

ACE WOMEN'S Network™ Michigan

Mentoring Mondays ~ July 27, 2020

Opinion

(Let Us Out of This Clause)

At last, I had seen the true absurd hopelessness of things, laid out in flawless prose.

By Ben Dolnick

Mr. Dolnick is a novelist.

July 6, 2020



A few years ago I got a note from a reader (written in the tone of patient disappointment with which you might discuss pants-wearing with a naked toddler) about parentheses. I used altogether too many of them, apparently. I tried to make them hold more than their listed storage capacity. I may as well have stamped the page with coffee rings.

Most such notes from readers send me into hours of panicky self-doubt, but this one affected me like a passing dandelion fluff. My parentheses usage is no accident. If, as a writer, I had a coat of arms, a set of parentheses would feature prominently, like an especially un-fearsome pair of swords.

What I love about parentheses is the very mess, the very sense of overspilling shelves, that so dismayed my reader. When I open up Nicholson Baker's "The Mezzanine," with its endless footnotes litigating such matters as the inadequacy of the paper straw, or Helen DeWitt's "The Last Samurai," with its pages of literal Greek, what I see is not chaos but home. A prose style that interrupts itself, that can't seem to make up its mind, promises me the thing that I open a book looking for: a friend. That friend might be insufferable (Hello, [Mickey Sabbath!](#)) or maniacally self-involved (Bonjour, [Marcel!](#)), but what she won't be, her parentheses assure me, is *distant*, withholding.

We are not, these voices say, sitting in the weird too-clean part of the house that we use only when guests come over, eating off of dainty plates. We are in the kitchen, or the bedroom, and yes there *has* been a strange smell hanging around the past couple of days, and be careful when you sit in that chair because I think I lost a pair of scissors.

All of which has made it more than a little uncomfortable for me to realize that I now know just how my parentheses-loathing reader felt.

Since March, I (and, more important, the entire human race) have been living inside a set of massive parentheses. Our lives as we knew them before the coronavirus — the subjects of our days marching crisply along, the verbs of our every hour thoughtfully chosen — have been suspended. And until God or Merck blesses us with an end-parenthesis, we are stuck here. Is it Saturday? Would it matter?

I have learned what it is to feel involuntarily severed from what came before, to be lost in the murk of a delay so interminable that you lose sight of what it is you were waiting for.

Here's something I used to think about, back in the before-times: A clause set off by em dashes is like dropping underwater while swimming breaststroke — just a quick dip before popping back to the sentence's surface. A parenthetical clause is more like diving down to the pool bottom to pick up a coin. And a footnote is a full-blown scuba dive — you have strapped on equipment and left the surface behind and you had better, after going to all that trouble, see something interesting down there.

How was it that I had never noticed that this entire taxonomic system of authorial interruptions took for granted that readers would enjoy being plunged into a medium in which they couldn't take a breath?

And now that I'd begun to perceive this airless quality of parentheses, it was infecting my reading life, too. Was it really glee I'd felt, flipping to the endnotes of "Infinite Jest" and encountering yet another slab of chemistry class gobbledygook?

I found myself longing, when I could bring myself to read at all, for the cool clear prose of a [Jhumpa Lahiri](#) or a [Kazuo Ishiguro](#). I craved the acerbic tang of a [Penelope Fitzgerald](#) paragraph. There was, I knew vaguely, some knack to enjoying interruptions — or at the very least making peace with them — but I seemed, in my reading and in my life, to have lost it. I knew that my former embrace of detours, my pleasure in being submerged, might hold some key that would help me navigate this time to which we'd all been condemned, but I could focus on nothing but the eventual period that would mark the end of this godawful sentence.

But then [I happened upon a line by Nabokov](#) (the author, incidentally, of perhaps the only [truly famous parentheses](#) in world literature): "The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness."

This majestically depressing sentence worked on me like fresh water in a vase of lilies. At last, the true absurd hopelessness of things, laid out in flawless prose!

Our whole *lives* are a parentheses! You think you'll be dancing out of the doctor's office, vaccine freshly administered, free of all dread and torpor? Of course you won't! You think there's more to your life than the morsel of experience — this bite of sandwich, this knee pain, this worry — that happens to be before you? Ha!

Even the tidiest, most limpid Hemingway story unfolds, if you zoom out far enough, in the howling void. And even the most endless Covid lockdown, if you zoom in far enough, unfolds in the crystalline present. I felt as if I were staring at a literary and existential fractal. I felt (however briefly) unbounded.

Ben Dolnick is the author of the novel "The Ghost Notebooks."

Follow *The New York Times Opinion* section on [Facebook](#), [Twitter \(@NYTopinion\)](#) and [Instagram](#). A version of this article appears in print on July 7, 2020, Section A, Page 19 of the New York edition with the headline: (Let Us Out of This Clause).