



## Double or Nothing

*Raymond Federman*

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*Double or Nothing* is a concrete novel in which the words become physical materials on the page. Federman gives each of these pages a shape or structure, most often a diagram or picture. The words move, cluster, jostle, and collide in a tour de force full of puns, parodies, and imitations. Within these startling and playful structures Federman develops two characters and two narratives. These stories are simultaneous and not chronological. The first deals with the narrator and his effort to make the book itself; the second, the story the narrator intends to tell, presents a young man's arrival in America. The narrator obsesses over making his narrative to the point of not making it. All of his choices for the story are made and remade. He tallies his accounts and checks his provisions. His questioning and indecision force the reader into another radical sense of the novel. The young man, whose story is to be told, also emerges from his obsessions.

Madly transfixing details—noodles, toilet paper, toothpaste, a first subway ride, a sock full of dollars—become milestones in a discovery of America. These details, combined with Federman's feel for the desperation of his characters, create a book that is simultaneously hilarious and frightening. The concrete play of its language, its use of found materials, give the viewer/reader a sense of constant and strange discovery. To turn these pages is to turn the corners of a world of words as full as any novel of literary discourse ever presented. *Double or Nothing* challenges the way we read fiction and the way we see words, and in the process, gives us back more of our own world and our real dilemmas than we are used to getting.

## Picked for American Book Review's 100 Best First Lines from Novels

## Double or Nothing Details

Date : Published April 1st 1999 by Fiction Collective 2 (first published 1971)

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Author : Raymond Federman

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## From Reader Review Double or Nothing for online ebook

### Stephen P says

A man plans on renting a cheap room at \$8/day for 365 days. He will be locking himself inside spending 7-12 hrs/day writing a novel. It is the day before. He frets. Planning out a list of all the purchases of all the necessities needed-he will live on noodles- it continuously lengthens. He lists also in his mind the ideas for his unformed story. This brings the creative world of fiction into the mundane activities of the world out of a desperate fear of, not being up to the task, losing himself within the fiction, losing himself within the character he is to create.

The desperation of his anxiety is linked directly to and through the reader by the placement of words in varying fonts and sizes, lines slanted and askew, final letters of final words of sentences beginning the next sentence. The pages are awash in words foreign to the structure we expect in novelistic writing. By the end of the first day of reading my heart was racing in the turmoil of this man's inner life now mine in large part due to having to read the narrative in this form, a fight to gain some semblance of control.

Ideas cropping up about the story he intends to write, though possibly not very well, regards a 19 y/o Jewish youth coming from France to the U.S. by boat to meet an uncle he has never seen and who has never seen him, at the pier on New York's water front at the end of the war.

We know most of this by the written record of a tenant in the apartment building. He records everything the writer does, says, purchases and thinks. His task is no embellishments or authorial intrusions. Just the facts. Only the facts. We know everything the would-be writer does and thinks.

The problem is, the recorder has no access to the writer's thoughts and probably the events taking place. Once the writer locks himself in the room with his wares bought to within a few pennies of his money, access in any form will be ruled out. Other than some telepathic form it leaves us with the fact that the recorder is not just embellishing what he is taking down but is the creator of the writer who is the creator of the 19 y/o's journey. The creation is aptly named Double or Nothing. This recorder is a presence and character in this novel. So far he is the creator of the entire story, and each of the stories within. However, at the beginning of the book which Federman clearly stated, is not the beginning of the book, much of this structure is laid out for the reader. At the end of this part, which cannot technically be called a part since this is not the beginning of the book, not even a prologue, he confides that there is something like an organizer who shapes the material of the book quivering in my hand-possibly Federman himself?

This is normally where I would attempt some pathetic joke about needing a sedative or drink or both no matter what the doctors warnings are. There is no need for any of the above. The book flows. It is of a whole. Federman's mastery and artistic uniqueness is that all of this swarms up out of the story, natural, coherent according to its own world.

A temptation, due to the life Federman, lived is to interpret the material as autobiographical data. I believe this would be valid. My choice is to read the text as it is. A small miracle in and of itself in a world in need of the miraculous and its breath of a possibility of existence, its devastating enclosure of a writer engaged in her or his work. The fight to fend off the outside world, purify oneself from its monotonous drugged myopia.

Autobiographical or not, the Noodles and their boxes, the lists of items needed to be purchased growing all

the time, is the writer of the nineteen year olds story, needing to hold onto the material world and the clinging hesitation to let go and fall into it. A building desperation to not enter that room, clutch the pen, paper, shorten the distance between the roles and sequences of activity that serves as his life, from the life brewing deep within. Distance, trepidation is salvation.

Okay, so I lied. I am a corrupted narrator of this narration, or a CN. I did think at one point that I might read this book as a text in and of itself. Not possible for me. Raymond Federman was born in Paris on May 15, 1928, the son of Simon and Marguerite Federman. In 1942, when Raymond was 14, the Gestapo came to the family's door. Telling him not to make a sound, his mother shoved him into a tiny closet on a stairway landing. Raymond huddled there, listening, as his parents and sisters, Jacqueline and Sarah, were marched down the stairs.

Raymond spent the war in hiding on a farm in the South of France. His parents and sisters died in Auschwitz.

This for me was what the book was about. A book of such bravery, blood-let guts, as to face his procrastinations, avoidances to fall into the darkened well of trauma. The problem is that horrific traumas never leave. Worse yet is at some point, no matter how much spoken of, written about, it is apparent that no one will ever understand what it was like. And still is.

Therefore we look over a number of shoulders within this book. The story can only begin to be written from many distances and with the subtlest excursions within time and point of view. Existence is a frailty which must be respected.

Federman is a technical and creative genius. Also, he is the definition of boldness, strength, and perseverance. At the end of this book, which I held tightly in my hand, he was to be pitied, admired, a source of vast inspiration.

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Special thanks to Nathan "N.R." Gaddis for bringing this book to the attention of our reading community.

### **Terry says**

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A book that was entirely fun to read!! Completely different from anything I've ever read!

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### **Vit Babenco says**

"It is essential indeed that the second person allows nothing to interfere with his plans however irresponsible these might be, and that the first person persists in his stubborn and determined recording, and that finally the third person do nothing, nothing but wait to see what will happen to him and to the others who are involved with him."

Any author is a trinity: the Holy Spirit – thinker, the Father – doer, the Son – protagonist, and writing a book is a process of creating a world.

There is a plethora of all kinds of autobiographical novels and in *Double or Nothing* **Raymond Federman** keeps going at how he would've written an autobiographical novel his own special way and he eventually ends up with some sort of autobiography integrated within his opus.

Despite being a concrete novel *Double or Nothing* has to it a palpable touch of beat generation mentality.

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### Fionnuala says

by page 50 I'm ready to throw my hand in  
I mean 50 pages is a fair investment  
what couldn't I do with 50 pages of beckett  
but 50 pages of lists and typographical jokes  
hmm  
perhaps that's where the challenge lies  
finding something to say about a list of lists  
though admittedly slightly more than that really  
a book about a man recording **the** attempt by a second man to write a book about a third man on his way to  
the united states by boat who may or may not be the first man or the **second** man or both  
but no ordinary book  
a book that must be written in 365 days while locked in a room living on noodles and coffee and never going  
out  
how many spoons in a jar of coffee  
how many cups a day  
how many jars a year  
you do the math  
and what if the third man never gets off the boat  
what if he never even got on the boat  
what if he  
but no  
can't mention camps  
or lampshades  
or closets  
or farms  
and sadly no aunt rachel with her fur coat and suitcase  
I liked aunt rachel  
but hey  
while I was thinking about aunt rachel the guy got off the boat  
so I'm in for another 50  
nothing ventured nothing gained  
and if I don't come up with something after 100 pages  
I'll get the second **man** to write this piece for me  
why not  
he's got a typewriter  
he can make it typographically interesting too  
better if he writes it himself because he keeps changing the names of the characters  
sometimes he writes in first person sometimes second sometimes third  
and what do you know  
the third man is having a mute period  
how do you write a \_\_\_\_ period  
I should have quit when I was ahead  
but hold everything

the second man has **delivered** a whopper  
there's a suitcase  
you never know what might be in a suitcase  
glad I'm still in  
feeling lucky now  
might go for 150 yet  
might go all **the way**  
double or nothing  
feeling lucky is rare  
got to grab every chance you get  
but I don't have to go into all that here  
not unless I can't get the second man  
to come up with the **goods**  
then it might be useful to spend some time weighing up odds  
meantime I could slip him some decent coffee  
le pauvre enculé is drinking instant  
I could get a brew going and slip it in his cup when his back is turned  
when he's craping on about toilet paper  
how many sheets on a roll  
how many rolls for a year  
doing multiple multiplications and divisions  
tomato sauce sugar salt toothpaste soap  
while meantime the story is pretty nearly finished **in** his head  
and he hasn't even put paper in **the** typewriter  
hasn't even bought the paper  
what if he reaches the **end** before he moves into the room  
cos no room  
no noodles  
no story

.....  
reading a piece of writing without punctuation isn't especially interesting it can actually be annoying  
especially if it is written in block text and not broken up as above **and by the way thanks second man** no a  
block text with no punctuation can be a major headache and what if it is written with  
allthewordsrunningintoeachother now that is a real hangovertypedizzymakingnauseainducingheadspiltter of  
a headache but all that doesn't matter because while reading this book you soon realise that with Federman  
it's not about being annoying for the sake of it with Federman words are all he has I mean the first man the  
second man the third man arrive in the united states with nothing no family no money nothing no words even  
so when Federman finally finds some words he makes them work overtime they literally perform tricks they  
turn somersaults they dive they soar they smile they cry they mock they sing they riff they scat they march in  
lines up the page down the page side to side top to bottom in here out there across through and round the  
corner you love it or you hate it me I love it

.....  
This noodle story is the same story that the first man tries to sell to a publisher in France in Aunt Rachel's  
Fur: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

## Kai Weber says

If you are a writer yourself or if you would like to be one, then poetological fiction is probably something you're interested in. Every system needs and creates some meta-discourse.

Ten years ago I probably would have said, that readers are part of the literature system, and therefore also naturally interested in poetological literature. I would still say, that readers are part of the literature system, but I'm basically a bit bored by the genre discussed here. If a writer writes a book about writing a book, or even worse, about not being able to write a book, I don't think anymore, that I need to read that. (It's like Tom Lehrer once said: So many people bemoan the fact that they can't communicate. "Well, if they can't communicate, the very least they can do is to shut up.")

On the surface Raymond Federman's book here is such a poetological novel, and it shows a protagonist failing to write a novel. Yawn. However, there are two points that go well beyond the surface discussion: This book is also a beautifully designed piece of visual art (the text being set in a way to allude to the shape of things, as is usually the case in visual poetry), and this book is a book about something else that cannot be said, that is the most difficult to be spoken about: The holocaust.

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## MJ Nicholls says

### **I RE-READ THIS MASTERPIECE. BOW DOWN, MORTALS. I REPEAT MY ORIGINAL**

**REVIEW:** This is the most astonishing use of typographical innovation in a text I have ever seen. Search me for hyperbole. Contenders for that crown include such luminaries as Alasdair Gray in *1982 Janine*, B.S. Johnson in *House Mother Normal*, Christine Brooke-Rose in *Thru*, and a dozen others whose innovations escape me at this exact moment, but Federman builds his entire novel around his meticulously arranged page-by-page doodlings and makes the dazzling array of acrostics, zigzags, ups and downs, split text, pages of NOODLE REALITY, part of his "discourse," with four levels of narration (see NR's review for further) helping tell the tale of young Raymond (Boris) arriving in America from France, and older Raymond locking himself in a room in order to narrate the tale, surviving on nothing but noodles, cigarettes, and limited loo paper. As NR states, Federman's 'surfictional' technique evolved as his own personal language of dealing with the holocaust and the loss of his family—the devastation hanging over this hilarious, digressional and dark novel is palpable, and elevates Federman way beyond the bourgeois hipster figures like Katz or Sukenick (fine in their own right—but not Federman). Tremendous. This fourth edition contains an uproarious preface from Raymond about his difficulty in placing *Return to Manure* (later pubbed by FC2) with a British publisher. This edition was published, bizarrely, by a small Scottish press based on Ullapool (an off-shore island in the northeast Highlands. Two Ravens Press run by, at present, one lady!)

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## Roger Green says

This book, as with everything else I've read by Federman, is brilliant and creatively inspiring.

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## J.I. says

3 stars is too low for this book. It is a game changer and an innovator and absolutely mind-blowing by the end. It could also have stood to be 150 pages shorter.

In Double or Nothing, the first person decides to write about the second person, who is going to lock themselves in a room for 365 days to write a novel about the 3rd person, a 19yo frenchman immigrating to America after the Holocaust. This is to say nothing of the 4th person. What follows is a novel, sure, but one that is heavily autobiographical, and one that exists through typographical oddities and jokes and crudities and more. It is surprisingly funny. Not for a while, not until you slog through a good amount of tedium, but it is funny. And it is smart. It is a novel about trying to build the self, even though the self is fictionalized, it is about how a man who survived the Holocaust as a young teenager can ever know themselves as themselves, instead of a fiction, and how the self is fractured into more and more people, and all of them--all of them--are trying to figure out some order that will be impossible to really find.

This is a truly great novel. If you haven't read it, you have done yourself a disservice. It just also annoyed the heck out of me, so I'm being vindictive with my stars on a silly book rating site.

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### **Nate D says**

This is a difficult book to describe without its sounding like a parody of terminal postmodernism, but it succeeds brilliantly. Perhaps it's brilliant precisely because it manages to pull so much out of pushing familiar postmodern gestures to breaking point. In an ultimate act of self-reflexivity, this is the story of an AUTHOR documenting an OBSERVER of the thoughts of a WRITER preparing to seal himself into a room for a year in order to finally, without distractions, tell the story of a CHARACTER arriving in post-war America in the 40s, whose experiences may or may not correspond exactly with those of the other three levels of the narration. In order to seal himself up and write the book, the writer will live off of the cheapest food available, noodles, whose price and quantity, along with other provisions, he endlessly recalculates over the course of the novel, which unfolds over his last day before commencing. In relying on noodles for sustenance, he also relies on noodles for content and form, as every typewritten page explodes into unpredictable typographic play, lines breaking and twisting, or getting crammed into geometric forms (yes, even noodle-shaped). What I mean to say is that the form of the book is endless noodling with words and paragraphs and storyline (he's planning out what he means to say when he actually writes the book (which remains unwritten except for this book), trying out scenes and characters and names in constant renewal). It's not always a triumph of form as content where much of the typographic form is fairly separate from the story (ie true noodling, improvising -- not incidentally, the character takes up jazz saxophone) but it retains its sense of surprise, invention, and fun. As does the content, which somehow never gets boring, and even toys with the reader by spooling out bits of sexual confessional in another classically postmodern ruse. Nothing cuts through intellectual exercise like the erotic, right? (Though realizing that these ruses are typically a bit male-gaze-designed). Still, it works, in some way, the book is as entertaining as it desires to be. Except that this shouldn't be too much fun. Did I mention why our hero is coming to America? Federman, or the author, or the observer, or the writer, would prefer not to (let's omit the camps, the Jews, the dead family members, the lampshades), but suffice to say that there's a hard reality under the play. This is a book about avoiding writing a book. This is a book about avoiding writing that which cannot be written. This is a brilliant book.

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### **M. Sarki says**

Gladly, it is over. I do believe that as time passes I will appreciate more my reading of this most-original book. But for now brand me burned, rightly forgiven, and smoldering on the stake.

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## **Jonathan says**

NOODLES !SELDOON dnA .ylimaf eht lla rof semag dna nuf cihpargopyT .esruoc fo ,emosewa si siht lleW

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## **Anthony Vacca says**

Raymond Federman has created with his first novel, *Double or Nothing*, a fully-realized work of art about never creating one's fully-realized work of art. A meta-fictional masterpiece with a typographical wonder to be found on every page, this novel lucidly presents the fairly convoluted set-up of a compulsive gambler who decides to hole himself up in a cheap apartment for 365 days exactly, living sparingly off of nothing but noodles and cigarettes while he writes a novel about a recently-orphaned teenager who emigrates from France to the U.S. in the aftermath of WW2. But before our unnamed, writing-hopeful can get under way with his novel, he has to plan out, to the finest point, exactly what all supplies he will need to survive and write for a year with no human interaction, as well as how much it's all going to cost.

And that's exactly what takes up a large portion of the novel, especially in the 1/3 of the book. In a hilarious series of considerations, reconsiderations, assessments, digressions, calculations, diagrams and broodings, the narrator wonders about weighty matter such as the best way to purchase 365 pounds of noodles, and how to transport said noodles to his apartment, and how best to cook said noodles, and how often he should eat said noodles a day, and how much time will the eating of said noodles detract from time in which he could be writing, and...so on and so on goes the zig zags of the narrator's thoughts. He occasionally does think about writing but worries more over superficial concerns, such as if a character's name sounds good, or how many pages a scene should take, or if he should make the character have sex with this or that character or no, or if he should be writing in 1st person? 2nd person? 3rd?

But Federman keeps deft control over the work and pretty soon is pulling the carpet out from under the reader by crafting a genuine sympathy for the narrator and his task at hand as the distinctions between the narrator's and his character's troubled and disappointing life reveal themselves as being profoundly similar. Federman himself was an immigrant from France, and throughout his writing career (from what little biographical information I know about the man) continuously used his own harrowing life experiences as the subject matter for his blend of memoir and experimental fiction. *Double or Nothing* is an impressive evocation of the mind of a person who wishes to create, the pitfalls that come from such a daunting task, and the inescapable wonders and horrors that are inherent within the fiction of believing that anything can be fiction.

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## **Nick says**

A typographical masterwork.

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## **m csmnt says**

Double or Nothing is the definitive 'novel about writing a novel'.

Instead of dealing in the known formula for this type of fiction, this delves head first into the visceral experience of the whole process.

Our protagonist is writing a novel (or recording the actions of) a writer planning his next 365 days in order to write a novel, about the first year in America of a refugee. All this, with the smoothest finesse.

Part heavy logistics (what is needed physically to support the writing of a novel), part critique of the conventions of a novel, and (well...) part novel(?); there is really no other book I could imagine executing this premise as well as Federman has.

Truly, both a demanding and exciting read packed full of Federman's distinct humour and typographic trickery. Not one to miss. This is everything an experiment of this kind should be.

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## **Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says**

*Double or Nothing: a real fictitious discourse* is Federman's famous Noodle Novel. Read a little into Federman's various books and you will hear him say something about it. An editor in Paris famously thought it was too "autobiographical", too "self-reflexive". But you should find those passages where Federman gives that flunky editor the what's-what. Of course it's "autobiographical" -- show me fiction that's not; all is, hence none is, etc -- and of course it's "self-reflexive", how else can you write fiction -- what, you just want the story "straight." Not going to happen.

Let me tell you something. When Ray was young, about nine years of age, his mother shoved him in a closet and said "Shhhhhh!" His mother, father, two sisters, that day, were shipped off to a lampshade factory. Years later, when Ray was 41 he discovered what it was that his mother had given him that day. A novel. He's spent the rest of his years trying to write that novel. *Double or Nothing* is part of Ray's one novel; the life which is his when he tells the story of his life which is the story. Many (most!) great novelists write the same novel over and over again. Should you undertake to read his books in some kind of chronological order? No. That wouldn't even make sense.

So but this novel begins with Boris arriving in New York City from France on a boat. The closet, the camps, the farm; all that we'll have to skip; you'll find those parts in other volumes which you *will* want to read. Just begin on the boat. Writing Boris's story is the inventor, the one inventing Boris's (the protagonist) story/life; and thirdly in this layered fiction is the recorder who will record everything that the inventor does says thinks. Somebody, of course, has to assemble all that stuff into a thing between two covers; we'll call this fourth person the *author*, probably Raymond Federman himself. The point is that the inventor will lock himself in a room for 365 days with 365 boxes of noodles in order to write the novel about Boris arriving in AmericA. The recorder will faithfully record all the goings-on. All of this is much better explained on pages 0 through 000000000.0. October first (tomorrow) he will begin to write; meanwhile there are preparations to be made, lists to be made ::

Room ..... 416

Noodles ..... 105.85

Tomato Sauce ..... 7.80

Coffee ..... 20.04  
Toothpaste ..... 3.45  
Toothbrush ..... .59  
Soap ..... 5.25  
Sugar ..... 1.89  
Toiletpaper ..... 14.04  
Salt is free.  
So far no problems.  
It's easier than I thought.

The neglect of Federman is deplorable on two counts; two counts against two readerships. ONE, Ray is among the geniuses of what we've experienced in the past few decades as "postmodernist fiction" and/or metaphiction. Every Coover-, Barth-, Sorrentino-, etcetera-Reader should know and love and most importantly read Federman. Federman. Federman. Why? Because more than any of them he has a story which *requires* games/tricks/evasions/discontinuities/younameit in order to tell it precisely as this very story which it is. And that story, the nature of that story, the "what it's about" of that story, TWO, is that it's a story about surviving the Holocaust ; the readership, the student of the Holocaust, those who study its literature and ask how can one write after Auschwitz, what does it mean to write fictionally the story of survival, how does one serve witness, provide testimony, respond to and make sense of that Unforgivable Enormity? You know the big names of Holocaust fiction. But why -- WHY??!! -- do we not know the name Federman when we speak of that Enormity and the writing about it? Federman writes the way he writes because he experienced what he experienced. You just want the story? There's a black and white film for that. Better read Ray. Please.

Noodle Review.

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