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## Eggers: Purpose and Form and Deviations from the Expected

Dave Eggers utilizes unusual formatting tactics to present his memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, including a lengthy introduction and acknowledgements section, inauthentic dialogue, personal commentary, and even an unconventional copyright page. The deviation from expected norms in the memoir genre can be seeded out even through the tone of Eggers-as-narrator. While the book focuses on tragedy, loss, and mourning, it is often funny, uplifting, sarcastic, and disturbingly light. This unexpected turn from what one might assume would be a dark, twisted, depressing piece of literature brings much-needed authenticity to the story, revealing the truth behind oft-fetishized tragedies like orphan-hood. The way in which Eggers constructs his *Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* is, in fact, genius, and lends itself to the content quite well; unconventional writing forms may be the only proper way to write as intended, that is, authentically, about heartbreakingly tragic events.

Eggers' book can be divided into two "books," according to Elise Miller, which consist of "an autobiographical narrative about unbearable suffering, and a book of critical commentary, a psychoanalysis, as it were, of the particular challenges of writing a memoir about catastrophic loss and trauma" (Miller 985-986). This division of form brings Eggers into commentary with himself, leading to self-reflection in the highest extent. This self-reflection "both [draw] the readers in, and [warn] about the traps of sincerity and authenticity in personal narrative" (Smith et. al.). The connection between reader and author becomes intimate, due to the way information and emotions are shared. Baer argues that "the incredible diversity of self-reflexive literature [...] offers rich ways of reflecting upon human emotional experience as a personal, social, and political phenomenon" (Abstract). This human experience is understood both separately from Eggers' overarching narrative and in coexistence with it, something some critics argue should not be done. Polvinen, however, advocates for the combination of the two narratives. Polvinen argues that fiction should be understood both critically and emotionally at the same time, claiming these two methods of reading can be used in conversation with one another. "In the case of fiction, the idea of imaginatively and emotionally immersing ourselves in a fictional world implies an internal perspective that changes to an external one as soon as we view the fiction as an artefact" (Polvinen 166). In Eggers' work, this method is useful to distinguish Eggers' meaning in both narratives – his story of events and his commentary on himself, or, the external and internal narratives. It is imperative to consider Eggers' two narratives at the same time, as intended by the author; Dave Eggers makes his intentions for this novel incredibly clear in every aspect, laying out guidelines for reading prefacing the book and displaying control freak-like tendencies throughout the memoir, so close reading without considering intentionality and emotion is doing a disservice to the book and its form.

Eggers' form between his two narratives also displays his vulnerability. While his primary story, about the tragedy of his parents' deaths and his coping with them, shows authenticity, grittiness, and perhaps exhibitionist tendencies, his metanarrative covers any places he may have exposed, building a shield around himself out of his personal commentaries and rebuttals. Eggers writes for several reasons in addition to releasing and covering his vulnerability and his form exemplifies them all. He writes fast and furiously, with little editing, in order to "spit out" his pain to avoid the dyspepsia of keeping emotions in (Eggers 210); he writes to save himself. This

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sometimes leads to the revealing of an excess of information, displaying to the public much of his personal life – and that of his close family and friends. After this, however, his metanarrative comes into play in similar ways in which it covers his vulnerability; the metanarrative works to dispose of the guilt Eggers may feel for exposing the lives of himself and his family; while his writing works to objectify his experiences to help him cope (Miller 987), it also works to prove to his audience that he is compassionate, or at least worthy of sympathy or understanding. Eggers is extremely defensive of his writing and purposes for writing; examples of this can be seen in Eggers' MTV interview section (Eggers 214-217), unreal dialogues with Toph and John (Eggers 272-275, 315-219), and other instances in which Eggers anticipates negative reader reactions and attacks them before they can develop further. It seems that the metanarrative is created almost entirely for the purpose of proving Eggers' innocence to his audience.

The self-conscious nature of Eggers' voice speaks a truth to the process of writing and publishing that cannot be seen if the metanarrative is not included, creating a realistic relatability allows for an emotional tie with the readers. Baer points this out a bit, claiming, "Perhaps the most obvious way in which self-conscious narrative reflects upon emotional experience is found in its emphasis on the presence, roles, and interactions of storyteller and audience" (Baer 17). This interaction is essential for full understanding and immersion into any story; because of it, the audience feels included and respected. According to Brian Stonehill, "By acknowledging what they are, self-conscious novels show and honesty and a respect for the reader's intelligence which novels that pretend to be life itself do not. There is thus an alienation of the reader from the novel's action at one level[...] while at another level the reader, by being made conscious of his or her role as a listener confronted by a storyteller, is drawn into a stronger bond of intimacy" (Baer 16). Dave Eggers demonstrates his authorial prowess by showing his understanding of this element and using it to its full extent.

Eggers' structure and form, including the metanarrative, has often been misunderstood, according to Baer. "The misunderstanding of metafiction as needlessly complex and obscure reflects how the category has frequently been misunderstood and dismissed" (Baer 4). The inward-facing nature of works like Eggers may seem to some critics insignificant, turning away from larger, more important world issues, but this is not always the case. "Though some critics might argue that an 'obsession' with inwardness indicates a narcissism that is disengaged with larger social conditions, a look at the metafictional works selected for this project indicates that self-reflexive literature can be, and often is, a means through which readers may further recognize the relationships that exist not only between fiction and empirical experience, but also between the individual and the social and the emotional and the cognitive" (Baer 17). In fact, the self-referential metanarrative of Eggers' memoir points to large significance. According to Baer, self-consciousness in narrative often points to significant historical moments, as this is when this pattern in writing often emerges in time (6). As a postmodern style, self-referential writing calls attention to world events through a unique perspective, calling within the self for information about the outside. "Metafiction [...], by drawing attention to human, social, and personal experience, engages itself in questions about how we make sense of those experiences, especially through affect" (Baer 7). Eggers uses his unique perspective heavily to comment on American culture in the 1990s, parenting and social climate, and his family issues. As Carusi says, "The reader comes to know Eggers not for the events he experienced but for the way he constructs those events through his narrative" (3). Without subjective insertions of his present self in the writing, a far less personal view of a highly personal situation would be seen.

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This personal significance has effect on the reader, but the author also draws certain results from this element. The affective nature of Eggers' story holds the same weight as many other pieces in the genre of grief literature. Dawn Carusi performs interesting research about orphaned storytellers in her "Narratives of Orphaned Adults: Journey to Restoration." She suggests particular forms are consistent among stories of grief, like Eggers', like the balance between guilt and innocence. She provides an interesting perspective regarding Eggers and the climate of loss, providing examples from his own work to prove his role in grieving. "Eggers is applauded for the painfully honest account of the mistakes he makes in the caring for and grieving for his parents. The self-conscious ironic forms of his writings function by enabling him to share the most unsavory details of his story," claims Carusi, "it serves a function beyond its aesthetic. Eggers (2001) writes that putting this narrative down is a tool for stopping time, collapsing time, vindicating his self-worth, exploiting and exalting his parents. Eggers, like all of us, constructs his world through the story he tells" (Carusi 2-3).

Carusi explains many of the quirks of Eggers' writing through his explanation of grief writing and its patterns. Firstly, Carusi argues that Eggers writes because, "Without the opportunity for self disclosure and story creation, the would-be narrator might suffer from lack of catharsis" (7). While this is true, and Eggers does seem to use his memoir as an outlet for mourning and closure, there are a plethora of other reasons Eggers writes as well, including memorializing his parents, creating new order and meaning (Carusi addresses this: "An individual's story provides a method to make order out of the disordered characters, events, and happenings central to a disrupted experience" (Carusi 34).), and saving himself from dyspepsia. Miller argues: "if he is to avoid his mother's fate, Eggers must use writing as a way to discharge the aggression, culpability, and repulsion he eschews digesting" (998). Carusi does shed light on the idea of saving the self through story-telling, as Eggers does; according to her, it is a fairly common urge from orphaned storytellers. "For many adult children, the role of caregiver is fraught with anxiety. Since death is inevitable, the caregiver child is doomed to fail in one sense or another" (Carusi 77). This sense of doom must be overcome somehow, and so is placed into the need for self-preservation. "The narrators see illness as something to be overcome," if not by their parents, then by themselves, "so that the body can be restored to its original condition" (Carusi 34). Still, Carusi fails to consider the need to memorialize the deceased and instead, in probability, groups Eggers into the category of experiencing complicated grief, as defined by Carusi: "Complicated grief may result when certain high-risk factors are present in the bereaved's experience with loss [...] in all forms of complicated mourning, there are attempts to do two things: 1) to deny, repress, or avoid aspects of the loss, its pain, and the full realization of its implications for the mourner, and 2) hold onto and avoid relinquishing the lost loved one" (Carusi 17). These two steps can be interpreted in Eggers' form in different ways. They can be seen as relating to the two "books" or narratives of Eggers' memoir, connecting holding on to the primary narrative and avoidance of loss with the metanarrative. They can also be considered in Eggers' story itself, beginning with avoidance and denial and ending in holding on or acknowledging the lasting importance of his parents, particularly in the last scene of Eggers scattering his mother's ashes. While Carusi makes valid points concerning Eggers and the orphan narrative, several holes remain that set Eggers apart from the canon, proving his uniqueness in style, form, and intention.

Eggers shows a longing for celebrity and fame throughout his memoir, from the compliments he pays himself ("Can I sing or what" (48)?) to his longing to be on *The Real World* ("Of course I wanted to be asked to audition, wanted them to see all there is to see in me [...] (183)) to every self-important, self-referencing comment he makes on himself. His self-importance, or longing

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for it, play into the form of his narrative in a huge way, taking over the metanarrative and the course of main events, circling the organization of the story around the parts of his life that could lead to eminence and rebuke, as well as the popular culture of the 1990s, of which he asserts to be well-informed. He ensures that he teaches Toph the important cultural knowledge of the era, explaining, “Though he has often been resistant— children so seldom know what is good for them – I have taught him to appreciate all the groundbreaking musicmakers of our time” (Eggers 49). While this self-assertion and arrogance of cultural superiority may seem distasteful, Carusi claims that “people tend to identify with their cultural background during life crises more than at any other time” (19). According to her, “culture molds *what* and *how* we feel as well as how we communicate what and how we feel [...] socially constructed notions of appropriate emotions determine our expression of those emotions” (21). This can explain Eggers’ intent to drown Toph – and himself – with music, jokes, and banter rather than with complete grieving and despair. Eggers’ reaction to his parents’ deaths is entirely appropriate given the situation he is put into as the guardian of his brother. He attempts to provide normalcy through the culture he knows, abandoning his needs and becoming what Carusi calls a “disenfranchised griever” (7).

It is because of Eggers’ role as a “disenfranchised griever” that some of his reactions may seem actually inappropriate to the reader, and why Eggers may feel he needs to include his metanarrative to defend himself against this lash back. Eggers is put into a difficult position “because we construct the loss of a parent as a low-grief experience” (Carusi 7). Eggers is expected to move on appropriately, as an adult in the position of raising a child, yet he is still in his lower twenties, a child at heart, and a baby to the real world, and is expected also to mourn heavily. He has no choice but to select his own path, first burying his grief in the writing one sees in his book, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* due to his lack of another grieving mechanism and chained to the facade he must put on for Toph, then finally memorializing his parents properly, through the completion of writing and final publishing of his book, as well as finally memorializing his mother with her ashes.

These roles work to help divide the memoir into the two halves that are constructed, creating a messy break of sometimes polarizing, sometimes harmonizing sides. Says Smith et. al., “Eggers is acutely aware that the contradictions of his multiple identities pose a dilemma for the tidy memoirist.” It is not Eggers’ goal to create the perfectly organized memoir; according to Miller, Eggers even refrained from editing the book in many places. Still, the way Eggers does organize the memoir is telling of his purposes and the effects they have on his, and the reader’s, psyche. Eggers is self-conscious yet brave, risk-taking yet weary, a controlling maniac, yet a disorganized mess; these opposing sides should not be surprising to the reader, particularly as one is viewing the grieving process of the author writing the book.

Eggers’ quirky, eccentric take on his subject matter is what gives him popularity, celebrity, and attention, which he seems to desire, rather than subjection to the realm of “Anonymous Memoirist Number 4001.” Not only does this form give him interest, however; it also accomplishes his goal of memorializing his parents and the events of his life properly through realistic events. His parents are not put on pedestals, as this would be an inauthentic tribute to their memories. Instead, they are held up at arms’ length and examined carefully, being preserved through every rumpled collar and missed belt loop, as well as every perfect detail; in fact, Eggers examines himself and his construction of this narrative in the same way, commenting carefully on his own place in the narrative, even when holding himself high, in a “deserving” fanfare; this only points to his truthful, arrogant flaws. Eggers asserts,

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[the author] plans to be clearly, obviously aware of his knowingness about his self-consciousness of self-referentiality. Further, he is fully cognizant, way ahead of you, in terms of knowing about and fully admitting the gimmickry inherent in all this, and will preempt your claim of the book's irrelevance due to said gimmickry by saying that the gimmickry is simply a device, a defense, to obscure the black, blinding, murderous rage and sorrow at the core of this whole story, which is both too black and blinding to look at – *avert...your...eyes!*—but nevertheless useful, at least to the author, even in caricatured or condensed form, because telling as many people as possible about it helps, he thinks, to dilute the pain and bitterness and thus facilitate its flushing from his soul [...] (Eggers Acknowledgements).

Proving his cunning and cleverness, Eggers beats the reader to any interpretation they may desire to take. He admits to his ultimate goals in writing and the ultimate themes of loss and sadness, and yet also proves the usefulness of the lighter “gimmickry” as a defense, both for Eggers and the reader. Yet this is where Eggers and myself differ. The term “gimmickry” does not seem to fit the device used at all. It is an appropriate, well-used narrative structure that protects, yes, but also helps get to the truth of the narrative. There is more truth to shadows than only the dark, for shadows are cast from light. Eggers finds pieces of light and strings them together, just enough to cast shadows upon the events needed. In order to comprehend the shadows and the darkness, the reader must also experience the light; only then can an understanding be made of what is missing, what eventually can be again, and what still is in the smallest of ways. While the tale Eggers spins is not one of gothic horror or miserable sadness externally, the shadows it casts are far more real than any other way an author might attempt to render darkness. Eggers' writing style, and other nontraditional forms, are the only way to convey a tragic event in a way that does not fetishize it or make it to be a false replica; these writing styles preserve the truth entirely, proving contrast between lightness and darkness is the key.

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