



Literature:  
Journal of  
21<sup>st</sup> Century  
Writings



THE BRITISH  
ASSOCIATION FOR  
CONTEMPORARY  
LITERARY STUDIES

Naughton, Gerald David, and Yulia Pushkarevskaya Naughton. 2026. "'Unstable, in Chaos': Reading Ali Smith's *How to Be Both* and Percival Everett's *Telephone* in the Age of 'Cruel Optimism'" *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings* 12(3): pp. 1–22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.23723>



## “Unstable, in Chaos”: Reading Ali Smith’s *How to Be Both* and Percival Everett’s *Telephone* in the Age of ‘Cruel Optimism’

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Many of the formal innovations of contemporary fiction arise from a collective sense of ceaseless crisis—a recognition that traditional modes of storytelling, forged in earlier cultural climates, may now be overrun and unable to accommodate an age of accelerated instability. This essay examines two such formally adventurous novels: Ali Smith’s *How to Be Both* (2014) and Percival Everett’s *Telephone* (2020), both of which employ multiple published versions to unsettle narrative unity and readerly expectations. Smith’s novel appears in two randomly sequenced editions; Everett’s in three distinct iterations. The essay argues that such strategies may be seen as responses to the condition Lauren Berlant terms “cruel optimism”: a structure of feeling in which attachments to normative fantasies of the good life persist, despite their increasing impossibility. In foregrounding variation, contingency, and aesthetic instability, these novels register what Berlant describes as a cultural moment shaped by “austerity, precarity, and awkwardness,” and reflect the experience of a world in which the genres of meaning-making are themselves in question. They do so, however, not by offering resolution, but by inhabiting the impasse—what Berlant elsewhere calls “genre flailing” – and devising alternative modes of formal coherence in the face of disruption. The result is fiction that portrays the very crisis that structurally forms it.

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## 1. Introduction: The Age of Cruel Optimism

This essay posits Lauren Berlant's seminal *Cruel Optimism* (2011) as a prism through which we may approach a definition both of the troubled first quarter of the twenty-first century and of the literary "genres" that are produced in this era. Berlant has encapsulated the period in three key terms: "austerity, precarity, and awkwardness". All three are indicative of a moment of crisis, when the constant instability of the world gives cause to a constant adaptation and regeneration of identity – both individual and artistic. Here, it is important to distinguish between genre, form, and narrative less as fixed categories than as overlapping modes of organization and expectation. Caroline Levine's famously explains form as "patterns of repetition and difference" (2015), opening up a consideration of form as a range of structural logics that organize texts; genre, meanwhile, as Berlant insists, is a matter of affective and social conventions that shape how texts and lives are oriented; and narrative then can be seen as the unfolding of sequence that both depends on and unsettles those frameworks. Berlant defines genre as "a loose affectively-invested zone" in which expectations about the narrative shape a situation will take" (2011b: np), noting that "[g]enres provide an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold, whether that thing is in life or in art" (2011a: 6). We find such definitions particularly apt for both Ali Smith's *How to Be Both* and Percival Everett's *Telephone* (2020), which exemplify how contemporary fiction stretches contemporary categories. In their "flailing", these novels destabilize a range of generic expectations, from the domestic grief narrative and the Künstlerroman to the campus novel, the philosophical meditation, and the borderland thriller.

For Berlant, the contemporary era points to a tension between crisis and genre, in what they describe as a historical moment "in which a relation of persons and worlds is sensed to be changing but the rules for habitation and the genres of storytelling about it are unstable, in chaos" (2011b: 6). Our essay will be comparative in nature, examining Smith's *How to Be Both*<sup>1</sup> (2014) in conversation with Percival Everett's novel, *Telephone* (2020). Both novels are experimental in nature, playing with genre, sequencing, and coherence. Their shared multiplicity suggests a contemporary process that Berlant calls "genre flailing," a condition that in these novels could involve instability among several genres at once, whether realist family narrative, Künstlerroman, campus novel, or borderland thriller. However, the instability here is not merely among named genres but in the very promise that generic conventions can make contemporary life intelligible. What 'flails' is the stabilizing promise of genre.

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<sup>1</sup> I keep the conventional capitalisation in this article, though Smith uses the lowercase "b" in her title. See Tory Young, "Invisibility and Power", 999.

Both novels are published in a hybrid style, and in differing editions. Smith's novel has been described as "an experiment in duration" (Kavenna 2016); it contains two distinct, but related stories – one set in 15th-century Italy, the other in contemporary Britain.<sup>2</sup> The novel was produced in two different versions, with the sequence of its two stories randomly determined by which edition of the text the reader happens to have. It is, in many ways, a novel about duality, which questions whether stories need to have singular structures, or to establish settled chronologies, or hierarchies of plot and subplot. Everett's *Telephone* is, similarly, one novel with multiple versions, each with a slightly different storyline. The three versions of the book have slightly different cover art, in which the compass points to a different pole, and varying ISBN numbers. The inside cover of the text is labeled either 'A,' (Northeast) 'B,' (Northwest) or 'C' (Southeast),<sup>3</sup> though again, the reader has no conscious choice over which version of the book they are purchasing, or how the version they are reading may differ from the other two, unread versions. Both novels, then, conspicuously avoid finality of form, sequence, and structure. The two books will remain both read and yet unread by everyone who encounters them, and will deliberately escape a settled genre. As Berlant puts it, "during crisis times the event emerges not as a thing that goes without saying but as a genre whose conventions are stunned, disorganized, and open for change" (2011a). The novels formally enact this very state: their narrative conventions are stunned into multiple, incompatible versions; their sequencing is purposefully disorganized; and their structures remain radically open for change, refusing the finality of a single, authoritative text.

To describe the contemporary moment in the West as one of precarity, instability, or crisis is certainly nothing new. In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, conditions of ecological catastrophe, geopolitical violence, public health emergency, and economic precarity accumulate and proliferate, leaving the individual in a state of perpetual disorder. Moreover, dominant neoliberal ideologies tend to interpret the emotional responses to crisis through the lens of pathology, framing them in terms of what counts as a normal or abnormal life and, by extension, what qualifies as a successful or meaningful existence. This heightened state of insecurity is produced at least in part by radical transformations of society and the deregulation of the labour market. These broad shifts in economic, social, and political conditions have undermined the stability that once underpinned ideals of the 'good life'. Aspirations like career progression, financial security, and reward based on merit have become harder to reach (Bardhan 2022: 101–2; Crosthwaite 30). The crisis at stake here is therefore both representational

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<sup>2</sup> The version referred to in this article is the one which begins with George's story in the contemporary United Kingdom.

<sup>3</sup> Where the text remains the same between the three, this paper refers to the edition known as version C (Southeast).

and material: a crisis in how contemporary life can be narrated and in the adequacy of the forms and genres that once promised continuity.

Lauren Berlant famously described this condition as one marked by cruel optimism: “the emergence of a precarious public sphere” in which “optimistic objects/scenarios that had once held the space open for the good-life fantasy”, while under pressure, are still the object of our longing, producing a state of “cruel optimism” (2011b: 2–3). In a much quoted passage, they define cruel optimism as a condition in which “something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (2011b: 1). “It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project,” they continue. “These kinds of optimistic relations are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it” (1). Berlant situates this condition within the “historical present” or “situation,” a temporality that “tracks transactions within the elongated *durée* of the present moment” (95). Our present “situation” is marked by disruption – “a disturbance” that interrupts the flow of ordinary life, compelling individuals to “take notice” and “figure out how to adjust” (95). And this continual effort to adapt becomes its own form of precarity, where the future remains unstable and in crisis (Berlant 2011b: 196).

Berlant’s cruel optimism has already been widely taken up as a central framework for diagnosing twenty-first-century affect. In his 2019 *New Yorker* article on affect theory, Hua Hsu questioned how a “dense and academic” book like *Cruel Optimism* had achieved such an impact beyond the academy and concluded that “the timing was serendipitous” (Hsu 2019). Reflecting retrospectively on the book’s importance, Robyn Wiegman writes that “*Cruel Optimism* registers the tonal shifts and affective atmosphere of the first decade of the twenty-first century”, noting the “deepening precarity wrought by neoliberalism’s monotheistic commitment to the market” (2023: 877). Further, for Wiegman, the book reached forward, “sending a laser” into the conditions that were to produce future crises. What Berlant ultimately asks about our contemporary moment is:

what it means to take the measure of the impasse of the present: to see what is halting, stuttering, and aching about being in the middle of detaching from a waning fantasy of the good life; and to produce some better ways of mediating the sense of a historical moment that is affectively felt but undefined in the social world that is supposed to provide some comforts of belonging, so that it would be possible to imagine a potentialized present that does not reproduce all of the conventional collateral damage. (2011b: 263)

Thus, Berlant posits the affective condition of contemporary life as one of painful suspension. The “impasse of the present” centers around a “waning fantasy” over that which we desire. In this model, the present is uncertain, ill-defined, merely “potentialized.” Crucially, Berlant emphasizes not resolution but mediation.

This sense of ongoing suspension – of living within the impasse rather than resolving it – becomes both a thematic concern and a formal imperative for contemporary literature. The novels examined here respond to the affective conditions Berlant outlines by experimenting with narrative structure itself. In doing so, they stage forms of reading and storytelling that remain proximate to contradiction, resisting the consolations of coherence and closure. Both *Telephone* and *How to Be Both* play with temporality, multiplicity, and structural inconsistency in a way that aligns itself with Berlant’s understanding of reading and story. “Books are never finished,” Berlant writes in 2022’s *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, “one just stops writing them” (27). The unfinishable narrative is a suspended encounter, like the impasse described in *Cruel Optimism*. “There are always more things to say,” Berlant continues, “more explanations, not a finite number of things to stack into a predictable shape” (Berlant 2022: 15). Thus, the very efficacy of finalising narrative is challenged. This resistance to closure is not simply formal but affective and political. To keep speaking, to keep explaining, is to remain with the problem without foreclosing its potential resonances. Berlant uses the term “ongoingness” throughout *The Inconvenience of Other People* to stress the importance of staying with a problem, immersing oneself in the conditions that produce it, in order to loosen its grip, rather than attempting to manage it from a presumed position of exteriority. Berlant’s method – what they call “loosening the object” – models a way of thinking that remains proximate to lived contradiction. This method is also, crucially, a question of genre – how narrative form registers and responds to the pressures of historical experience.

## 2. Berlant’s Genres of Crisis

The multiplicity of versions in both Everett’s *Telephone* and Smith’s *How to Be Both*, suggests a precarity around unity of storytelling, and consensus around reading that significantly echoes the work of Berlant. Crucial here is the relationship between crisis and genre. Berlant describes a historical moment “in which a relation of persons and worlds is sensed to be changing but the rules for habitation and the genres of storytelling about it are unstable, in chaos” (Berlant 2011b: 6). The idea of “unstable” and “in chaos” genres is crucial to understanding how these novels, with their multiple incompatible versions, reflect a broader cultural moment. The instability is not simply formal but rather implies a broader crisis of representation, with older modes of narrative no

longer fully reflective of contemporary life. This represents a key shift from earlier experiments with narrative sequence. In works like Cortázar's *Hopscotch* or Johnson's *The Unfortunates*, the reader is made consciously aware of their role in constructing the narrative; the "game" of multiplicity is explicit, a known contract between text and reader. Smith and Everett, by contrast, plunge the reader into a game they may not even know they are playing. The contingency is not a choice but a given condition, mirroring a contemporary experience where the rules of habitation are obscured and unstable by default. Further, running beneath the instability of these twenty-first century novels is the persistent fantasy that beyond the narrative chaos lies a return to coherence – that somewhere on the other side of confusion and fragmentation, a norm or stability might be reattained. Both novels, however, suspend that resolution, lingering in the tension between disorder and the impossibility of resolving crisis.

In their 2008 work *The Female Complaint*, Berlant calls genre "the nameable aspiration for discursive order," suggesting that genres provide a structure through which we make sense of the world (2008: 259). To be competent in reading genre, they explain, is to realise that genres "cultivat[e] a kind of subject," one that is affiliated with a larger social and national order. Thus genres are both aesthetic categories and social identities. In fact, Berlant argues, to consider an identity category as a genre "is to think about it as something repeated, detailed, and stretched while retaining its intelligibility, its capacity to remain readable or audible across the field of all its variations" (2008: 4). Just as we rely on the conventions of, for example, a romance novel to provide certain emotional satisfactions, we also rely on the conventions of gender or race to provide us with a sense of self- and world-continuity. Even the potential failures within these performances of identity or genre are part of the convention, Berlant notes, and not a radical break from it, for they signal that "generic performance always involves moments of potential collapse that threaten the contract that genre makes with the viewer to fulfill experiential expectations" (2008: 4). These disruptions, rather, serve to enrich the genre itself, making its conventionality more interesting. This is evident in *Telephone* and *How to Be Both*, which are both structured around "moments of potential collapse" that ultimately make the novels aware of their own crises of representation. In *Telephone* and *How to Be Both*, such "moments of potential collapse" are not incidental but structural: the doubled or tripled versions of each novel deliberately stage the instability of representation. In this sense, the works can be read as formal meditations on how crisis reshapes both narrative convention and readerly expectation.

Further, Berlant's concept of "genre flailing" is crucial to understanding how these novels function within a contemporary context of crisis. They introduce "genre flailing" to describe the breakdown of conventional narrative structures that prove inadequate to

manage complex, disruptive experiences. This “genre flailing” arises when an object or endeavor loses its value or stability, disturbing one’s confidence about how to navigate it. As Berlant puts it, “Genre flailing is a mode of crisis management that arises after the first gasp of shock or disbelief, or the last gasp of exhaustion.” To adapt like this is to improvise “like crazy.” (2017: 1–2). In a crisis, according to Berlant, “we engage in genre flailing – throwing language, gesture, policy, interpretations at a thing to make it stop” (2017: 2). This “flailing” is not always inventive, especially when crisis becomes ordinary, and can manifest as a “litany of lists of things to do, to pay attention to, to say, to stop saying, or to discipline and sanction” (2017: 2). The narrative experimentations Everett’s and Smith’s novels, could both be interpreted as a kinds of “flailing:” attempts to grapple with the instability of the contemporary moment by offering multiple, precarious forms. These forms register specific, overwhelming crises, whether difficulties of parental care during a child’s terminal illness (in *Telephone*), the complex digital and historical grief of a teenager (in *How to Be Both*), or the pervasive political unconscious of precarity that underpins both narratives. Berlant’s sense of form being generated in an almost frenzied state in real time can also seem apt here. This reflects, in part, the perpetual state of emergency that characterizes the contemporary moment, marked by events and crises too large to manage or even fully imagine, whether they be environmental, political, economic, or something else. The impression of this improvisation is felt in the narrative swerves of *Telephone*, such as when Zach, upon finding a cryptic note, abruptly embarks on a cross-country search without clear causal justification, a plot development that feels like an extemporised lurch, rather than a planned arc. Everett describes his own process of writing the novel as like “a kind of music, and it’s improvised music” (Everett 2025). Similarly, Smith’s decision to randomize the sequence of her novel’s two halves feels less like a premeditated puzzle than like a formal enactment of a mind attempting to hold two impossible realities in balance at once. As Berlant suggests, “We genre flail so that we don’t fall through the cracks of heightened affective noise into despair, suicide, or psychosis,” improvising “like crazy” in the face of overwhelming circumstances (2017: 1–2). Seen in this light, the narrative experimentations of Everett and Smith are not radical breaks but improvisatory responses: kinds of “flailing” that signal the inadequacy of stable generic forms while also keeping open the possibilities of reorientation.

### 3. Beyond Postmodernism

In *Approximate Gestures: The Meaning of Percival Everett* (2011), Anthony Stewart argues that Everett’s writing challenges readers to retrain their habits of thought and embrace uncertainty. Stewart highlights Everett’s resistance to categorization and

his ambivalent relationship to postmodernism. While Everett draws on postmodern elements – such as metafiction, genre pastiche,<sup>4</sup> intertextuality, narrative instability, irony, and the rejection of a singular, authoritative voice – he also critiques both modernist and postmodernist traditions, particularly in their treatment (or evasion) of race. Novels like *Erasure*, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, and *Glyph* clearly engage with postmodern techniques, but often to subvert them. Everett takes issue with postmodernism’s abstraction, its depoliticization, and its lack of ethical commitment – especially concerning race and identity. In this sense, he uses postmodern tools to resist postmodern ends. As Stewart puts it, Everett refuses the “comforts” of postmodern irony when it fails to confront the real stakes of race and power (Stewart 2020). Similarly, in *Jesting in Earnest: Percival Everett and Menippean Satire* (2019), Derek C. Maus describes Everett’s engagement with postmodernism as both tactical and critical. Maus also links Everett to postmodern narrative techniques, but emphasizes the ethical force of his work, particularly around race, authorship, and meaning. Everett, he writes, inhabits postmodernism to expose its limitations (Maus: 3). Sascha Pöhlmann has observed that *Telephone* “invites a reading that is more concerned with the world created by language than the language that creates a world” (Pöhlmann 2023). While the novel echoes a postmodern sensibility, it also subtly departs from it, situating Everett’s writing in what other critics have called post-postmodernism or metamodernism. As Keith B. Mitchell and Robin G. Vander (2013) succinctly put it, “perhaps what problematizes Percival Everett’s writing for readers and critics, even more than his formal narrative innovation, is his refusal as an African American writer to be categorized at all” (xi–xii). Here, ‘categorized’ can be understood both as conventional generic classification and broader critical frameworks. Again, Everett is characteristically resistant to stable narrative and generic boundaries as a means of exploring contemporary experience.

Postmodernism is, of course, highly self-reflexive and foregrounded the constructed nature of reality and narrative. However, the self-reflexivity in contemporary works such as Smith’s and Everett’s, while sharing some characteristics with postmodernism, operates differently. In *How To Be Both*, for instance, self-reflexivity is not merely playful or ironic, as it often is in Postmodernism; it serves to question the very nature of identity, time, and perception, reflecting a deeper engagement with the instability and uncertainty of the contemporary world. These realities include grief, digital saturation,

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<sup>4</sup> Whereas postmodern genre pastiche typically involves the knowing, often ironic, combination of different genres as a form of stylistic play or critique, genre flailing describes a more desperate, improvisatory mode that arises when conventional narrative forms fail in the face of overwhelming crisis. Pastiche maintains a critical distance; flailing is marked by an affective urgency.

surveillance culture, and the politics of historical visibility. This engagement responds to affective crises emerging from social and political pressures. Smith's narrative structure, with its multiple perspectives and temporal shifts, invites readers to actively participate in the construction of meaning which is multiple, incomplete, and always provisional. Rather than postmodern play as we may have located it within deconstruction and poststructuralism, Smith's writing is a reflection of how the contemporary instability of the world affects identity, both individual and artistic.

Though Smith's fiction has sometimes been labeled postmodern due to its formal experimentation, metafictional play, and non-linear structures, scholars increasingly position her work beyond the concerns of high postmodernism. As Huber and Funk (2017) argue, Smith's fiction exemplifies "reconstructive literature," a mode they associate with metamodernism – one that retains postmodern techniques but reorients them toward sincerity, affect, and ethical reflection (152). In this light, Smith's metafiction is not a retreat from meaning but a means of reimagining connection, across time and across forms of life. Unlike classic postmodern hybridity, which foregrounds epistemological skepticism, genre flailing in Smith and Everett responds to affective vulnerability and lived crisis. Both Everett and Smith use the tools of postmodernism – irony, fragmentation, intertextuality – not to dwell in aesthetic indeterminacy but to confront the lived realities of contemporary life (Teske 565). Through this, both writers enact what we term 'genre flail': they employ multiple formal and generic strategies in ways that destabilize easy categorization, highlighting ethical and affective stakes of narrative experimentation. Both writers question the authority of dominant narratives, yet do so with a pronounced ethical and affective orientation. In place of postmodern cynicism or relativism, Smith and Everett offer renewed attention to the possibilities of care, critique, and meaning-making. Ultimately, their work does not reject of postmodernism, but it does move through it and beyond it.

#### **4. "Which Comes First? What We See or How We See It?": Ali Smith's *How to Be Both***

Ali Smith's *How to Be Both* (2014) offers a formally daring meditation on perception, temporality, and the epistemology of art. Structured as a diptych with two reversible halves – each titled "One" – the novel resists chronological precedence, causal determinacy, and interpretive mastery. As Brian Richardson observes, "in many ways they mirror each other's concerns, though they remain too distant for a single narrative" (2019: 66). One narrative strand follows the contemporary story of George, a teenage girl grieving the sudden death of her mother, while the other conjures the spirit of the fifteenth-century fresco painter Francesco del Cossa, reimagined by Smith

as a cross-dressed woman living as a man. Smith's decision to print half the editions of the novel with George's section first and the other half with Francescho's<sup>5</sup> first, upends the hierarchy of narrative priority and generates a readerly experience defined by contingency, simultaneity, and recursion. In its very structure, *How to Be Both* stages what Lauren Berlant calls "a crisis of genre," where "the conventions are stunned, disorganized, and open for change" (2011b: 6).

This formal experimentation is not a gesture of postmodern play but of affective and ethical entanglement. Smith's novel dramatizes the disintegration of linear narrative temporality in favor of what Rita Felski and Elizabeth Anker describe as a postcritical orientation – one defined not by suspicion, demystification, or mastery, but by attachment, immersion, and openness to mystery. Anker emphasizes that this engagement is not purely formal but responds to affective and ethical pressures in contemporary life, linking structure to the lived experience of reading. This reading focuses on the visual aspects of *How to Be Both*, to read the novel's concern with the "immediacy of aesthetic experience" (2017: 35). In this reading, the novel is both a meditation on visual art, and itself a spatial art object.

George's perception of the frescoes at the Palazzo Schifanoia, viewed on a trip with her mother before her death, becomes a model for this epistemological shift. Initially skeptical about the value of art – "What's the point of it?" she asks – George later admits, impulsively, that the frescoes are "spectacular" (2014: 46; 48). In response to her mother's silence ("She is looking"), George "looks too," beginning a detailed description of the frescoes that lingers on their scale, multiplicity, and unresolved details: "There are details like it everywhere [...] here [...] there [...] above and below" (2014: 49–51). This perceptual shift is not about decoding meaning but about being changed through attentiveness. As the narrator observes: "Or perhaps it is just that George has spent proper time looking at this one painting and that every single experience of looking at something would be this good if she devoted time to everything she looked at" (2014: 156). This attentiveness enacts what Berlant might describe as a sustained affective encounter with the world, connecting individual perception to ethical and political stakes.

This affective transformation through vision exemplifies what James Elkins calls the paradox of aesthetic looking: "seeing alters the thing that is seen and transforms the seer" (1996: 11–12). Smith makes this dynamic literal through Francescho, who experiences being looked at across time. Francescho becomes fascinated by "the thing

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<sup>5</sup> The name of the historical figure is generally spelled Francesco del Cossa, though the character in Smith's novel carries the slightly different spelling, Francescho.

that happens” when, rather than the subjects or objects it depicts, “the life of the picture itself steps beyond the frame” (Smith 2014: 308). Francescho explains:

‘Cause then it does 2 opposing things at once.

The one is, it lets the world be seen and understood.

The other is, it unchains the eyes and the lives of those who see it and gives them a moment of freedom, from its world and from their world both. (Smith 2014: 308)

Caught in a suspended state, the “life of the picture” generates and participates in the *ekstasis* of its viewer, who, momentarily liberated from both their own reality and the world depicted in the image, inhabits a liminal space in between.

“Art makes nothing happen in a way that makes something happen,” George’s mother declares at one point (41). As Cara Lewis has observed, this focus on the affective dimension of visual art within a literary text brings Smith’s novel into conversation with some of the dominant concerns of fiction and readings of fiction in the twenty-first century.

By examining the affective event, Smith-like other contemporary novelists writing with and about visual art-engages the work of literary critics who have lately been concerned with many of the same questions. Indeed, as conversations about the status and use of critique have proliferated, critics have increasingly articulated a need to redescribe or reshape the artistic encounter between reader and text. (Lewis 2016: 130)

Elsewhere in the novel, the narrator speaks overtly of literature’s tenuousness. “Think how quiet a book is on a shelf, just sitting there, unopened,” we are told. “Then think what happens when you open it” (Smith 2014: 229). Thus, the fresco in the novel offers a metafictional allegory of reading. Smith’s use of the fresco is both a metaphor for reading, and a structure that enables her to engage with the contemporary discussions highlighted by Lewis. And key to this discussion is Smith’s dual structure. The ‘genre flail’ is enacted not only by Smith’s destabilizing sequencing but also by the characters’ own complex, often desperate, responses to the art object. George’s obsessive looking and Francescho’s sensation of being seen across time are themselves forms of flailing – impassioned, improvisatory attempts to find meaning and connection through aesthetic experience when conventional modes of understanding fail. The dual structure of the novel exemplifies ‘genre flail,’ destabilizing narrative and generic conventions while foregrounding ethical and affective engagement.

Further, as Lewis has pointed out, just as a fresco has an underdrawing often invisible on the surface, the novel's two stories inhabit one another (Lewis 2016: 136). Their coexistence is not causal but affective, layered rather than linear. The novel itself has been described as having "a palimpsestic structure, . . . that could be described as the becoming-simultaneous of narrative sequence" (Young 2018: 991). As George's mother explains when learning about the fresco technique, it is unclear which image comes "first," the underlayer or the final surface: "It is like a chicken or egg situation" (Smith 2014: 88). This simultaneity aligns with Wai Chee Dimock's call to move from synchronic to diachronic reading: "pastness is part of who we are, not an archaic residue" (Dimock 1997: 1061). Francescho's emergence from the past is not the return of the repressed, but the awakening of a coeval voice, one whose art is still doing something in the present. George's viewing of the fresco draws Francescho into consciousness, and Francescho, in turn, watches George: "This girl is looking like looking is a new invention" (Smith 2014: 171).

The novel's concern with vision and invisibility also extends into its ontological claims about the self. "Cause nobody's the slightest idea who we are, or who we were, not even we ourselves," one character reflects in the novel's fifteenth-century section. "Except, that is, in the glimmer of a moment of fair business between strangers, or the nod of knowing and agreement between friends" (Smith 2014: 210–11). Thus, being is a matter of sight and being seen. In the novel's contemporary narrative, acts of seeing gain further dimensions. Near the beginning of her story, George, who is described as a "migrant of her own existence," immerses herself in a historical documentary across two devices, each playing a different segment, while also browsing YouTube clips on a third screen. She lives within this saturated viewing experience. Later, she watches a disturbing video of a young girl on a pornographic website. She vows to keep watching it "in witness [...] of all the unfair and wrong things that happen to people all the time" (33). In the twenty-first century, the act of looking is multiple and affective. However, as Alice Bennett notes, Smith's novel "refuses to take up an antagonistic stance to digital technology" as a form of "distraction" that removes capacity for attention (Bennett 2018: 87). Rather, the novel "stays faithful to its spirit of embracing contraries, and takes the affective pull of lightness, fleeting contact and lowpressure intimacy into its aesthetic too" (Bennett 2018: 87). As George's mother later emphasizes the complexity of "seeing and being seen," warning that this exchange "is very rarely simple" (Smith 2014: 106).

For Francescho, being "seen, entered and understood" is something "mysterious" that resists mastery: "Not to have to know," she says, becomes a kind of freedom (Smith 2014: 228). Mrs. Rock, George's counselor, articulates similar ideas, explaining to George that contemporary culture has mistaken "mystery" for "Mystery" – the

former a sacred unknowability, the latter a solvable genre plot. “Now we live in a time and a culture when mystery tends to mean something more answerable [...] But mystery originally meant a closing of the mouth or the eyes” (Smith 2014: 72). Of course, genre here is used in a conventional sense, though it may recall for us Berlant’s specific framing of genre as “an aesthetic structure of affective expectation” (Berlant 2011b: 6), one that shapes how we perceive and attach to the world around us, even when those attachments are not nourishing.

Smith’s use of genre and visibility aligns with what Berlant calls “the aesthetic encounter, where one watches oneself encountering the world” (Berlant 2011b: 15). These encounters are not moments of resolution but of delay and suspension – what Berlant identifies as “the impasse of the transitional present, where situations unfold in ongoing crisis” (2011b: 195). In this state, attention itself becomes a form of endurance. George’s repeated viewing enacts this logic. Through her witnessing she cannot transform the event, though she sustains its visibility, exposing the political and ethical weight of looking within a digital economy where traumatic content circulates endlessly, without any means of redress.

As George moves through varying foregrounds and backgrounds, shifting between different figures and scales, she democratizes the act of viewing. She reflects that what she initially sees is “only one detail. There are details like it everywhere,” and proceeds to catalog the various elements within the fresco, spatially navigating between the “here” and “there,” “above and below” (Smith 2014: 50–51). This shift in perspective mirrors George’s evolving understanding of time, particularly as it relates to grief. In her study of del Cossa, temporal divisions that once seemed fixed begin to unravel.

By weaving these acts of perception throughout the text, *How to Be Both* shows how Smith uses visual modes of representation to engage with the potential of seeing – where the interplay of absence and presence, reality and imagination, and self and other combine to shape meaning. As Cara Lewis argues,

Smith reasserts the separateness of the worlds of the painting and the viewer [...] a separation that paradoxically also accomplishes the opposite: ‘it lets the world be seen and understood.’ [...] What the artwork manages to do, then, is to offer both an alternate ontological state – a mode of being that is not dependent on communication between the separate worlds of the picture and the viewer, or the novel and the reader – and a new episteme, so that we might know the world differently. (2016: 320)

Expanding on this, we might observe that Smith’s interest in the porous boundary between the artwork and the observer aligns with her broader interest in how aesthetic forms

mediate the affective attachments that bind us to life, even when life becomes unlivable – what Berlant calls “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011b: 1). The novel asks what it means to keep looking, even when what is seen is painful or illegible, and how such sustained acts of perception might become sites of both impasse and potential transformation.

Ultimately, *How to Be Both* refuses to answer the question it constantly raises: “Which comes first? What we see or how we see it?” (Smith 2014: 90). In that refusal lies its power. It models a reading practice of looking and looking again – not to resolve ambiguity but to dwell within it. “It was all: it was nothing: it was more than enough,” the narrator offers – a line that could equally describe the novel’s method, its affective charge, and its readerly afterimage (Smith 2014: 285).

### 5. “Of all Possible Worlds”: Percival Everett’s *Telephone*

In *Telephone* (2020), Percival Everett launches a radical literary experiment that challenges the foundational assumptions of narrative coherence and authorial finality. Published simultaneously in three distinct but subtly varying versions, *Telephone* unsettles the notion of a definitive text, destabilizing the act of reading itself. Everett’s refusal to signal which version a reader has received – each copy identified only by a differently rendered compass on its cover – forces an epistemological confrontation: how does one interpret a narrative when its boundaries are unstable and its events uncertain? Like Ali Smith in *How to Be Both*, Everett foregrounds readerly contingency, emphasizing the ethical and perceptual work demanded by narrative engagement. The answer, Everett suggests, lies not in discovering a hidden truth beneath the variations but in accepting indeterminacy and insufficiency as aesthetic and philosophical principles.

Such a maneuver may recall Pierre Macherey’s seminal *A Theory of Literary Production*, which points to literary texts that are never complete wholes but are always structured by what they omit, repress, or leave unsaid. As Macherey puts it, “the book is not a fully realized object; it is an object marked by absence” (Macherey 1978: 87). In Everett’s *Telephone*, the multiple published versions foreground these textual absences not as interpretive failures but as essential components of literary form. Each version gestures toward an absent center – events that occur differently or not at all in other iterations, scenes missing or modified, sentences shifted in tone or content – thus reinforcing the idea that meaning emerges not from presence alone, but from a dialectic of presence and absence. Similarly to Smith’s dual narrative, multiplicity and absence become generative, rather than frustrating. Everett’s structure, indeed, enacts what Macherey calls “symptomatic reading”: an interpretive mode that focuses on contradictions, silences, and the limits of textual enunciation to expose the ideological

underpinnings of a work. While this framework helps to describe the novels' productive absences, Everett's and Smith's gaps function differently, as structural features that dramatize affective contradictions – the unspeakable nature of grief, the ethical vertigo of impossible choices, and the raw data of loss that resists narrative coherence.

At the surface, the novel follows Zach Wells, a geologist and university professor whose life is disrupted when his daughter, Sarah, is diagnosed with Batten disease, a degenerative and fatal neurological condition. Yet the narrative refuses to settle into any single genre or affective register. What begins as a melancholic domestic novel becomes, in some versions, a borderland thriller; in others, a philosophical meditation on grief and randomness. In each version, however, the reader encounters fracture: narrative incongruities, unexplained decisions, and philosophical digressions that invite rather than resolve interpretation. As Everett explained in an interview, he was interested not in producing a puzzle to be solved but in “question[ing] the authority of the artist” and the reader alike. “The reader is generating as much or more meaning as I have,” he remarks (qtd. in Felicelli 2023). As with Smith, the reader becomes a co-producer of meaning, navigating interpretive uncertainty and ethical complexity. For this reason, critics have already commented how “genre and narrative but also character and reader are interlinked in the *Telephone* reading experience” (Kowalik 2023: 50). This mutual destabilization of author and audience leaves the text, to echo Berlant's terminology, flailing, rather than achieving finality of form.

One of *Telephone*'s most striking techniques is its deployment of gaps – narrative, emotional, and epistemological. The protagonist's knowledge is incomplete; his decisions appear impulsive or obscure; the reader is rarely granted causal clarity. For instance, when Zach finds a cryptic note in a shirt – “Please help to us” – he embarks on a journey to a remote town in New Mexico to investigate. But Everett withholds from us the explanatory logic of this leap. The reader is never quite sure whether Zach is acting out of grief, desperation, paranoia, or some incoherent mixture. It is significant that it is at this point in the text that the novel significantly “splits off into three narratives, each giving a distinct account of how feelings of loss and grief spur Zach to act on conviction and mobilize support for a cause” (Nishikawa 2022). In one version of the novel, the plot culminates in an intervention against a human trafficking ring; in another, the storyline diverts or disintegrates. The episodic, contingent unfolding of action here resonates with Smith's reversible narratives, where cause and effect are disrupted to foreground perception and relational ethics.

As the epigraph for his novel, Everett chooses the famous quotation from Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, describing choice as illusory and inevitably disenchanting: “I see it all perfectly; there are two possible situations – one can either do this or that.

My honest opinion and my friendly advice is this: do it or do not do it – you will regret both” (qtd. In Everett 2020: 1). The novel then begins with its narrator declaring:

“People, and by people I mean *them*, never look for truth, they look for satisfaction. There is nothing worse, certain painful and deadly diseases notwithstanding, than an unsatisfactory piss-poor truth, whereas a satisfactory lie is all too easy to accept, even embrace, get cozy with. Like thoughts that carry with them a dimension of attendant thought, so actions have attendant actions, with unpredicted, unprompted intentions and results, good or bad, and things, things themselves, have attendant things in unforeseen perspectives and dimensions. (Everett 2020: 1)

Thus, *Telephone* begins with reflections on choice, desire, and free will. Just as Everett’s three-version structure eschews stability of form, Zach’s narrative fails to outline clarity of action. The story centres around moments when Zach feels that he must choose a course of action, but “flails,” to again echo Berlant’s phrase, due to the unattainability of his supposedly desired outcome. The novel’s central concern is twofold: both a treatment of how grief and loss shape subjectivity, an exploration of desire foreclosing the possibility of meaningful choice. In this respect, Everett’s work, unlike Smith’s reversible narratives, leverages irresolution not only to challenge narrative authority but to stage the ethical weight of indecision itself, making the reader confront the consequences of desire, grief, and inaction across multiple possible worlds.

Everett stages choice as an illusion: what appears as a fork in the road may be nothing more than a narrative loop. The structure of *Telephone*, with its three branching narratives, literalizes this condition. Each plot explores a different outcome from the same initial conditions, but none resolves the problem of action or offers a privileged version of outcome. The first plot, evident in the Northeast and Southeast editions, depicts Zach’s direct action in a Parisian encounter, even if the narrator notes, “Zach had ‘turned away for only a second’” (Everett 2020: [Southeast] 119). This suggests the potential for impactful action, even amidst lapses in attention. The second plot, found in the Northwest edition, renders this same encounter as purely internal: “‘in my mind ... in my head ... in my head ... in my mind ... in my mind ... in my mind I had saved my daughter’” (Everett 2020: [Northwest] 122). Here, the possibility of external action is negated, highlighting the limitations of subjective experience. The third plot diverges most significantly at the ending. In the Northeast and Northwest versions, Zach achieves a form of redemption by helping the women cross the border, understanding that “‘they were saving [him]’” (Everett 2020: [Northwest] 217). However, the Southeast ending offers no such resolution, leaving Maribel wounded and their fate uncertain, with Zach’s final word being “‘Slave’” (Everett 2020: [Southeast] 216). Thus, the three

versions present distinct plot trajectories that offer no single, definitive outcome, underscoring the illusory nature of a singular, authoritative narrative choice. This multiple structure is less about possibility than about expenditure, a formal enactment of what Berlant terms the “big suck of our best creative energy toward holding off the pressure pushing at the survival wall” (Berlant, 2017). This refusal of closure mirrors Smith’s destabilized narrative temporality but differs in affective emphasis: Everett emphasizes the exhausting ethical and existential consequences of this energetic flailing, whereas Smith foregrounds perceptual and relational openness.

It is hugely significant that in many cases the three versions of *Telephone* diverge precisely at moments of decision involving action or inaction. Having not read the other versions of the text, the reader is left unsure to what extent these moments matter, or whether any of the choices alter the story’s underlying condition of loss. The novel’s structure thus performs what might be called a philosophical trilemma: three incompatible futures unfold simultaneously, each gesturing toward meaning without ever arriving. In this way, Everett mirrors the logic of cruel optimism – proliferating narrative attachments while refusing resolution, insisting that the desire for meaningful agency is itself one of the central illusions of contemporary life. This concept of attachment aligns with Berlant’s theory and also resonates with Smith’s concern for relational entanglement, though Everett’s stakes are more ethical and tragic in dimension.

A lot of the story seems to centre on the acuteness of Zach’s paternal love. After his daughter, Sarah’s, illness is introduced, Zach’s internal monologue revolves around imagined futures that have already been foreclosed:

Of all possible worlds this was the one in which I had landed. I wondered how years passed for parents who lost children, how these parents navigated birthdays. Thanksgivings. Would my imaginary daughter grow older in my dreams? Would she graduate from high school and go to college? Have babies? Would my imagined child sit beside my deathbed and allow me to thank her for completing my world? However brief the time we shared. My daughter came to me in every nighttime dream, and I anticipated. (2020: 170)

These speculations enact what Berlant terms “fantasies” of future potentialities that are already precluded (2011b: 6). In contrast with Smith, whose narrative simultaneity highlights perceptual and relational possibilities, Everett foregrounds the ethical and affective consequences of desires that cannot be realized. Zach’s desires are projections of futurity that are emotionally sustaining yet structurally impossible.

Indeed, throughout the novel, Zach's desire to hold onto such imagined continuities disables his ability to act in the present. Before his daughter begins to show symptoms of her illness, one of Zach's greatest pleasures is in playing chess with her. Entire chapters of the novel are devoted to these games. In a section called "Castling Short," which features a series of chess moves with diagrams, we can see that rather than trying to defeat Sarah, Zach seems intent on achieving a stalemate. When Sarah "castles short," a standard move in chess that swaps king and rook, Zach begins to contemplate other possibility of synchronous change: "That two pieces could move at once seemed like magic to me, enough so that I wished I could make a similar move in real life. What such a thing would look like I had no idea" (Everett 2020: 94). The appeal of simultaneous movement expresses a desire to escape the constraints of sequential, consequence-bound action. Everett's novel creates an incomplete and improvised structure to explore, rather than resolve its central structural impasse.

Sarah explains to her father that the reason she consistently beats him at chess is because he is unwilling to sacrifice pieces. "You can't protect everybody," she tells him. "You just have to get the better of it or get the position you want" (Everett 2020: 84). This offers a potential meta-commentary on her father's broader failing. Zach's attachment to an ideal of ethical totality leaves him in a position of impasse or stalemate. Only when external forces eliminate the space for delay does he act, though even then his choices remain opaque.

*Telephone's* game of textual differences becomes a literalization of Macherey's claim that it is through its gaps and silences that a text speaks most profoundly. Zach's crisis mirrors the reader's own disorientation within the text. His longing for a meaningful gesture, a heroic act that might redeem his helplessness, is answered only by ambiguous outcomes. He muses, "Perhaps nothing had happened. Perhaps everything had happened" (2020: 132). This undecidability is not a flaw to be solved but the novel's central metafictional concern. Similarly, Sarah's progressive decline parallels the novel's own fragmentation, suggesting an implicit questioning of emotional attachment in a life marred by urgent crisis. In one scene, Zach dreams of her losing herself, "bit by bit" – a detail that reflects both her clinical process of neurological degeneration and the narrative's own unraveling.

Within such a confused and atonal narrative, tropes of redemption or closure become impossible. Zach's existential malaise is not resolved by heroism or narrative catharsis. "I hated the notion of redemption," he says. "But here I was in the world, in this world. I would do something" (2020: 194). The "something" remains undefined, open-ended – a gesture without telos. As such, Zach's actions, like the novel's multiple versions, remain in a state of suspended legibility.

Everett's metafictional moments further reinforce the instability of authorial control. At one point, Zach jokes with a student about Shakespeare: "What if he was just making marks on paper? And that's how he came up with *Macbeth*?" (Everett 2020: 20). He adds: "Maybe *Measure for Measure*. Not *Macbeth*" (2020: 20). The joke, with its casual revision mid-thought, points towards an instability around meaning-making and narrative authority. That the character lands on *Measure for Measure*, a so-called "problem play" with ambiguous tone, genre, and resolution, seems to reinforce the point. The moment echoes Berlant's idea that "books are never finished," foregrounding genres that resist closure and instead embrace provisionality, revision, and "ongoingness". Meaning, like narrative, is not sovereign or settled, but precarious and provisional.

Ultimately, *Telephone* enacts a text imagined as a field of tensions, contradictions, and productive absences. Its multiple versions are not a gimmick but a philosophical challenge to the assumptions of literary form and reception. Everett's novel does not resolve its ambiguities, it magnifies them. It insists that the work of fiction is not to affirm coherence, but to dwell within contradiction. In comparison with Smith, who cultivates simultaneity to explore perception and attachment, Everett emphasizes ethical and affective consequences, using narrative multiplicity to dramatize grief, desire, and the impossibility of total agency. As such, *Telephone* stands as a paradigmatic text of genre in crisis: a novel that asks not what it means, but what it means that it means differently each time.

## 6. Conclusion: Literature in the Age of Cruel Optimism

For Smith, "Art makes nothing happen in a way that makes something happen" (2014: 41). In Everett's novel, we read: "Perhaps nothing had happened. Perhaps everything had happened" (2020: 132). These reflections frame a paradox at the heart of contemporary narrative: that something can happen without registering as a clear or completed event. Both *How to Be Both* and *Telephone* operate within this ambiguity, where crisis no longer arrives with rupture but persists ambiently. Their formal structures – disrupted timelines, multiple versions, improvisational shifts, refusals of resolution – mirror a historical moment in which the event is stretched thin, prolonged. In this sense, the crises in both novels are not merely plot-driven but operate as atmospheres that shape perception and ethical engagement. This is the condition Berlant theorizes as "the impasse," a suspension "where habituated forms of life . . . become increasingly unbearable" (2011b: 199). In such a context, the work of literature is not to resolve crisis but to dwell in its textures – to stage how life continues within the impasse.

The formal experiments undertaken in *How to Be Both* and *Telephone* reflect Lauren Berlant's concept of suspension within a "genre in crisis," growing from an age of austerity, precarity, and awkwardness. Both novels, through their manipulation of narrative structure, sequencing, and generic conventions, mirror the instability and uncertainty that characterize the contemporary moment. Smith's contemplation of "duration" through interwoven and non-linear narratives, alongside Everett's multiple iterations and open-endedness, elicit an affective response to the very lack of resolution that Berlant identifies as central to our current condition. This deliberate unsettling of traditional narrative expectations reflects a broader trend in contemporary fiction, where authors are similarly pushing the boundaries of genre to capture the fragmented and often unresolved nature of human experience. Ultimately, the resistance to formal consistency and narrative closure stands as a literary response to the readerly desire for resolution. Instead, we are offered a genre of storytelling as an open circuit, prompting ongoing affective and philosophical questioning, a fitting characteristic of literature produced in an age defined by cruel optimism.

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## Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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