

# LOSING THE BOOK BODY IN JENNIFER EGAN'S 'BLACK BOX'

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Jennifer Egan's Twitter fiction "Black Box" was released over the course of 10 days, from May 24<sup>th</sup> to June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2012. The text was published in short bursts via *The New Yorker's* Twitter account, with one tweet released every minute for one hour each day. This is how the text was introduced to the world, in fragmented pieces that spread across accounts and readers through likes and retweets. This paper will examine Egan's text as an important example of Twitter fiction, considering the process of its release as well as its afterlife on the internet, in order to think about how fiction might adapt to thrive in a virtual environment.

N. Katherine Hayles unites humans and books through the shared impact of technology upon materiality, and the shared danger of overlooking the vital contributions of that materiality. She writes "because they have bodies, books and humans have something to lose if they are regarded solely as informational patterns" (Hayles 1999, 29). When we discuss digital fiction and Twitter fiction, in which the book is no longer a tangible, paper object, we must then be aware of this risk of loss. While Hayles states that books have something to lose, this does not necessarily mean that they all experience loss. The risk comes when the informational pattern is prioritised over any potential contributions of embodiment. In terms of digital books, this brings into question whether electronic literature experiences a deficiency of textuality, whether the non-physical nature of the fiction has a detrimental effect upon the narrative or reading experience.

Discussion of digitization is complicated by a necessary distinction between digitized print literature, or literature that contains elements of digitization, and fiction written for a digital environment. According to David Ciccoricco, “Digital fiction is fiction written for and read on a computer screen,” which “would lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function if it were removed from that medium” (2012, 256). Hayles uses the phrase “electronic literature,” which is “generally considered to exclude print literature that has been digitized, [and] is by contrast ‘digital born’” (2008, 3). The distinction shared in these definitions is that this kind of literature is created for screen reading rather than adapted to it. Critics have noted that print books are in many ways already digital — such as in printing and publishing processes<sup>1</sup>—and for this reason I prefer Hayles’s term of electronic literature to more clearly signal the distinct nature of this “digital born” literature.

After its Twitter dissemination, “Black Box” was made available on *The New Yorker’s* website, which can be easily downloaded and saved as a PDF. The only way to view the original tweets is to scroll back years through *The New Yorker’s* Twitter feed, an arduous task that no casual reader would attempt. The Twitter publication now, therefore, is not a practical method of reading the text, and instead is mostly present through the structure that the format of the text is based on; separated into many short phrases that fit the then 140-character Twitter limit. There are also material versions of the book that exist, such as the author’s draft of the text; Egan used a notebook that had eight squares drawn on each page to plan “Black Box,” using the physical parameters of the squares to limit her segments so that they would fit the Twitter character count (Egan, 2012b). The advance review copies of the text copied the visual format of Egan’s notebook, replicating the squares that bordered and separated each segment (Gee, 2012). These physical versions were thus the original form of the text, a fact that invokes questioning over whether this text is actually “digital born,” as Hayles’s definition of electronic literature insists. While the text was crafted and intended for its Twitter setting, it first came to life in a traditional pen-to-paper authorship process, a method that many contemporary authors no longer even use as the advent of computers has led many to digital drafting and editing. There is thus an odd inversion in this originating in material form and then appearing officially online, as the physical versions of “Black Box” only exist as a draft or preparation for the digital publication.

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<sup>1</sup> Hayles observes that digitization has an impact even on print literature (2005, 32), and Reina notes that digitization has been part of publishing for a long time (2019, 76).

If it were not first published on Twitter but merely released as a PDF, would we even consider “Black Box” to be an example of electronic literature? Perhaps not, yet the text’s unique crafting to fit the restrictions of the social media platform, despite much of this planning itself not being digital, does constitute it as a notable electronic text. Hayles argues that the transformation of a print document into an electronic one is “a form of translation – ‘media translation’ – which is inevitably also an act of interpretation” (2008, 89). The significant difference here is that “Black Box” is not exactly a paper book translated into a digital environment; it was designed for and launched into its technological format. Its unique fragmented structure is tied to the requirements of the platform, which does not make sense or have the same impact when removed from this environment. In fact, the PowerPoint chapter in Egan’s best-known novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) is more of an act of translation than “Black Box” as a Twitter fiction, as there Egan takes a technology meant to exist and be viewed on a computer screen and prints it onto paper. While the layout of the image is identical to the onscreen version, the reader of the paper book loses out on the digital-specific environment that this technology was created in. This, as Ciccoricco points out in his definition of digital fiction, causes the digital image to “lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function [when] removed from that medium” (2012, 256).

In contrast, Twitter fiction intentionally makes use of its digital environment and considers this part of the reading experience. Ritika Singh notes how electronic fiction has to work harder than the print book to “grasp the viewers’ attention” amidst all the other digital noise present while the fiction is being read, “unlike an eBook that is downloaded and read by default in ‘full-screen’ mode to minimize distractions on the screen” (2016, 3). Singh speaks of the “short-short story,”<sup>2</sup> an extremely short piece of fiction that is published on social media sites; “Black Box” is comprised of many of these tiny fragments, which together form the entire story. In many ways this amplifies the limitations and distractions of the electronic reading experience, as the text has to continue to capture the reader again and again. The entire body of the text is continually interrupted by digital noise: background elements of the website that surrounds and separates each 140-character segment. This amplifies the digital nature of the text as it draws attention to the social media skeleton that the fiction latches onto, which is constantly

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘Short-short’ was first used in an 1855 article by the American critic Brander Matthews. ‘Matthews’s use of capitals and a hyphen to join his two terms was a deliberate attempt to distinguish short stories from stories which merely happened to be short’ (Boddy 2010, 1).

present when viewing each short fragment. “Black Box” is then not a piece of print fiction uploaded to Twitter, which stands out as special amongst all the other posts and advertisements on the platform, it is part of this platform—part of the digital noise itself.

“Black Box” utilises the freedoms and limitations of its Twitter publication alike, revealing the potential to inject fiction into this unlikely landscape. As Hayles remarks in *Electronic Literature*:

digital media have given us an opportunity we have not had for the last several hundred years: the chance to see print with new eyes, and with it, the possibility of understanding how deeply literary theory and criticism have been imbued with assumptions specific to print (2008, 33).

In fact, in removing literature from its material body, we give it new life by removing limitations previously enforced by the necessity of print. Fiction becomes a new experience as the reader learns physical tools to manage the onscreen platform; they must put aside expectations learned from print literature and engage quite differently when reading Twitter fiction. The short nature of each fragment requires closer attention to each phrase: rather than consuming an entire page in one glance, Twitter fiction is more condensed and requires close reading of each segment. Additionally, the reader cannot rely on surrounding text to inform the passage at hand, as many will appear on the feed without the prior and subsequent segment in view. For example, the phrase “If your limbs are sore and your forehead scraped and raw, don’t dwell on why” (Egan, 2012a, p. 35) contains references to a suppressed instance of sexual assault, willingly forgotten by the agent. Four tweets earlier, the agent refers to beginning a countdown, which is the process of dissociating she uses to manage this constant assault. The Dissociation Technique is explained in full much earlier in the text— which would have been days earlier for the Twitter reader experiencing the live publication of the text. The reader thus experiences an increased distancing between segments of the text itself, showing the need for increased attention and close reading. This distancing also signals a return to serialisation, which has become less common in fiction over the last century, due to the changing media landscape (Andersen 2017, 35). Kirtley argues that “Twitter fiction heralds a digital ‘return of serial fiction’” (2012, as quoted in Andersen, 2017, 35), a concept evident in this fragmented structure which requires patient investment from the reader as they wait to receive the next instalment of the text each day.

The fragmentation of the text is thus central to its relationship with the reader and to the creation of narrative tension. This fragmentation of the text, both separating it out into hundreds of individual tweets and spreading out its dissemination over multiple days instead of posting it all at once, amplifies the digital nature of the text because the reader is constantly confronted by the digital casing of each new segment. The text does not come together as one continuous stretch of narrative, it is always divided by these digital wrappings around each fragment. Because of this, the reader is also constantly interrupted, and is never able to settle into a continuous reading style on the Twitter platform as they have to sift out the advertisements, date marks, and Twitter handles that sit around and between each tweet. The below image shows the very first tweet of “Black Box” and illustrates these many digital wrappings:



Figure 1: (@NYerFiction, May 5, 2012)<sup>3</sup>

As well as the fragment of fiction, the reader also encounters the digital information and the options present to them: to Retweet, Quote Tweet, and Like. They are also able to see the engagement of other readers/Twitter users, viewing reactions to the text before it has been fully published. These reader responses are translated into the language of the host media, summarised in three numeric values; here 36, 2, 38; totalling 76 “interactions” visible to the reader.

Here we see Egan stretching the boundaries and abilities of the book body, wrapping the text itself around technology and imbuing technology with

<sup>3</sup> This first tweet was published on May 24th 2012 (EST) however it appears as May 25th to a GMT user.

fiction rather than the other way around. The text latches on to the structure and visuality of the technology, as it carries these digital wrappings as I have just described and adopts the language of its platform. These digital borders and casings also create gaps between and within the tweets, suspending the fragment of fiction within layers of technical information; the above image shows the fragment as taking up less than half of the space of the entire tweet. These gaps between and around the fragments of fiction not only bring reminders of digitality into every line of the text, but create brief pauses filled by the reader's own thoughts. These pauses might be informed by the tweets or advertisements that appear in between the fragments of the Twitter fiction, or this might be a moment of emptiness in waiting for the next tweet to be published. In any case, this shows the fiction interacting with the reader and the platform in a very interesting and unique manner, as the experience is not the same for every reader and instead is personalised by the contributions of each user's Twitter feed.

While it is impossible now to experience the live unfolding of the text, we can see the structure, pace, and visual style of the tweets through websites such as *Paste Magazine*, which displays individual images of each tweet in "Black Box." These images are also date-stamped, which reveals where the publication ended on one day, and the readers were then left to wait until the account began tweeting the text again the next day. As displayed in the image below, these 23-hour gaps add another layer of emptiness within the text, again leaving space for the reader to fill with their own thoughts and imaginations.

## Image 59 of 606

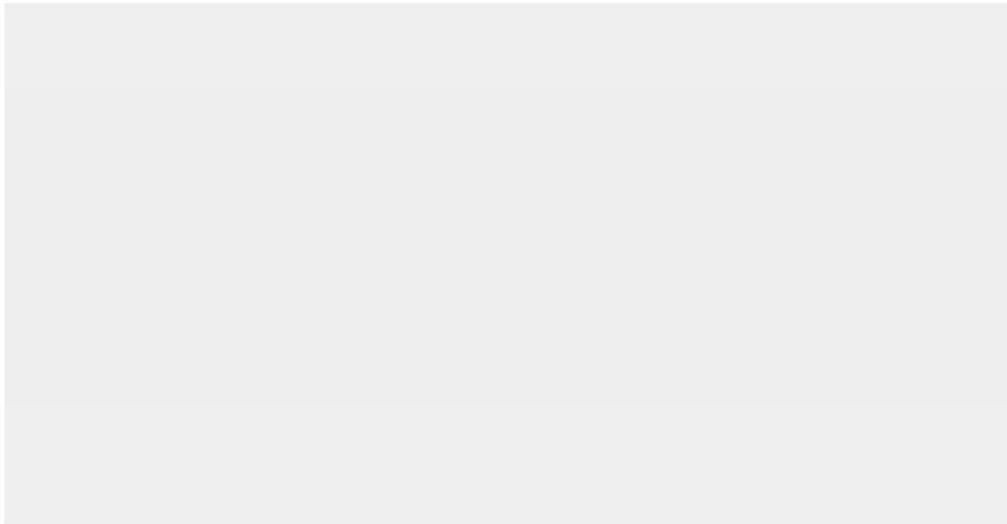


New Yorker Fiction @NYerFiction

24 May

With each number, imagine yourself rising out of your body and moving one step farther away from it.

Expand



## Image 60 of 606



New Yorker Fiction @NYerFiction

25 May

By eight, you should be hovering just outside your skin.

Expand

*Figure 2: (Orf 2012)<sup>4</sup>*

This image shows the waiting period between day one and two of the text’s publication— pausing in the middle of the agent’s explanation of the “Dissociation Technique,” which she uses to endure the sexual assault she experiences in her role as a beauty. Breaking at this point leaves the text in a state of uncertainty about the agent’s safety for this period and pauses oddly in the middle of a description of the dissociation process, rather than ending at the conclusion to a thought.

We might turn to Barthes’s writing on the pleasure of the text in analyzing what is occurring in these gaps and breaks. Barthes writes that readers read with their own rhythm, skipping over some sections and pausing on others, “imposing abrasions” upon the surface of the text ([1973]1975, 11-12). These narrative gaps and discontinuities emphasise the “site of a loss, the seam, the cut,” self-consciously breaking the narrative in order to increase desire (Barthes, [1973]1975, 7). The gaps within ‘Black Box’ similarly call attention to

<sup>4</sup> Image from Paste Magazine. Grey square shows where advertisements appear on the website.

the fragmentation of the text and emphasize the state of uncertainty and desire that the reader is left in. This stop-start method of publication thus increases narrative tension by amplifying the reader's desire to know the outcome revealed in the next day's publication session. As analysed above, these pauses and gaps engage with the reader's own imagination and thus enhance the reading experience. Similarly, the narrative is enhanced by this fragmentation, building tension in a slow unfolding of the action within the text— what Barthes calls the “gradual unveiling” ([1973]1975, 10). The layout of the text in *Paste Magazine*, as opposed to the *New Yorker* article, enables us to better notice these choices and periods of prolonged waiting for conclusion.

Reading the text in this cut-and-paste fashion might actually be truer to the original Twitter publication style, as the easier option of reading the text on *The New Yorker's* website only replicates the pattern in which the text is divided, it does not carry the same visual markers as the tweets. The *Paste Magazine* version, however, exactly shows the image of the individual tweets and it also inserts their own advertisements in between each one. While a frustrating reading experience, made two to three times longer because of the high advertisement to image ratio, this is probably more akin to the experience of reading it on your Twitter home feed, with regular interruptions from other sources, amplifying these narrative gaps and abrasions as noted above. *Paste Magazine's* record of “Black Box” also highlights the scheduled nature of the text in detailing its date marks, revealing the way in which it is not completely live, but programmed to send information at planned moments each day. While the daily burst is fragmented enough to feel random and certainly allows enough time to pass that the text newly interrupts the Twitter feed each day, it is important to note that there is nothing truly spontaneous or live about the text. Egan here plays with technology to create an atmosphere of interaction and spontaneity, which in reality is a structured and inflexible process with no room for adaptation. This is amplified by the material nature of the text's planning: as mentioned it was decided and recorded on paper before being programmed into a scheduling site and then sent out in its short bursts on Twitter. The text's live effect is countered by its predetermined nature, demonstrating a usage of the social media platform to create an impression of live dissemination through this fragmentation and scheduling.

The fragmented Twitter fiction style also distorts the representation of the text, as it enables hundreds of different access points to the text; linked through each individual tweet; each of which could give an entirely different first impression of the text. If a reader merely stumbled upon the text by seeing one solitary tweet on their Twitter feed, that 140-character segment

alone would be their first impression of the fiction and the basis upon which they would decide whether or not to read more. While some phrases are extremely reflective and philosophical, such as “Kindness feels good, even when it’s based on a false notion of your identity and purpose,” others throw the reader into an action sequence, such as: “It is hard to safely navigate a cliff-top promontory at high speed while blind” (Egan 2012a, 2, 30). This gives two entirely different first impressions of the text depending on which tweet the reader first engages with. Here we see the result of the process of fiction losing its material body, in which all excess content is removed and only the text remains. This has a particular impact upon reader engagement as the cover is removed and the reader directly accesses the text with no introductory material guiding their expectations.

Hayles’s observation that the materiality of the textual body is impacted by, and potentially at risk due to, digitization is quite evident here; “Black Box” sheds the literal paper skin of the novel, and many expectations that accompany it. However, my own observations in this piece indicate that “Black Box” is not in fact less structured, less engaging, or less literary than a material novel. The difference is that reading processes are rethought and constantly questioned, as there are fewer set expectations of the text— given the multiple access points, loss of guiding materials, and the informing digital noise that will differ between use.

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