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Sure shot, or round of Blanks?

Who is the author? Who is the character? Who's writing who?

Paul Auster's 2006 novel, *Travels in the Scriptorium*, is, on the one hand, an intriguing parable that can allegorize many things for many tastes; on the other, it is a spinning, out-of-control ramble that only ends because it has to. Perhaps a third possibility becomes clear in looking at the first two: Auster intended the ambiguity, and therefore it is the uncertainty that is becomes his cold, hard fact of life.

Main character Mr. Blank wakes up in a room he doesn't recognize. The narrator is privy to all of Mr. Blank's dealings because there is a camera implanted in the ceiling. Mr. Blank apparently has amnesia, or, as the reader infers as the novel unfolds, perhaps is the butt of psychological torture. There are labels on different items in the room: "LAMP" on the lamp, "BATHROOM" on the bathroom door, "TABLE" on the table, and so on. This table is littered with photographs and documents, including an unfinished manuscript written by a man who wrote it from his cell to give an account of his role in a complicated plot to incite a war between the fictional nations, the Confederacy and the Primitives.

Do the Confederacy and the Primitives in this framed story represent America and the American Indians, respectively? Do they represent modern day America and our war against the jihadists? Is the man who wrote the report Mr. Blank is reading simply Mr. Blank himself? And perhaps most intriguingly, is the reader of Auster's novel actually a real-life Mr. Blank?

Such games are typical of Auster. He is overly cute sometimes in his story (like the obligatory masturbation scene where a woman-aid gives “Mr. Bigshot” a rub), but out of this playful posture is produced a story that can challenge, even frustrate, the most avid of readers. If a person pays attention to history and current events and America’s place in world affairs, he will find this story a safe parable that explores the surreptitious possibilities in governments without making any overt indictments of any side or ideology. If, on the other hand, a person looks for form and function, order and answers, in his fiction, perhaps he should not read this book: The winding plotline (yes, even inside this, a single-room setting), the random entry and exit of characters, and the, shall I call it, “unique” way he chooses to resolve the conflict in the end will frustrate because there really is no resolution other than to make the reader think of the novel’s opening page and his curious mindset upon beginning a brand new story. There is no clear ending, no open door to walk into the sunshine ever again. It’s just Blank, round and round and round again.

It is in this sense of repetition, this sense of nothingness, however, that I find this book’s charm. Auster’s psychological setting allegorizing the confusing and often absurd workings of the mind is reminiscent of Poe and Auster’s literary hero Samuel Beckett, and certainly is a symbol of the confused state of order the individual in a postmodern America can feel. Auster creates a symbolic world from the very first page, and any games or mischief he has in store for the reader is fair game because he never intended for this world to be taken literally in the first place—a perfect place to explore the strange and irrational in Man, a subject that is a sure shot, indeed.

Auster, Paul. *Travels in the Scriptorium*. Picador: New York, 2008.