SHOWCASE

REVIEW

It Has No Beginning, It Has No End

A novel approach plays havoc with literary convention.

by Andrew Hinderaker

IT’S AN OLD STORY. An unsuspecting passerby stumbles upon a priceless antique, ignorant of its worth and oblivious to the fact that other parties, devious characters, are tracking the treasure.

In Figurski at Findhorn on Acid (Eastgate Systems, 2002), Richard Holeton takes this familiar plot line and gives it a very unfamiliar twist: the antique is a robotic pig; the passerby, a murderer on parole; and the pursuers, a “No-Hands Cup-Flipper” and a cross-dressing journalist. Still, the premise of this screwball comedy is not nearly as unconventional as the format in which it is presented.

This is no paperback. Holeton, ’75, head of residential computing at Stanford, unfolds his creation in an innovative electronic (hypertext) environment called Storyspace. Unlike the typical novel, which progresses more or less linearly from beginning to end, Storyspace organizes its documents around an interactive weblike map. The user clicks on any one of the map’s links—any knot in the web—and is immediately transported to that page of the hypertext.

In Figurski’s case, the map is structured around the number three. There are three characters: Frank Figurski, the convict; Nguyen Van Tho, a.k.a. the No-Hands Cup-Flipper; and the journalist, Fatima Michelle Vieuchanger. All have some real-life basis. Figurski is modeled on the Stanford grad student who murdered his math professor with a hammer in 1978. There really is a World-Famous Cup-Flipper—Eugene Zanger, whose sleight-of-hand with coffee cups is immortalized on postcards from Casa de Fruta, near California’s Pacheco Pass. Vieuchanger, whom Holeton describes as a woman pretending...
to be a man pretending to be a woman, is inspired by the French adventurer Michel Vieuchange, who disguised himself as a Berber woman to explore southern Morocco in 1930.

Also featured on Figurski’s map are three “artifacts”: the mechanical pig, LSD and Spam. And there are three locations: a new-age community in Scotland, a trailer park in Florida and the holodeck of the starship Enterprise.

Every possible combination and permutation of character, artifact and location—Figurski at Findhorn on acid, for example—comprises its own page. Readers of conventional fiction, beware: there are 147 scenarios in Figurski’s brainchild, and not a single one can definitively be characterized as the beginning or end. But Holeton, who has always admired the works of genre-elusive authors such as Vladimir Nabokov, James Joyce and Italo Calvino, is out to create a different read—an experience as fragmentary and innovative as the Internet itself. And he seems to be succeeding.

A colleague of Holeton’s placed Figurski on the syllabus of his 20th-Century American Fiction course and watched as a rift ripped through his classroom. Students who detested the sterility of a computer screen grappled with those who cherished a medium more akin to computer games than books. In the end, though, the hypertext-tale forced the students to debate the biggest question of all, the question Holeton was gunning for all along: What defines literature?

Not bad for a madcap invention about a fake pig.

Andrew Hinderaker, ’01, MA ’02, of Mountain View, is working on his second play.