



Frog

Stephen Dixon

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The esteemed and prescient critic John Hollander wrote that "*Frog* represents a new phase of Stephen Dixon's work, and manifests a new concentration of creative power and unfailing rhetorical control, and it should certainly bring him the broadened recognition which is already so deep a one." Indeed, when first published in 1991, *Frog* earned Dixon nominations for the National Book Award and the PEN/Faulkner Award and elevation to the front rank of American letters. Combining interrelated novels, stories, and novellas, Dixon's multilayered and frequently hilarious family epic—the story of Howard Tetch, his ancestors, his parents, his children, and the generations that follow—"reassures us that whatever is precious can never be completely lost" (*The Baltimore Sun*).

Frog Details

Date : Published March 15th 1997 by Owl Books (first published December 1st 1991)

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Author : Stephen Dixon

Format : Paperback 769 pages

Genre : Fiction, Contemporary

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From Reader Review Frog for online ebook

Andy says

Absolutely brilliant!

My favorite book by my favorite American author.

Josiah Miller says

As in Cortazar's Hopscotch, the reader could open this book up at any point in the narrative and after getting through 769 pages in any order, one could understand the psychological traumas of Howard and the traumas he imposes on those around him. As mentally real and detail oriented as Nicholson Baker, Dixon gives us the lies, delusions and realities of his character that is funny, makes you pissed off and is sad throughout. Howard won't take no for an answer.

Chelsea says

If you were not a neurotic person before reading this book, you will be afterwards. Darn it if you don't feel like you know the protagonist better than your own brother by the end of the near 800 pages though.

Chris says

I made it about 10 pages into this piece and closed it for good. Dixon's stream of consciousness style does not play well with my tastes.

My impression: I had bacon today. No, wait, I had bacon yesterday. I mean I've had bacon sometime in my life with a pretty girl. I've kissed your mom while eating bacon. I mean I've seen a mom eat bacon and I've wanted to kiss her. Wait, what? Huh? I like bacon. Mom, will you please cook me some bacon?

Jim Elkins says

An Unusual Form for a Long Novel

There's an interview with David Foster Wallace, in which Michael Silverblatt miraculously guesses that Infinite Jest is structured like a fractal. In fact, Wallace says, it's built like a Sierpinski gasket (more commonly called a Sierpinski triangle). No one has followed up on that; there's even a new book out from Bloomsbury on form in Infinite Jest (2017) that devotes only half of one paragraph to Wallace's claim. I assume the structure is not legible in the published version because of the "mercy cuts," as Wallace put it elsewhere, but the fundamental idea is very interesting: small things are blown up to large ones, and vice

versa, and the structure is recursive, enclosing near-copies of structures within each other, potentially without end.

That is one model for the structure of a long novel. I've looked, but I haven't found any studies of structures of the maximalist postwar novel, at least after Perec; it's a study that's needed for anyone interested in understanding what counts as whole, coherent, or complete in works by Schmidt, Vollmann, Barth, Gaddis, and other long-form writers. (Barth is perhaps especially pertinent to Dixon, because the two of them ran the writing program at Johns Hopkins.)

Stephen Dixon's *Frog* (1991) is interesting in this context, because it is fractal in a different sense than *Infinite Jest*. Dixon is a compulsive writer and publisher, and his vita looks like a tabulation of all the literary journals publishing in English in the last forty years. He's said somewhere that he had about 46 publications and half that many publishers, because he'd be dropped as soon as the second book failed to sell.

Most of his output is short fiction, and a fair percentage of that is very short, nearly flash fiction. His novels, with *Frog* perhaps the most interesting, are studies in the aggregation of short forms into long ones. *Frog* is 769 pages long, and divided into 21 chapters. Most of those are short, on the order of 15 pages. "Frog's Mom" is a novella at 110 pages, and "Frog Fragments" a full-size novel at 220 pages. As William Ferguson says,

"It is as if the central character, Howard Tetch, represented several versions of what one man might be – a portrait that includes not only his physical attributes but the host of possibilities that swarm around his life like bees around a flower... The most startling of these stories is "Frog Made Free," in which the four members of the Tetch family mysteriously find themselves in a cattle car on their way to a Nazi death camp. (Auschwitz's infamous motto, "Arbeit Macht Frei," is ironically echoed in the title.) We know from other stories – or we think we know – that the Tetch family belongs not to the Holocaust years but to later decades, yet nothing in the text indicates that this episode is a nightmare from which Howard might conceivably awaken. Such a daring imposition of characters on the past recalls one of the fundamental aims of fiction: in the midst of particularities, to be in some way suprapersonal, historic, truer than any individual truth could be." [William Ferguson, "Which Version Do You Prefer?," *New York Times*, September 4, 1994.]

Dixon's style is telegraphic, abbreviated, compulsive, informal, breathless, concise in grammar and excessive in the permission he gives himself to run on. The basic strategy of *Frog* is the entertainment of possible alternate stories and futures. In one chapter, the main character imagines what would happen if he went downstairs to investigate a noise; the chapter explores dozens of alternatives, one after another with no segues. In other chapters he thinks about his sister, his wife, and his brother, and their fates and paths through life. Even brief chapters ramify into dozens of stories, all plausible the moment they're told. Sometimes the truth of a death or an illness emerges as the chapter progresses, and in that case the multiple stories carry a heavy burden of pathos, as we're invited to think of the narrator's sad helpless rehearsal of alternate pasts. Other times the multiple possibilities aren't resolved, and readers get a less focused sense of the narrator's frantic mental state.

Frog is nineteen entirely separable short stories, a novel, and a novella, under one cover. The nineteen short stories are mostly entirely self-contained. Often they are as tightly composed as his free-standing short stories. I think Dixon wrote his way toward "Frog Fragments," because it contains echoes and repetitions of some earlier chapters; but most chapters are potentially independent. On the face of it, then, *Frog* isn't coherent, and in fact it is ostentatiously disunified. But the endlessly multiplied branching narratives in each chapter produce a fractal effect: the chapters divide into dozens or hundreds of parts, and they are in turn aggregated into the whole of *Frog*. Because the stories endlessly ramify, the ramified chapters are less incoherent. It's an interesting model for a large novel.

Dixon himself had talked about the structure of his novels, but he has a perhaps unhelpfully laissez-faire way of thinking about form. About *Frog*, he said: "I wrote the first draft of the first story (chapter?) in it in Prague – it's called "Frog in Prague" – and I finished it in Maine, summer, '85, and continued to write stories with

Frog in it, and then the stories got longer and I had novella-length and novel-length stories, and that's how it was written. I never know how long a work is going to be when I start it, and I rarely know where it's going to go and what the structure of the work will be." (Sean Carroll, interview in Bookslut, December 2010.)

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It's a separate question how well this works. Dixon has had an unusual number of negative reviews. According to Vince Pissarro,

"The run-on sentences, the rapid-fire but mundane stream of consciousness, the apparently frank but merely amphetaminized dialogue that goes back and forth and back and forth within page after page of unbroken paragraphs that stretch as far as the eye can see: these devices are no longer energized by an author who has anything fresh to say... Exchanges like [that] are too easily achieved – too easily typed, even – and they're not challenging to the reader or to Dixon himself." [Vince Passaro, "S.A.S.E," New York Times, May 16, 1999.]

But this kind of criticism is too simple, and so is the complaint – common on Amazon and Goodreads – about Dixon's formlessness and endlessness. His narrators are compulsive, and so is the implied author, who writes at speed. His signature style, which omits particles, verbs, punctuation, and prepositions, is a direct effect of his frantic frame of mind: Write! Think! Publish! Don't stop! And when that frame of mind is applied to the dissolution of memories, as it is in *Frog*, the result is intensely expressive. It has the irritability of some Alzheimer's patients, and the everyday anxiety of any middle-aged person trying to make sense of her unraveling life.

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

PW blurb:

"The author of five well-reviewed but relatively obscure novels and eight story collections, Dixon may achieve a higher profile with this novel, a National Book Award finalist. Opening portentously with the protagonist's trip to Kafka's grave, this 860-page Joycean monolith deftly portrays the urban nightmare as cosmic comedy, though some readers will doubtless be put off by chapter-length paragraphs, free association, time shifts and voice changes. Howard Tetch, angst-ridden college professor, had an old nanny who smeared his face with excrement as a boy; now he has violent outbursts toward his own daughters and fantasizes his wife's death. His Dublin is Manhattan, the Bronx and Brooklyn. With a fine sense of the absurd, Dixon tells dozens of stories--how Howard's father, a dentist, went to prison; the tragic decline of Howard's suicidal, invalid sister, Vera; his violent adolescent street life; the apparent death at sea of his newsman brother, Alex. Then Dixon mixes the deck, giving alternative, mutually exclusive versions of some subplots, as if the world were splitting into parallel universes before our eyes. Readers attuned to the author's run-on style may warm to a cunning, sexy, audacious performance; others will find this an arty bore."

Rairy says

Somewhere in this 700+ page book I got lost and never seemed to find my way out again. Good luck

Stu Moore says

This is a pretty amazing book and when reading it I sorta thought that maybe I had never read anything quite like it and I think that I am correct. I bought it probably back when it first came out and probably because the book itself was sorta oddly shaped and interesting looking. But I was too young, read a little bit, thought "what is this?" and eventually it went the way of many books that I buy and ended up being recycled to the library or a used bookstore. Many many years pass and a friend of mine publishes a book entitled All the Happiness You Deserve, look it up and read it. His name is Michael Piasfsky. It's written in 2nd person, just so you know. Anyway, there is a blurb on his book from Stephen Dixon, the author of Frog. I thought "I remember that book, I should go back to it now that I am older/wiser, more understanding of literary fiction". Turns out it is no longer in paper print but only ePrint. No problem, I buy the book for my Nook on B&N.com. I'm reading along enjoying myself and around page 452 or so, in the chapter "Frog's Sister", which is a very good chapter by the way, the eBook freezes up and I have to shut down my Nook to even get it going again. I try on my Samsung phone, same thing. I try on an older Nook I have, same thing. I give up and am verklempt. The good news is that B&N customer service does refund me my monies lost on this endeavor. I'm thinking maybe it is just a faulty eBook, and how many people are buying it anyway, and of those who do, how many get to page 452 or so? Stephen Dixon may want to look into this. So now I am stuck buying a used copy of the paperback book that I got rid of so many years ago, which I do, and am happy to get through the mail, and then I finish it. It is outstanding. It is like nothing else. It's sort of hard to describe except that there are vignette's, novellas, short stories, brief glimpses of a man's life and his name is Howard Tetch. Sometimes they fit together and other times they do not. Maybe it is like our own lives and our memories of ourselves and those in our lives, sometimes they are real (most of the time) but other times maybe not so much. Maybe I am a masochist but I think my favorite parts are when something happens, and for several sentences Dixon has it re-happen but only a little different until the plot moves forward again. Is this like our own memories as we try to sort them out. What actually did happen? Hell if I know. In some ways we are all Frog. Does this mean we are all a turtle waiting for people to come pick us up? How about that weird mention of Derry, Maine in the last chapter - who would have thought that a literary novelist would give a shout-out to Stephen King?

Thaddeus Croyle says

I cringe to even give this book a second star. I struggled to get through it, paragraphs 30 pages long, stilted dialog, endless variations of the same event. Every time I opened it I was tempted to give up, or skip a few hundred pages. But then something would come along, some moment of brutal, simple honesty that rang so true and I'd keep reading on, hoping to see it again. I made it through to the end, but I'm still not sure I wouldn't rather have that week back.

David Markwell says

Do authors still write career defining novels. Probably not. Frog is Dixon at his best. Stories upon stories. Modern novels aren't dead, they just aren't written by Stephen King

Vit Babenco says

Love is lost. Life is ruined. Nothing is left but memories and fantasies. But memories are dim and fantasies are bleak. The past starts branching and the reality ramifies.

“Sometimes things you can never understand destroy you.”

Too often **Stephen Dixon** becomes prolix and then he goes nowhere but is just running on the spot. *Frog* somewhat reminds of the novels by Saul Bellow but it is plainer in language and poorer in ideas and also **Stephen Dixon** tends to be too self-centered and too self-pitying.

Carmen Martines says

Very stream of conscious with a zillion different alternative endings, subplots, narratives, and voices. At first the constantly changing direction of the story annoyed the pants off me, then I became fond of the flow and of how one character could become so many different beings with the same core values. It reminded me of T.S. Eliots poems "The Four Quartets" in which there is one Now but many different possibilities in this now. Brilliant.

Krys says

Rarely have I been so conflicted about a novel, and the last time I can recall was with the equally long-winded (and yet somehow fittingly so) *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace.

Frog is less of a narrative than it is a brainstorm of possibilities. What COULD the narrative have been given a more or less static set of behaviors and past experiences for the protagonist Howard. Each chapter takes a time period in his life or focuses on a relationship in his life (familial/romantic/etc), occasionally overlapping with events from previous chapters. But on occasion some of the events contradict those of the past, leaving the reader with a feeling of uncertainty about what they have just read. One chapter is twenty-thirty revisions of one simple event of going downstairs and hearing a conversation between two men. One chapter goes all meta and a characters comments on how the Howard of that chapter (a man in his late 40s, early 50s) is completely different from a younger Howard from a different chapter with the impression that he's talking about more the changes one experiences growing up.

For a book so meticulously loquacious, I want to believe there is a reason for the contradiction and the repetition. If a straightforward narrative was not Dixon's intention, then what? A clue comes in the repetitive chapters where the reader gets to see Howard, a writer, in his creative process. This one chapter, I feel, underscores the entire text, examining all the possibilities, of who someone could be, and what would happen if they did such and such. And because the character of Howard is so static, with his obnoxious second-guessing logorhea, Dixon's own firm belief on Howard's identity, that the novel makes me think of Howard as less of a character than as a representation as any one of the books readers, someone with a set personality whose life could takes a multitude of shapes depending on the choices one makes. In this we Dixon's novel-come-thesis on personal identity is anchored to personality tendencies.

The possibilities and quandaries of the text often reward the reader with their profundity. But like with so many long-winded works before it (the afore-mentioned *Infinite Jest*, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*) I wonder if the means are justified by the ends. Namely I found myself frustrated with the structure of the novel, and often downright bored with it.

On the other hand, as a source of esoteric investigation for the budding writer, Frog supplies a wealth of examination of the writing process, and a good argument of character solidification through Howard. For teachers of writing especially, several chapters rendered unbearable by their repetition when reading solely for pleasure, gain value, such Frog Goes Downstairs. I can see this chapter and others used as assigned readings for developing writers to discover the possibilities open to them with fiction, the benefit of revision and taking risks with a character you feel you know.

So as someone aspiring to be an author himself, I find this novel fascinating. As a piece of literature I would recommend to me friends? I'm not so sure there is anything thing other than academic exercise cleverly disguised as fiction.

Bradley says

This book is incredible.

Ali Lafferty says

Ugh this was one long stream-of-consciousness mess. I'm not kidding, there was one paragraph that went on for like 20 pages and contained a whole story, dialogue and all. What's more, sometimes there were small mistakes with the quotation marks, which made trying to navigate lengthy conversations between a few characters all shoved into one huge block paragraph even more difficult.

I get that this work is huge in how the main character, Howard Tetch, has so many different possible lives within the stories. In some he has a wife and two kids, in some he loses his wife or one of his kids, in some he never had a wife or kids to begin with but he's pursuing that sort of life in his future. Yeah, great concept. I appreciate the idea here. But to me, there wasn't enough of an overlying concept to tie all these possibilities together. And that just made it confusing. Plus, Howard Tetch is also representative of the average American Joe, and so the stories were at times boring as well as confusing.

Lastly: There was SO. MUCH. SEX. And it was annoying. Just because we're getting an intimate picture of Howard's life or what could have been his life does not mean we need to know every single one of his sexual exploits or endeavors he wished he'd had in excruciating, technicolor detail. Which is what sections of this work amounted to. I'm still not clear as to how this enhanced the plot.

All in all, just a huge stinking heap of lewd prose with the occasional sentence or phrase that really stood out and made almost 800 pages worth the slog. But then, maybe I completely missed the point.
