

Aspects of Experimental Fiction in *Hell of a Book*

Experimental fiction is a mode of writing that has begun to infiltrate modern literature and redefine the way novels are being written. It breaks the constraints of traditional literary fiction and has encapsulated readers through its various nonconventional characteristics. In Jason Mott's, *Hell of a Book*, Mott plays with different perspectives and narration styles to transform the story of an author and young black boy to a much more layered tale about the publishing industry, racial injustice in America, and self-love. The story also evades the norm by being metafictional, which is exposed through the author's first-person narration style. Mott's experimentation with these different perspectives and narration tactics not only makes his novel unique, but more importantly reshapes the way a narrative or narratives can come together to tell a shared story.

While reading *Hell of a Book*, readers are transported into the lives of two distinct characters; the author who is on a cross country publicity tour promoting *Hell of a Book*, and a young black boy who is living in the American South named Soot. Although the novel does not have any traditional "chapters" the stories of the author and Soot are parallel with one another. The book is structured so that after a portion of the author's life is told, the next section of the book is followed by a portion of Soot's life. However, even though these two characters seem to exist in two different places, both of their stories share commonalities mainly about the insufferable climate the United States has created for black people. Additionally, as the story progresses, these two perspectives seem to intermix more and more. "The Kid" who is only visible to the author and mysteriously follows him state to state, is later revealed to be Soot.

In addition to the physical separation of these two characters' stories, is also paramount to note the different narration styles Jason Mott uses to make this experimental fiction. The character of the author takes on the first-person narration style to tell his story. It is important to note the use of this first-person narration because readers are only given a sense of reality through the author's perspective. Yet in this scenario, the author "has a condition" in which he often sees imaginary people and things. This makes it so his perspective is not very trustworthy, since he himself cannot distinguish what is real or not. However, it is this subjectivity and unreliable perspective that makes this novel experimental. In her article, *Experimental Novels and Novelists*, Nasrullah Mambrol attests that, "once reality is acknowledged to be inner and subjective, all rules about structure in the novel are abandoned." So, because the author is

incapable of determining the difference between reality and his own imagination, the subjectiveness of the reality that the author presents is only radicalized. Furthermore, Mambrol states that the technique termed “stream of consciousness” is often attributed to experimental novels. In this case, the subjective reality that readers come to know is formed through the author’s stream of consciousness. It is through the author’s stream of consciousness that readers are able to hear every one of the author’s thoughts and consequently come to experience reality only exclusively through the lens of the author’s psyche.

However, like Mambrol states, even the structure of this narration breaks traditional boundaries of the first-person perspective. For example, the author uses words like “you” often so that readers are not just experiencing his world by a personal recounting but are rather simultaneously invited to go on the journey with the author as it is happening. By doing this, the audience’s interaction with this author feels authentic and purposeful. This works to make the story feel a lot more intimate and conversational than other first-person told novels as well. It feels as though this story was made to be told to the specific individual reading it, rather than to a collective “readership” which also further distinguishes it.

On the other hand, the other half of the story, Soot’s story, is told mainly from the third-person narration style. Although it is a third person narrator the narrator in Soot’s case is omniscient. This means they have the ability to tap into Soot’s brain, revealing his inner emotions and thoughts at times. This form of narration can also lead to a character’s stream of consciousness, although it is more restrictive than the author’s first-person perspective. Soot’s stream of conscious is not always present, but rather can be tapped into whenever the narrator feels necessary. Due to this, readers, get to know Soot slightly more objectively than the author, but the contrast of these perspective works to bring yet another distinctive aspect to the novel furthering its credibility as experimental.

Now although their stories for the most part are told in two separate places, Soot and the author’s separate narratives work together to reveal different themes within the novel. In the first half of the novel, the separate stories of Soot and the author are mainly used to make commentaries about race in America. On one side, the author, who is a black writer seems to completely repress his racial identity. It is not till about a fourth of the way through the book that the author who is a middle-aged man learns he is black. In a conversation with his limo driver the news is revealed to him. Renny, his driver states, “You’re a writer. You’re supposed to say

something about these things. And you're Black!' 'Am I?' I ask. I look down at my arm and, sure enough, it turns out that Renny is right. I'm Black!" (Mott 76). Quite oppositely though, Soot is perhaps overly aware of his race. He is intentionally made to be a very dark shade of black and therefore extremely vulnerable and unaccepted. He is described as, "Black as shut eyes. Black as starless nights. Black as a stovepipe soot" (Mott 30).

Although complete opposites, the juxtaposition of these two character's understandings of their racial identities, both works to examine what it means to be Black in America. The author for one, seems to purposely neglect or try to ignore the fact that he is Black. Like many of his other delusions it seems as though this racial dysphoria is used as a defense mechanism. In this case, forgetting he is black both serves as means to protect him from the negative psychological and emotional exhaustions that being Black in America comes with. This failure of acknowledgment ultimately works as a unique way to relate to one of the book's main questions, which is what level of a responsibility falls on Black people or Black authors to write/talk about the Black experience?

While the author's race is made somewhat ambiguous, Soot's is unignorable. Soot's very dark complexion makes him an outcast to both white people and lighter-toned black people. However, while the author protects himself by refusing to acknowledge his race, Soot is not given that luxury, so his means of survival is portrayed as the ability to turn "invisible." The need to learn how to turn invisible was stressed to Soot beginning from when he was a very young boy, and his parents constantly reiterated that if he can turn invisible, he will be safe. In Soot's circumstances, this means of protection is mainly used to avoid police brutality.

In both cases though, the author and Soot in one way or another have to ditch their racial identity in order to protect themselves from the harsh realities black people face in America. Whether evading those realities looks like not writing about being Black or turning invisible in order to prevent oneself from being shot and killed, the modes of protection each of these characterize utilize both work to expose the various hardships Black Americans face. Now, there is a wide array of literature that touches on this subject already, but Jason Mott takes more of an experimental approach to portraying this through the novel's varying perspectives. It would be easy for Mott to create a story in which one singular character faces these same kinds of issues, but by interconnecting the two it makes the novel both more experimental and furthers the

credibility of the claim that racial injustice in America is not an uncommon occurrence, that every Black person experiences it.

Another way one of this novel's themes is shaped by its experimental form, is revealing that "The Kid" has been Soot all along. For most of the novel not much information is given about the The Kid other than that he is very dark complected and is a young boy. Most of his identity remains a mystery in the novel, but it later becomes clear that his purpose is to teach the author how to accept being Black and with that comes the acceptance of himself, or self-love. In her article, *In Defense of Experimental Fiction and Unorthodox Narratives*, Ze Burns states traditional narratives utilize linear time. Another aspect she declares traditional narratives having is their pattern of reaffirming our perceptions of "reality." *Hell of a Book*, neither utilizes liner time nor affirms our perceptions of reality, in fact it does the opposite. Although it is revealed that Soot and the author have secretly been interconnected this whole time, the separation of their histories present for most of the book coupled with the reveal that Soot was The Kid the whole time, begins to confuse space and time. The readers are unable to tell how the author's timeline portrayed in the book lines up with Soot's timeline. It can be assumed that Soot is dead upon his first meeting with the author, however, readers would not know that until the end of the book. Furthermore, Soot's story is continuing to be told like he is actively existing from his own narrative, yet at the very same time he is appearing to the author after he has died in the author's narrative, so readers are never really able to gain an accurate sense of time in relation to how these two narratives are paralleled with one another.

Furthermore, after it is revealed that Soot is The Kid that was killed it is never really known if he existed as a ghost to the author or if he really was just a figment of his imagination all along. This coupled with the author's other delusions, blurs the lines between reality and imagination even more. In traditional novels, it is usually made clear to readers what is real and what is imagined, but in *Hell of a Book*, there is no way for reader's to know if what the author is seeing is real or not, and if Soot himself is real or dead or possibly even something in between. Both the authors delusions and the murkiness of Soot's being, help attribute this novel to being an experimental one and address one of the novel's major thematic concerns which is "learning to love yourself in a country where you're told that you're a plague on the economy, that you're nothing but a prisoner in the making, that your life can be taken away from you at any moment and there's nothing you can do about it – learning to love yourself in the middle of all that..."

(Mott 318). Without Soot the author would not have been able to come to accept himself, or at least not at that time. Mott places Soot in the author's life purposely, and it is the combining of their narratives that allows the author to learn to accept who he is, despite the social and cultural constraints telling him not to.

Another way this novel proves itself as experimental is through its inclusion of metafictional aspects. This is made apparent through the author's navigation of the publishing industry. As readers come to know the author, they can see that a lot of the author's more pressing problems in *Hell of a Book*, have to do with the pressures of being an author itself. Since his main identity centers around being a writer, he often speaks directly to the readership about what it takes to write a book, how taxing his tour is, and otherwise just the ins and outs of the publishing industry. Due to the fact that this commentary is coming from a first-person perspective and can be applied to other works of fiction, it can be considered metafictional. In the 1960s, William Gass described metafiction as "recent fictions that were somehow about fiction itself" (Currie 1). As it gained traction in the literary world by the 1970s metafiction was also defined as fiction with self-consciousness and self-awareness (Currie 1). In *Hell of a Book*, these two definitions of metafiction work together as one. The author makes commentaries about the writing process strictly through the use of his individual self-consciousness and knowledge. Additionally, metafictional works are always crossing the borders between fiction and criticism and the convergence of these two things blurs the lines between each of their insights. (Currie 2). By doing this, it creates a sort of self-awareness on both sides. *Hell of a Book* works to blur this line by criticizing the commercialization of fiction. Furthermore, since the protagonist is an author himself and often is seen speaking to readers directly about his reservations about this industry, it makes it feel as though readers are getting to know a work of fiction within a different work of fiction. It is like having a dream within another dream. Without the inclusion of certain metafictional aspects like the stream of consciousness and talk about works of fiction within this particular work of fiction, the greediness of the publishing industry would not be as evident and the mode it uses to expose these truths would not be as experimental.

In *Hell of a Book*, Jason Mott utilizes two different perspectives and forms of narration to transform the stories of an author and a young black boy to a much more multifaceted story. Mott also includes metafictional aspects like the stream of consciousness and the criticism of fiction in addition to the use of multiple perspectives and changing narration forms to help

distinguish this book's credibility as an experimental work of art. The unique use of these literary techniques not only deviates this novel from other traditional novels, but it also helps address the book's thematic concerns of racial injustice in America, self-love, and the pressures of the publishing industry. Ultimately, it is these nonconventional characteristics that make *Hell of a Book* both distinct and enthralling. Mott is a pioneer for experimental fiction and has begun to redefine the ways in which novels can be written.

Work Cited

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