the reading experience to endless repetition, with each iteration different than the others. Once the reader must re-read the novel – once this concept is established as a normal and expected reading strategy – the typical concept we have of reading a book from first page to last page is undermined. “Reading” is something completely different than usually assumed, and can be said to be not only a recursive or repetitive process, but an endless process. One is never done reading a puzzle novel because reading is re-reading.

In addition, the novel provides all the material to understand the story, but requires creative work from the reader. The puzzle novel is not only complicated or hard to understand. The puzzle novel is not only a long novel or a novel with a lot of characters or detail. A puzzle novel is not just a novel that makes the reader think hard or a confusing novel. The puzzle novel has to encourage the reader to use the pieces given to him or her to construct a story, not just comprehend a story.

Many theorists of the novel find themselves having to specify that what is commonly called a “novel” is not necessarily their object of study. Gyorg Lukács contrasts the “novel” that he assumes in theorizing the form with the “entertainment novel”, which in many ways looks like a novel but ignores many of the innovative narrative possibilities that the novel form offers, and therefore is not a real novel (cf. *Theory of the Novel*). Bakhtin delineates a “First Line” and a “Second Line” in the production of the modern novel, emphasizing that it is the Second Line that interests him, because the First Line only mimics the style of the novel, but does not truly invest itself in the heteroglossia on which the novel capitalizes (“Discourse” 415–416). The puzzle novel refers only to Bakhtinian “Second Line” novels or whatever is not an “entertainment novel” according to Lukács.

While it is necessary to define the “genre” of the puzzle novel more specifically, at the same time it is clear that there are other possible useful definitions that follow from the basic structure outlined above. Also, as mentioned above, the traditional ways we define a genre do not work well for the novel, so the same will apply for the subset puzzle novel. Still, one cannot escape the attempt to define. The defining characteristics of the puzzle novel for this study are as follows.

First, a puzzle novel does not ask the reader to fill in pieces with special outside knowledge or sources. In puzzling out the story, the reader has only the information that the novel gives to him or her. Leo Bersani proposes a “naïve” reader of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* with a similar motivation as I take for granted in this study (155).

Second, a puzzle novel encourages engagement in the puzzle. It gives the reader reason to believe that the puzzle can be completed. In many ways the novel simply appeals to our human need to put forth an effort to understand a somewhat unclear text. But the novel cannot appear completely chaotic, or fragmented in a careless way.

Third, if the reading experience of a text reasonably meets the reader's expectations of that experience, then the reader is compelled to work out the meaning of the text. Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) was uncomfortable for many readers in the 1970s, but if the same text appeared in the 1870s, it would not have reasonably met readers' expectations. It would have been seen as nonsense, chaotic. We do not search for meaning in every confusion we encounter; we look for meaning where it seems beneficial to do so within the limits of time and effort. But, in principle, readers must search for meaning given a reasonable text. In fact, we could say that this is a basic human need, that all other things being equal, one will put forth an effort to understand a text when an understanding does not come automatically.

Fourth, the reader is the one to decide if the puzzle is complete. The novel does not do this for us. In this the puzzle novel is much more like an original jigsaw puzzle than a mass-produced jigsaw puzzle. We do not know if there are too many or too few pieces, we do not know what the picture is, etc. If the puzzle is not complete, the reader needs to decide if it will ever be completed, and if not, what meaning that has in itself. Ultimately, this is an individual decision, and reflects that cooperative nature of the making of meaning in the reading process of a puzzle novel.

Because of all of these qualities, the puzzle novel breaks boundaries, but at the same time it does not disregard or destroy boundaries. The puzzle novel uses and abuses boundaries, definitions, innovations, and assumptions. The puzzle novel invites us to create a new kind of criticism. For example, the puzzle novel does not "kill the author" à la Roland Barthes (cf. *Image Music Text*), but it does not doggedly follow authorial intention. Authorial intention is one possible tool to use to better understand the novel, but theoretically it does not have more "authority" than other methods to gain insight. Each tool or method is unique and has its own different effect on understanding, but no one tool is absolutely better or worse than another. In addition, novels themselves will often make it clear that such authority does not exist. Novels do not have to be consistent. A puzzle novel will often propose structures within itself or refer to structures outside the text as macro-level organizing principles, only to undermine those structures while using them or even paradoxically flatly denying that structure after using it. Perhaps the best example is that the assumption we often have about reading a novel from first page to last page is both exploited and undermined in the puzzle novel.

A puzzle novel is not reader-centered. It does not transfer all of the making of meaning onto the reader. Just because it does not follow the traditional production-consumption pattern of novels, that does not mean that the text itself has no say in making meaning. In fact the puzzle novel is suspicious of following any one concept absolutely. In the same way the puzzle novel is not author-centered, either. It is not even character-centered or narrator-centered, or centered on any particular narrative or textual phenomenon. If we have to say that the puzzle novel is centered on anything, we would have to say it is *reading*-centered.

The puzzle novel allows readers to leave the novel without solving or completing the puzzle, but the reader in this case still leaves with some sense of story and plot. This

reader refuses the encouragement to engage further, but does not leave empty-handed. This power of refusal is not a rejection of the novel and is not uncommon. This refusal, of course, may be temporary or permanent. In either case, the reader is not left with chaos or incoherence. There is a sense of plot and story, an understanding of what the reader has participated in making, but has not been able to complete.

The strategy of the puzzle novel is not that the reader needs to find the “key” to the novel. At the same time, the puzzle novel usually holds out the prospect of such a key. But the endgame of reading a puzzle novel is not to be satisfied, in the sense of learning the “real” meaning. Because the making of meaning is a cooperative and inclusive process, the feeling of a plot comes even during the process of reading and looking for such a key, balancing the need for an absolute coherent completion and the need to continue reading.

The puzzle novel described here is, necessarily, a novel. As all novel theorists recognize, there may be novelistic aspects to texts that we call different literary forms, such as poetry or drama. Bakhtin in particular claims that in the modern era all literary genres have become “novelized”. But this does not make them novels, nor does it deny the special place the novel holds as a genre. In different ways, novel theorists clearly describe the modern novel as the most potent instantiation of these “novelistic” qualities, not denying that other genres, especially in the modern era, may have become “novelized” to a certain extent. In fact, while other genres have become novelized, as mentioned above, some novels are not considered novels in the sense that prominent theorists describe the genre. In the end, it is impossible for a poem to be like a novel and remain a poem. However, a novel may be like a poem, and still be a novel.

In many puzzle novels, there seems to be a narrative scheme that sets up a “core story” in the novel, but the novel also includes a large amount of “extra material” that seems indirectly related or unrelated to the core story. Usually even the core story is something that needs to be puzzled out.

It seems that this core-story-plus-extra-material scheme is the major structure through which puzzle novels have tried to accomplish the paradoxical experience of reading described above. The core story in a puzzle novel follows a traditional plot line: a protagonist who goes through some kind of significant change over time and the experience of that change is narrated. These events are narrated in chronological order, and the events do not have large time gaps; the reader is “with” the main character during the process of the change. The core story could be narrated in a much shorter text excerpted from the novel. Although, to make this cut properly, one would have to be at an advanced stage of puzzling. Even this determination of the core story is a particular construction of a particular reader, but it seems justified to say that most readers, in puzzling the novel, would realize these core stories in these ways. One of the assumptions I make here is that readers often try to find the thread of a story by following what seem to be main characters, and keeping track of the cause and effect of what happens to them. Generally, I find that at this level the puzzle novel does not frustrate the expectations of the readers.

The material in the novel that is not part of the core story can serve a variety of purposes, but all of these ultimately relate to the core story. In the limit case, this material serves as a diversion from the puzzle, connected by not being connected through the puzzle. Because of the puzzle structure, including the anchor of the core story, the extra material has a wide

breadth of area of operation while still being in a coherent work. But still, the extra material should not be random or unconnected to the core story.

The approach to the reading of *Prisoner's Dilemma* shown below could be used for other puzzle novels. It takes a two-part structure. First, a description of a particular puzzling of the core story is given. While all acts of the puzzling of these novels can be different for different readers, this part of each novel seems to allow the author or narrator to dominate and to a large extent determine the meaning-making of the narrative. Second, a consideration of the extra material in the novel is given. This is where the results of the reading usually diverge for different readers and purposes and indeed for different puzzle novels.

### **3. *Prisoner's Dilemma***

Richard Powers' *Prisoner's Dilemma* (1988) provides a puzzle that only resists solution at the very end of the puzzling process. It leaves out important pieces of the puzzle (like a jigsaw puzzle, the reader does not know these pieces are missing until the very end), which leaves the reader with both a sense of order and an opportunity to be creative. In this way *Prisoner's Dilemma* allows the reader to change and define the puzzle, but only to a limited extent. However, the changes that the novel allows in this limited area allow the reader to define the basic purpose of the whole novel. In this way the amount of creativity the reader has is truly huge, for the reader helps determine the most basic foundational concepts on which the novel rests, as well as being able to create large systems of meaning that all are mostly coherent, but not completely coherent. The question that *Prisoner's Dilemma* ultimately leaves the reader with is "who is the author?", a question that is asked on a variety of levels, providing a unifying uncertainty.

The typesetting and titling of the chapters in *Prisoner's Dilemma* indicate that there are three kinds of chapter in the book (one could also determine four kinds; see below). One kind of chapter appears quite normal: the chapters are consecutively numbered and printed in normal text, with no title other than the chapter number. It turns out that this narrative is also chronological. The second kind of chapter has titles that consist of dates chronologically arranged from 1939 to 1945, and is set in italicized text. The third kind of chapter has descriptive titles such as "Riddles" or "Breaking the Matrix" (so they are "undated") and is also set in italicized text. While two of these groups of chapters follow a linear chronological order in the book, the third does not, and all three types of chapter are integrated in the book. The result is that from chapter to chapter time shifts greatly, although the general progression is forward in time. Even with this first impression, *Prisoner's Dilemma* presents itself as containing multiple narrative threads, and the implicit challenge to the reader is to figure out if and how the threads relate to each other.

The first kind of chapter in *Prisoner's Dilemma*, the normal-text narrative, can stand on its own as a traditional story. We could pick out these chapters as a short novel on its own. This part of the novel is chronological, there is a rather conventional story line, and many of the typical narrative cues to connections between events are present. Eddie Hobson, Sr. is the protagonist in the normal-text narrative, and this part of the novel has a consistent and apparently reliable authorial narrator. Eddie is the patriarch of his Midwestern American, two-boy, two-girl family. Eddie is a retired high-school history teacher, and

he constantly asks challenging intellectual questions of his children, who always have the answers. Eddie's hobby is Hobstown, the creation of another world that involves Eddie speaking for long hours into an old Dictaphone. Eddie has a mysterious sickness, a sickness that causes him to have seizures which knock him unconscious and that keeps getting worse. However, Eddie Sr. refuses to seek treatment for his illness, or even to go see a doctor. It is the worsening of this illness that provides the main narrative tension in the normal-text sections.

In the normal-text narrative, after years of denying the seriousness of his affliction, Eddie finally agrees to check into a veteran's hospital for treatment. Eddie soon runs away from the hospital and disappears, but his son Artie figures out where to look for him by listening to the Dictaphone recordings: Alamogordo, where Eddie happened to be when the first A-bomb was tested. The family does not truly realize that this is the cause of his sickness until he disappears from the hospital. Eddie Sr. has radiation poisoning, for which there is no treatment, hence his refusal to go to a doctor. Eddie Jr., the youngest child, drives west to find his dad, and realizes that Eddie Sr. came to Alamogordo to finish what was started there: his death. Eddie Sr. presumably kills himself in Alamogordo. In the closing chapter, the other three children listen to what is left of Hobstown and start to record their own story over the tape.

The normal text narrative has a clear story structure, with a problem that mounts as the description of the interesting family situation continues through most of the bulk of the narrative. The climax is when Eddie Sr. checks into and disappears from the hospital, and the family have to figure out where he has gone and why. The story ends with Eddie Sr. tragically, but necessarily, dying or killing himself, leaving traces of himself both at the Alamogordo visitor's center and on the Dictaphone tape. From these traces his children have to take up the challenge and create their own lives, figuratively spreading Eddie Sr.'s ashes and recording over his Hobstown.

The narrative in the other types of chapter is quite different. Both kinds of italicized chapter are parts of a narrative set farther in the past, during World War Two. The first kind is marked by having chapters with dates from 1939 to 1945 and authorial narration. The character of the dated italicized chapters is determined through a puzzling process, specifically by comparing repeated text in different chapters in the book. The dated italicized chapters are a transcript of Hobstown: what Eddie's children listen to and record over at the end of the normal-text story, the remnant or supreme creation of Eddie Sr.'s twenty-year-long obsession.

In the normal text narrative, after Eddie Sr. has run away, Artie listens to the tape that Eddie Sr. has left. Eddie Sr. leaves many erased tapes, and only one with any sound. The first two sentences Artie hears are given in one of the last normal-text chapters, chapter 18 of a total of 21 normal-text chapters: "Everything we are at that moment goes into the capsule: a camera, a wall switch, a safety pin. The task, a tough one, is to fit inside a ten-foot, streamlined missile a complete picture of us Americans, circa 1939" (316). In this chapter, Artie proceeds to listen to most of Hobstown, but not the whole thing.

These sentences in the normal-text narrative are therefore identified as the very beginning of Hobstown (at least the Hobstown that Eddie Sr. left when he went to the hospital), and they are the same two sentences that begin the first dated, italicized chapter on page 41. The ensuing dated italicized chapters are therefore the continuation of Hobstown that

Artie and his two sisters listen to in full in chapter 19, one of the last normal-text chapters. Since these chapters are a transcript of Hobstown, the narrator of these chapters is meant to be Eddie Sr. His method of narration is rather authorial, not personal, so before this puzzling takes place the reader has no reason to think the narrator of these chapters is Eddie Sr., or any other character. Hobstown even includes Eddie Sr. as a character, but the character is not narrated in the first person. The Eddie Sr. in the normal-text narrative is narrating a fictionalized version of himself in the dated italicized chapters, in Hobstown. It is clear that the puzzle reading of *Prisoner's Dilemma* is indeed a re-reading. Without taking the novel as a whole, none of these narrative conclusions can be made. Further, the impact of identifying the different qualities of the chapter simply cannot be represented in a study such as this one. One must read and live with the novel in order to make these simple connections, and when explicating the connections in this way, they appear rather simplistic than artistically simple.

The undated italicized chapters, on the other hand, have a first-person and more subjective narrator, but before puzzling out the qualities of these chapters, the reader has a hard time identifying just who constitutes the voice of these chapters. Through puzzling, we find these chapters are a transcript of what the children record on the Dictaphone after listening to Hobstown. Again, we come to this conclusion by recognizing repeated text in the novel. In chapter 21, Artie records over his father's voice, saying: "Somewhere, my father is teaching us the names of the constellations" (344). This sentence is repeated as the first line of the "Riddles" chapter on page 13, the first undated, italicized chapter, and the first chapter of the book. The three children take turns recording episodes from their childhood and stories that they heard their parents tell, and this is the content of the other undated, italicized chapters in the book.

This narrative structure is in no way explicitly indicated anywhere in the novel. Without puzzling out these connections, the reader cannot know that these chapters are narrated by the Hobson children. Each of these chapters, then, has a different first person narrator, but since they are all Hobson children, and they are all narrating things about the Hobson family, they are all very similar. Without puzzling out the narrator identity in this way, the narrator in these chapters seems consistent enough to be one narrator, but just different enough to make it difficult to be confident with this conclusion.

The piecing together of this puzzle has to do with authorship. The clues are textual – that is, parts of the text of the book direct us to other parts of the text of the book – and indicate to us which parts are narrated by whom. To this point, the questions left have to do with the effect of the story as a whole, but we seem to have a mastery over who wrote what. So far *Prisoner's Dilemma* requires the reader to engage in a puzzling game to make sense of the text, although at the same time without playing this game the narrative provides a readily-understandable thread of a story through the book. In this way the normal-text narrative is a "core story" for this novel. There is material that clearly links the other chapters to this core story, as well. For example, the dated italicized Hobstown uses Eddie Hobson as a character, supposedly narrating parts of his life that pre-date the normal-text narrative. The connections between the children's undated italicized chapters are more difficult to know, but most of these chapters seem to deal with the same characters as the normal text narrative does, albeit without naming them. Knowing the authorship and narrator identity through these puzzles, the reader seemingly can now proceed to a straightforward

interpretation of the story of the book. The two kinds of italicized chapters are to be taken as more or less a commentary on the lives of the characters described in the more traditional normal text narrative. We can use the italicized chapters to bring more life and insight into the neat normal text story.

However, in the analysis above we have ignored three chapters in the book that will continue our questioning of authorship and complicate the puzzle in *Prisoner's Dilemma*. This will also lead us to create a fourth kind of chapter, or to problematize the chapter designations we have made so far, despite the sound conclusions we have made above, clearly indicated by the text. That is, considering the vast majority of the text of the book, only ignoring three short chapters, we can make sound, logical, normal game conclusions about the novel.

In the chapter "V-J", between chapters 19 and 20 of the normal text narrative, we realize that the names we have been using for the different kinds of chapters are perhaps inappropriate. We should be designating the italicized chapters according only to the narrator, either first-person or authorial, not according to the obvious appearance of the title. "V-J" is an undated, italicized chapter, but it describes events in Eddie's life before his children were born with authorial narration. In fact, it shows Eddie listening to a Dictaphone tape left by Walt Disney, and after listening to it, re-threading the tape and recording over Disney's recording. As an undated italicized chapter, this chapter should be a part of what the children record over Hobstown, but in two ways this is impossible. It uses authorial narration, whereas all the other undated italicized chapters use first person narration, and it authoritatively describes a time before the children were born, while the other chapters subjectively describe events within the children's lives.

This chapter forces the reader to consider that the chapters in first-person narration compose the children's recording, while third-person chapters are Hobstown, created by Eddie Sr., regardless of the appearance of the titles. While this is a basic difference in understanding the chapters, it actually causes little change in the identification of the chapters in the book. All of the chapters so far considered remain as before, but defined by narrative voice rather than by title, "V-J" fits into Eddie's Hobstown. This is not completely comfortable, for there is no clear reason why the chapters would then be titled and typeset as they are. But it does seem to produce a more coherent narrative chapter system.

"V-J" closes with a sentence spoken by Eddie Sr.: "It's one of those unrepeatable days in mid-May, and all those who are still at home sit down to dinner" (333). It is not exactly clear in the narrative, but this is probably the beginning sentence of Hobstown, since it seems that at the end of "V-J" Eddie is beginning his project by recording over Disney's voice. This conclusion, though, also requires another leap of interpretive faith in that we must not define the first thing Artie hears on the tapes on page 316 as the beginning of Hobstown. Perhaps Artie did not start the tape from the beginning.

Complicating things further, the "unrepeatable days in mid-May" sentence begins the last chapter of the book, "1979", a dated italicized chapter with an authorial narrator, and therefore, in either understanding, a part of Eddie Sr.'s Hobstown. This chapter should then be the beginning of Eddie's Hobstown. But the chapter shows Eddie coming home, unexpectedly alive, in 1979. This is not a likely beginning to Eddie's project, especially given the description of how and why he begins the project in "V-J". The identification of

the chapter according to narrative voice and repeated text confirm that this is the start of Hobstown. But the content of the chapter does not allow for this.

There is no way to interpret “1979” so that it follows the puzzling rules established so far, but there is also no way to interpret the chapter to exempt it completely from these rules. It has to only partially fit the puzzle. With “V-J”, we can create a system that allows this chapter to fit, but it performs a certain violence on the obvious appearance of the book, and the puzzling the reader has done to that point. The puzzle exists only for the novel to willfully refuse to complete the puzzle, to purposefully leave out a piece of the puzzle so that it cannot be completed, but the novel does so in a way that the reader cannot deny the puzzle that is already constructed. All the same, even the incomplete puzzle is important for understanding the story.

The question that Powers leaves us with is “who is the author?” By “1979”, the novel calls into question the existence of all the narratives in the book while simultaneously asserting the power of those narratives. For every step of the puzzle in this novel before “1979”, there is strong textual evidence to support the logic of the step. But ultimately the text fails us, we cannot make a conclusion about “1979” that has the support of the rest of the text, as the other connections have. In a strange way the reader is seemingly alone/autonomous in her or his understanding of the book, yet at the same time is surrounded by the novel itself and the system that has led the reader to this place. Further, “1979” is not just a gimmick, a surprise ending. “1979” shows us that separate logical constructs can work with the same material. It causes us to truly reconsider the rest of the book, rather than “problematize” the rest of the book.

One can imagine different possible readings that seek to reconcile these conflicts, but each of these possibilities must honor parts of the logic of the game and defy other parts. That is, none of these possibilities are completely correct or clearly incorrect. I have started to give an idea of some of these interpretive connections that the reader can start to make above, and I will not continue to give exhaustive examples of such possibilities. They all lead to the same contextualized and logically frustrated end. The reader is not confronted with a myriad of details and narratives, from which she or he needs to take a heavy hand in making sense of the story. This is a strategy employed by many postmodern novels such as Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Rather, the finishing is the reader’s own, while the story as a whole remains a communal creation. This is also why it is not a gimmick ending, since it is not a hidden alternative key to the story that makes all the pieces fit into place. Rather it breaks the whole puzzle, but only at this very late stage in the puzzling.

However, we still have one more chapter in *Prisoner’s Dilemma* to discuss that will further our questioning of authorship. “Calamine” is a very short chapter, less than a page, and it is the second-to-last chapter in the book, just before “1979”. “Calamine” is also another chapter that does not follow the original chapter scheme, for it appears in normal text, but has an undated title, not a number. The narrator is first person. By these qualities, this chapter does not fit any of the possible categories established above.

“Calamine” starts with the same sentence as “1979” (the “unrepeatable days in mid-May” sentence, page 347, which is repeated twice), and proceeds to roughly follow the scene of “1979” as well. “Calamine” describes a day in mid-May with a different family than the Hobson family in “1979”. In this family, there are five children, and the middle son is narrating in first-person while in the Hobson family there are four children with

an authorial narrator. The “Calamine” family’s narrator’s brother is home from medical school; “1979”’s Artie is home from law school. The “Calamine” family’s narrator’s father died of cancer the previous winter; in “1979” Eddie walks in the front door when the family has given him up for dead. “Calamine” ends with this (remember it is the middle son narrating): “I have had an idea for how I might begin to make some sense of the loss. The plans for a place to hide out in long enough to learn how to come back. Call it Powers World” (345). In “Calamine”, we are to see that the Hobsons are a fictive version of the author’s family.

In one way, “Calamine” can be seen as a rather unsophisticated move by the author, where he shows his hand and cannot resist explaining to the reader that his fiction is indeed grounded in his own lived reality. It risks being simple, cute metafiction; it again risks being a gimmick.

But “Calamine” lifts the whole story to another level, employing the concept of the book itself to show how we try to puzzle out our own lives. This is a basic theme of this book, with multiple people creating their own Hobstowns to sort out their own lives. The author of the book is not clearly an outsider; he is another point on the plane of consistency. Through its successive phases of puzzling out the story, this novel plays into the reader’s traditional sense of a hierarchy in the reading experience, the most basic of which is the author as the creator, and the reader as the consumer. Even to this last step, the novel relies on this hierarchy, brings the reader up successive steps of the story to the pinnacle, where the author simultaneously shows his face and hides his presence, indicates his reality and asserts his fictiveness. Again the puzzle novel uses and abuses our conventional expectations for reading strategies and innovates with those strategies. In the end, a character with the author’s name can never be the author, it can only be a representation. However, using representations of known people has a different narrative effect than characters that have no such common reference.

In fact, with “Calamine” we are encouraged yet again to look at our chapter system, even though it is now both broken and working, to see if the inclusion of “Calamine” affects our consideration of the other chapters. The first chapter of the book, the undated italicized “Riddles”, narrates in first person children lying on the ground with their father looking at the constellations. In this chapter, it is “we children” who are lying with the father, typically answering questions about the constellations. “We are all already expert at second-guessing. The five of us are fluent, native speakers of the condensed sign language, the secret code of family” (13). Later in the chapter, the narrator says the father has gone, leaving among other things, “And the five of us, of course. The sum total of his lessons” (16). Five? It is technically possible in these passages that the narrator is including Ailene, Eddie Sr.’s wife and mother of all the children, but the character of the narrative does not suggest this. “Calamine” has five children, of course, the Powers children. Is “Riddles” also about the Powers family, rather than the Hobsons?

With this in mind, we can find other questionable places in the book, such as the undated italicized chapter, “The Dominant Tense”. This chapter is narrated like the other Hobson children’s recordings, but part of the chapter speaking about the “father” includes “[d]ad probably should have been an engineer, the only line of work that fit his temperament. . . . He would have become one, too, if it hadn’t been for the detour that history arranged for him. He wanted me to take up the work he never did, but on that hope I could not deliver.

My product has to be another” (83–84). In what we know about Artie, Rachel, Lily, and Eddie Jr. (the four Hobson children), none of them do anything that deals with producing a “product”, while obviously a novelist does, and there is a novelist in the Powers family while there is not one in the Hobson family. These questionable parts probably all occur in what we have been considering the Hobson children’s recordings, and this makes sense since the narrative identity in these chapters is more diffuse, and the content that the middle child in “Calamine” would want to address would reside best in these chapters. No clear conclusion can be made about these chapters, how much they are fictionalized versions of the author’s life and how much they are more purely fictionalized Hobson children’s narration. Perhaps this distinction starts to be more and more useless the more we think about it.

This is another way that the novel leaves us with the question of “who is the author?” *Prisoner’s Dilemma* seems to leave only a small area of the story untold, just a few small questions, but through these questions it causes us to doubt all the bases we stand on in reading, and in this way this unwritten area is much larger. The metafictional part would seem to give us more information for how to deal with the piece missing from the puzzle, but in fact all it does is show us how important it is to take that creation, that decision, with care. It simply increases the stakes of the game; it does not help us complete the game.

In this novel, until “Calamine”, we are merely asked as readers to imagine what the story might be. Even though other forces are inevitably at work, until this chapter the story maintains the separation between the world and the book on the one hand, and the author on the other, even though it integrates the reader as a maker of meaning. With “Calamine”, this separation disappears; we are confronted with the reality of fiction and the fiction of reality, and the reader must suddenly recognize her or his place beside this book, this story, and this author in the plane of consistency. This is the place that *Prisoner’s Dilemma* takes us to, ultimately. It is a place that asks incredible things of the reader, yet also teaches the reader how to belong in that place. This is a very different thing from a puzzle novel like James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which is a puzzle that is also a guide to its own puzzle. *Prisoner’s Dilemma* takes on the task of helping the reader live in the world, rather than helping the reader read the book. This is obviously an unwritable part of a story, and it is the crucial piece of the puzzle that must be left out of the narrative proper. By the time the reader has any idea of what the missing pieces are, he or she is deeply involved with figuring out the puzzle, and deeply invested in the novel. Only after the reader truly becomes surrounded with the words in *Prisoner’s Dilemma* does he or she start to get an idea of what the novel really focuses on, even if, at that point, the focus is actually less clear.

*Prisoner’s Dilemma* ends with the concept of freedom. In the end, perhaps the most crucial lesson the puzzle novel teaches us is that like paranoia (see Bersani’s chapter on Pynchon in *The Culture of Redemption*), but in an inverse way, freedom is not always positive. We can be too free, left to make our own individual, solipsistic meanings from texts that do not confront us with the ethical choices of those meaning-makings. *Prisoner’s Dilemma* shows us the need to negotiate things such as freedom and paranoia in conjunction with other thinking humans, other readers, and other writers.

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