

***Edinburgh* as a Machine: Reclamation, Resistance, and Formative Fiction**

Jayne Abraham, Stanford '26.

Abstract: This essay first identifies *Edinburgh* by Alexander Chee as a work of formative fiction, as defined by Stanford Professor of French Language, Literature, and Civilization and Comparative Literature Joshua Landy. It then explores the stakes of creating a formative novel in the literary age of suspicion in which we exist, as well as within the context of the multiplistic expectations that readers place upon Asian American writers. This essay ultimately positions *Edinburgh* as a reclamation of the novel for Alexander Chee, who faced unique expectations with the externally attached title of the “first gay Korean American novelist.”

Introduction

In 2001, Alexander Chee published his debut novel *Edinburgh*, giving him the title of the first gay Korean American novelist. *Edinburgh* is a semi-autobiographical fiction about Fee, a gay Korean American boy who ascends through his adolescence while grappling with the sexual abuse he and his peers were subjected to at the hands of their all-boys choir director, Big Eric. Chee's work is a devastating, evocative narrative that is adorned in stunning prose mediated by structural and stylistic ambiguity. In his 2018 essay "The Autobiography of My Novel," Chee writes that in order for *Edinburgh* to tell an effective story, specifically about victims of sexual abuse, he "would have to construct a machine that moved readers along, anticipating and defeating their possible objections by taking them by another route – one that would surprise them." Extending this sentiment to *Edinburgh* as a whole, this imperative then invites readers to think of *Edinburgh* as formative rather than informative – as a machine.

In this essay, I will first prove that *Edinburgh* is a work of formative fiction, as defined by Stanford Professor of French Language, Literature, and Civilization and Comparative Literature Joshua Landy. I will then situate *Edinburgh* within a literary age of suspicion, wherein the critical reader approaches literary works in pursuit of a deeper, seemingly hidden meaning, and the fiction writer bears the burden of meaningfulness when creating a piece. This discussion will lead me to posit alternative modes of reading that aspire toward alternative reading experiences — for example, prioritizing immersion *within* a fiction over investigation *of* a fiction. I will then explain how the burden of meaningfulness is compounded with the burden of authentic representation for Alexander Chee as a gay Korean American writer. Finally, I will arrive at a discussion of the stakes of creating a formative novel, a machine, within the context of the unique set of expectations thrust upon Alexander Chee when writing *Edinburgh*.

***Edinburgh* as a formative fiction**

In his 2012 essay "Formative Fictions: Imaginative Literature and the Training of Capacities," Joshua Landy defines formative fictions as literary works that seek to train rather than to teach. What formative fictions require, then, is a focus on what texts do rather than what they say — making them distinct from *informative* fictions (Landy, 2012, p. 183). In this way, formative fictions become "machines that assist us in becoming who we are" (Landy, 2012, p. 176). Formative fictions are also characterized by their gradual temporality and the fact that they tend to be reread. Additionally, the introduction of new elements in formative fictions — whether through plot development or changes in perspective — causes readers to constantly revise their hypotheses about how the work will unfold. With a concrete definition of what formative fictions are and what they do, how does *Edinburgh* function as a work of formative fiction?

Gradual Temporality

One distinct element of *Edinburgh* is the pace of its plot development and the effect this has on how readers experience the book. The plot progresses slowly through the first two sections after the prologue of the novel, "Songs of the Fireflies" and "January's Cathedral," before significantly picking up speed in roughly the last 50 pages. The plot of the first section

revolves around Fee and the other choir members' experiences with Big Eric's sexual abuse, as well as around Fee's relationship to Peter and exploration of his sexuality. But when the truth about Big Eric comes out and he eventually goes to jail — a seemingly conclusive plot point in the Big Eric story arc — readers continue into the second section and engage with the resounding effects of Big Eric's imprisonment. Readers delve deeper, and deeper still into Fee's psyche as he watches the boys in his choir die by suicide. As Fee progresses through his later teenage and college years, readers watch him bear the burden of survivor's guilt while exploring his sexuality and dealing with the loss of Peter, his first love. "January's Cathedral" reveals the depths of Fee's depression and the complexity of his relationships to various men, ending in a deeply euphoric sexual experience with the David brothers. After the first two sections, though readers may feel closer to Fee, they lack a concrete conception of the plot progression, as the narrative seems to prioritize character development over a consistent plot up until this point. It is in the third section, "And Night's Black Sleep Upon the Eyes," that Chee invokes a change in perspective with the introduction of Warden, the boy with whom Fee will eventually engage in an inappropriate sexual relationship. Though readers can intuitively sense that the introduction of a new perspective often indicates plot advancement, it is not until the fourth and final section, "Blue," that *Edinburgh*'s plot truly accelerates. In the last 50 or so pages, readers are returned to Fee's perspective as he relays facets of his adult life with astounding speed, advancing through his first encounter and subsequent relationship with Bridey and his choice to move back home to Maine for a job. It is within these last pages that Fee begins his relationship with Warden, abuses it, and finds out that Warden is Big Eric's son. Warden then kills Big Eric and Fee and Warden attempt to run away together, before Fee leaves him in a hotel and reunites with Bridey — all within roughly the last dozen pages. With the most substantial portion of its action occurring at the very end, *Edinburgh* is certainly gradual in pace. The first two sections allow readers to get to know Fee in the ways Chee will let them, before clueing readers into a new plot point with Warden in the third section, and accelerating the action in the fourth and final section. In "The Autobiography of My Novel," Chee relays his process when constructing the plot. In his pursuit of creating the formative machine that is *Edinburgh*, Chee claims that "[readers] would want to grasp for something familiar amid it all. Plot could do this." In this way, Chee gives readers something to "grasp for" by eventually invoking a distinct plot, but Chee is not so fast in doing so, establishing a gradual temporality within *Edinburgh* — a fundamental tenet of formative fictions.

Rereading

Formative fictions tend to reward reading and rereading, and *Edinburgh* is no exception. In part due to its gradual plot development, *Edinburgh* creates completely different reading experiences upon a second or third reading and/or upon reflection. Additionally, as a narrator, Fee occupies an ambiguous temporal location. *Edinburgh* is written in present tense, but it is clear that Fee is located somewhere in the future in his telling of events, as evidenced by statements such as: "The survivor gets to tell the story. Have you figured out who survives yet?" (Chee, 2001, p. 92). Therefore, *Edinburgh*'s gradual plot development and Fee's ambiguous temporal location work in tandem to create a different effect upon rereading. This effect can be demonstrated through a close reading of the following quote: "Love melts all our murder. As

much as it makes it. Love melted me. Peter, it could only have been you” (Chee, 2001, p. 52). At this point in the narrative, readers are aware of Fee’s devastating experiences of sexual abuse as well as his all-consuming love for Peter. Upon first read, then, this quote feels like a boy’s innocent, maybe even naive, proclamation of his capacity to romantically love just one person. However, at a much later point in the narrative, it becomes clear that it is Fee’s unhealthy preservation of the image of Peter that ultimately leads him to engage in an inappropriate sexual relationship with Warden — in part, if not in whole, due to his resemblance to Peter. Therefore, upon reflection, this quote loses the innocence by which it was initially characterized. Additionally, recognizing Fee’s ambiguous temporal location in the future, this quote can function as a sort of justification of Fee’s unthinkable actions. The idea that “love melts all our murder” suggests that love trumps all, even when it can have negative consequences — “as much as it makes it.” If Fee is speaking from the future, after his inappropriate relationship with Warden, then saying that “it could only have been” Peter relays Fee’s unhealthy obsession with the past and with Peter. As readers’ relationship to Fee evolves with the introduction of new information and perspectives, an informed rereading of this quote absolves its initial innocence and solidifies the reality that, for Fee, Peter would remain “the one” as he progresses through adulthood. This experience of gaining greater consciousness upon rereading and reflecting further speaks to *Edinburgh*’s status as a formative novel.

Introduction of new elements

Another distinct facet of *Edinburgh* is Chee’s commitment to temporarily withholding information and then revealing it later on in the narrative, causing readers to constantly revise their hypotheses regarding the conclusion of the novel. The most salient example of Chee’s manipulation of access to information is Peter’s letter to Fee. After Peter lights himself on fire and dies, Fee possesses two physical mementos of Peter: a photo and a letter. It is not until the final section of the novel, when Fee is an adult working at Warden’s school, that this letter is revealed. Up until this point, if readers have not forgotten that Fee possesses these physical mementos of Peter, they are left to guess what the contents of this letter are. When the contents of the letter are revealed, new insight is gained that has the potential to alter readers’ perceptions of Fee and their hypotheses about how the rest of the novel will unfold. Additionally, multiplistic interpretations of the contents of the letter itself are possible, creating several potential paths to the conclusion of *Edinburgh*, depending on readers’ interpretations. The last few lines of the letter explicitly open themselves up to at least two interpretations: “And so I want you to be happy for me, that this is better for me. That I found what I needed. I know you won’t be. But it’s the last thing I want. You happy” (Chee, 2001, p. 210). Beyond the lingering, devastating effect of Peter’s sentiment that he could only find solace in death, Peter’s claim that the last thing he wants is Fee happy has an unsettling effect. On one end, this could mean that Peter’s dying wish is Fee’s happiness, or it could mean that literally the last thing Peter wants is Fee’s happiness, meaning he does not want Fee to be happy at all. The ambiguity of these lines and the letter as a whole allows readers to understand why it has haunted Fee for all these years. Additionally, readers’ interpretations of this letter affect their perceptions of Fee as character and his relationship to Peter. With access to new information, readers also get to decide the symbolic significance of Fee getting rid of the past; they get to decide if Fee is capable of doing away with

the past and is successful in this moment, or not. In this way, Chee's choice to reveal Peter's devastating last words and disrupt readers' perceptions of Fee at this point in the narrative is yet another facet of *Edinburgh*'s operation as a formative work.

Through its gradual temporality, differing interpretations upon rereading, and introduction of new elements throughout the entire narrative, *Edinburgh* functions as a formative fiction. These three elements of *Edinburgh* work in tandem to create a distinct reading experience. As the story builds gradually, readers are given access to new information that alters their interpretations of the narrative. They experience delayed gratification in the last 50 pages of the book through the increased action and accelerated progression of the plot. However, the extent to which readers are gratified is based on their attention to elements of *Edinburgh*. What readers decide to make of *Edinburgh*'s gradual pace, Fee's ambiguous temporal location, and the information that Chee withholds and then gives them access to invites them to engage in the construction of *Edinburgh*'s narrative, making a passive reading nearly impossible. Chee facilitates a complex relationship between readers and Fee by giving them Fee's perspective, but ultimately revealing his narrative unreliability, clueing readers into this early on through Fee's ambiguous temporal location. Readers' perceptions of Fee, as coaxed through *Edinburgh*'s gradual temporality, inform their interpretations of *Edinburgh* — Chee manipulates readers' ability to trust their narrator and interpret the information he chooses to share. Fulfilling the qualifications of a formative novel, *Edinburgh* invites readers into the active construction of the narrative, beckoning them to pay attention and constantly revise their conclusions. But why does it matter that *Edinburgh* is a work of formative fiction?

Writing and reading in a literary age of suspicion

As Joshua Landy notes in his aforementioned essay, there exists a reigning logic that fictions are designed to give readers "useful advice" (Landy, 2012, p. 170). In other words, readers approach fictional works seeking to gain something by excavating a deeper, hidden meaning that they perceive is embedded within a literary text. Landy's essay is situated within the larger context of the idea that we exist in a literary age of suspicion. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's seminal chapter on paranoid reading from her book *Touching Feeling* situates us within this era of paranoid, suspicious reading. Sedgwick posits that readers approach literary texts with a hermeneutics of suspicion (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 124); that is, readers possess a sense of paranoia that is anticipatory, reflective, and mimetic when engaging in literary criticism. Due to their paranoia, the reader then creates a burden of meaningfulness for the writer, as the reader expects that their attention and analysis will be rewarded with some greater, concrete message or meaning.

Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus expand on this concept in "Surface Reading: An Introduction" by complicating the normative method of "symptomatic reading," a mode of reading informed by paranoia that encourages readers to interpret texts under the assumption that their meanings are hidden and must be extracted. Best and Marcus instead speak to the liberating nature of "surface reading," a mode of reading that encourages attentiveness and immersion within a text as opposed to investigation. Adding yet another layer of nuance to the concept of surface reading, Heather Love identifies an alternative mode of reading that is akin to surface reading while in conversation with psychologist and sociologist Erving Goffman in "Close but

not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn.” Love adds nuance to the idea of surface reading by contending with how identity intercepts readers’ inclination to participate in an incessant pursuit of deeper meaning. Goffman argues in favor of a valorization of experience over identity, refusing to “[divide human activity] into realms of authentic action and stereotyped or conventional behavior...For him, there is no more authentic reality to get to...” (Love, 2010, p. 381).

Readers’ inclination to engage in symptomatic readings and distinguish between authentic and stereotyped or conventional behavior is particularly prevalent when discussing *Edinburgh*. It is important to acknowledge the fraught title of the “first gay Korean American novelist” that Alexander Chee possesses, as specifically related to expectations and pressures in *Edinburgh*’s writing and publication process. In an interview with Min Hyoung Song included in his book *The Children of 1965: On Writing, and Not Writing as an Asian American*, Chee says, “Who wants to be valued just for what you are, as opposed to what you have to say? That’s disgusting...No artist likes to be told what to write” (Song, 2003, p. 62). Song then asks Chee if writing under the label of “Asian American” makes him feel as though he is being told what to write. Chee responds, “Not even ‘almost.’ It’s most certainly within this category that you’re expected to have Asian American characters...” (Song, 2003, p. 62). Focusing specifically on Asian American writers, the burden of meaningfulness is compounded by an external obligation to relay an authentic, representative experience in literature that is in line with normative conceptions of Asian American identity. But what exactly constitutes these normative conceptions of Asian Americanness?

Expectation and the Asian American author

In the essay “Korean Enough: Alexander Chee on New Korean American Fiction” published in *Guernica Magazine* in 2008, Chee explicitly identifies the dizzying expectations he feels subjected to under the title of “Korean American” author: “Is it a Korean American novel because there’s kimchi, or is it a Korean American novel because it’s informed by someone who grew up with even a distant sense of *Han*?” Continuing, Chee expresses the complex, contradictory questions Asian American writers, and more specifically Korean American writers must contend with:

We worry if they will “chink” the book up, put chopsticks and teacups on the cover, or dragons, or an Asian woman... Will we be accused of trying to “make the book marketable” if there’s Asian content? Will we be branded as sell outs if there’s not “enough” Korean content? And if we write work that isn’t what people expect of us, of our brand, will we find an audience, or even be allowed to find an audience? (Chee, 2008).

Here, we observe how normative conceptions of Asian American identity influence and trouble writers of Asian descent. Stereotypical conceptions of what it means to be Asian American choke Asian American writers’ abilities to authentically express themselves in their works. How does Chee’s mixed racial identity fit into normative conceptions of Korean American identity? Additionally, how does queerness fit into these conceptions? Does it? Further, what does it mean

to write a literary work when one's identity precedes one's writing? In one way or another, these are questions Chee had to confront when writing *Edinburgh*. In "The Autobiography of My Novel," Chee identifies the weight of such expectations as specifically related to his process of writing *Edinburgh*:

I was supposed to both invent characters from whole cloth and tattoo my biography onto each of them. The absurdity of casting my every story in half-Korean gay characters alone made me rebel. I think every writer with a noncanonical background, or even a canonical one, faces this at some point.

Note here Chee's use of the word *rebel*. Under the crushing burdens of meaningfulness and authenticity, Chee chose to rebel, creating the formative machine, that is *Edinburgh* — rejecting all expectations and doing what a writer does best: telling a story.

Conclusion

Put simply, it matters that *Edinburgh* is a formative novel because it radically rejects expectations placed upon Asian American writers. In an age of literary suspicion, *Edinburgh* beckons readers to reject symptomatic reading and immerse themselves in a story that demands their attention and active engagement. *Edinburgh* is not wholly representative of any purported notion of gay Korean American identity, nor is it wholly representative of Asian American identity — and it does not seek to be. In this way, meaning does not lie where readers want to find it, and this sentiment is also reflected in the publication process of *Edinburgh*. In "The Autobiography of My Novel," Chee writes, "Editors didn't seem to know if it should be sold as a gay novel or an Asian American novel. There was no coming-out story in it, and while the main character was the son of an immigrant, immigration played no part in the story." When asked by his agent what kind of novel *Edinburgh* is, Chee replied, "It's a novel...I wrote a novel" (Chee, 2018). And so *Edinburgh* is a sort of reclamation — of art, of expression. It is a formative work; it is a machine. *Edinburgh* is Chee's way of rejecting the externally attached title of the "first gay Korean American novelist." Subverting the suffocating expectations that are a symptom of our literary age of suspicion, refusing to present a normative image of Asian American identity, *Edinburgh* is, above all else, a novel — and Alexander Chee, a novelist.

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