Benjamin H. Hill V

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Professor Beyer

An Alternative Reading of Jen and Eric

The novel “*S*,” written by J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst, is a truly unique book. The core of the work is “*Ship of Theseus*,” the fictional story of a man who finds himself washed up in a city with recollection neither of his name nor his past. “*Ship of Theseus*” is a well-written and interesting story, but what sets the work of “S” apart from other books as a whole happens in the margins. In the margins there are notes from two people named Jen and Eric who pass the book “*Ship of Theseus*” back and forth, attempting to analyze the work and its author, the mysterious V.M. Straka. Jen and Eric appear to be two separate students, but there is evidence in the text that Jen may be a person suffering from dissociative identity disorder, and Eric may be an “alter”—an additional personality.

Dissociative Identity Disorder, or DID, is a commonly misunderstood mental illness. Often mistaken for a form of schizophrenia, DID is rudimentarily defined as when two or more distinct personalities manifest themselves in one individual. The personalities, or “alters,” are often completely different from the original person, the “host,” differing on some or all of: sex, age, race, hand gestures, postures, ways of speaking, and ways of writing (Psychology Today, 4). There are normally two to four distinct personalities present early on, but as time goes on more and more alters appear; DID often worsens over time. Switches between different personalities can take anywhere from a few seconds to years (Dissociative Identity Disorder: Signs, Symptoms, Treatment, 2). Beyond that most basic definition, symptoms of DID include unusually reckless behavior, anxiety and/or paranoia, struggles with memory beyond ordinary weak memory, and identity confusion (Dissociative Disorders, Causes).

The causes of DID are still not fully understood by psychologists, but experts believe that the disorder stems from traumatic experiences in childhood or young adulthood, most often (but not necessarily) around the age of nine (Dissociative Disorders, Causes). According to this theory, the disorder develops as a way to cope with the stress of abuse or continued tension at home. The reason that it occurs most often from childhood experiences is because children are most able to remove themselves from the situation, essentially observing the traumatic event as if it were happening to somebody else (Dissociative Disorders, Symptoms). This effect lingers, leaving multiple personalities in the victim.

Jen has this sort of traumatizing experience at a young age: at the age of ten, just one year off of nine, the peak of traumatic DID experiences, Jen simply wandered off into the woods at a celebration. She walked and walked until she found a strange boy in the woods at an abandoned building. After talking to the boy and learning that he, after temporarily running away from home, had stored food in the building, Jen stayed there for four days until she ran out of food. She was completely alone for days, away from her parents, and even the boy did not return (Dorst, 376a). When Jen came back to society, there were police and reporters everywhere, and her relationship with her parents was never the same. This sort of isolation coupled with the reaction she received upon her return could lead to DID.

On top of having a reasonable cause for DID, Jen demonstrates many of the symptoms, including unusually reckless behavior. For starters, the very idea of engaging in a long relationship with a strange man several years older in the margins of a book, and then attempting to meet with him, is already fairly reckless and unusual. Jen notes this, stating that it’s odd that she’s “writing in a stranger’s book at 3am” (Dorst, 7), especially when she has so much work to be doing for her classes, but she does it anyway. Even more recklessly, she breaks into Professor Moody’s house in an attempt to find out what he knows (Dorst, 355). This is extremely dangerous, especially from her point of view since she believed that Moody had been initiating direct attacks on her and her family, most notably including the burning down of her barn (Dorst, 91). Even Eric, who is not exactly the most rational person either when it comes to his behavior, warns against her breaking in (Dorst, 325), yet she does it anyway. Finally, she herself acknowledges that she’s “a total short fuse” (Dorst, 46), subject to reckless behavior on a whim.

Despite being extremely reckless on occasion, Jen also displays extensive anxiety and paranoia, characteristics strongly linked with DID. There are many instances of Jen expressing paranoia about regular events throughout the entire novel. For example, at one point when she walks home from the library, she is convinced that someone is following her, even though she never sees him again (Dorst, 190). At another point she writes “I swear there are people in the library who are watching me. Pretending to read/study/browse/copy etc…And yes, I know how paranoid that sounds” (Dorst, 230). Later she again expresses paranoia when, at the scene of the fire, a very average-looking man glances at her a few times (Dorst, 263). In yet another instance of paranoia, Jen confesses that she is convinced that someone is looking through her mail. Even she acknowledges that she “reeks of paranoid delusion” (Dorst, 120), having taken abnormal psychology. Eventually she gets to the point where she can’t live in her own home (Dorst, 133), only feeling safe when she is in the library (Dorst, 139). At a later point, Eric points out how paranoid she seems when she complains of a man who was at the bus stop watching her house (Dorst, 299).

In addition to paranoia and anxiety, struggles with memory are also associated with DID, and Jen displays that characteristic at a very interesting point. The most notable instance of Jen struggling with memory comes in her description of the story of her running away. She recalls in great detail many things that happened to her, but she can’t remember the name of the boy who took her in (Dorst, 376a). That should be the one thing she wouldn’t forget. The boy is never again mentioned. Jen’s forgetfulness reveals something about the nature of her days in the woods, implying that it was a traumatizing event and that it left a mark on her. This corresponds to an interpretation of the event as a cause for DID.

Jen also demonstrates identity confusion throughout the book. For starters, she rejects her names assigned to her at birth; Jen protests bitterly against her friends calling her “Jenny” (Dorst, 32). She also has trouble defining her interests, goals, and professional ambitions, struggling to decide what to do after college (Dorst, vi). Both of these are common characteristics in people, but they are also associated with DID, and coupled with other evidence it begins to become more compelling.

Jen’s identity confusion pertains not only to herself. She also struggles with her collective identity regarding Eric. At the beginning of the book, Jen mistakenly refers to Jen and Eric as “we,” which Eric questions. They are very much separate people at this point, just as alters are initially very separate from hosts. Even on a much later read, Jen still considers her word choice a mistake (Dorst, ii). This changes, however; at another point, Jen writes “you” when speaking of something Eric has to do, but crosses it out and writes “we” instead (Dorst, 237). Later in their correspondence Jen notes that Eric uses “we” (Dorst, 366), and the point is most definitively proven when after Eric writes “us,” Jen responds “Us? Not you?” and to which Eric writes “Us—definitely us” (Dorst, 240).

This sort of struggle with the identity of alters is common in DID. Early on, the host person and the alters often fail to recognize each other, because alters are repressed to cope with traumatic experiences (Morris, 43). As time goes on, however, the host person is sometimes able to communicate with alters and bring them out. One of the most common ways to make contact with alters is through journaling (Morris, 85). This is exactly what Jen and Eric do, by way of the margins of “*Ship of Theseus*,” thus it makes sense that at first Jen attempts to reach out to Eric with little success, but by the end they consider themselves closer to one entity.

Jen’s struggle to reach out to Eric is displayed not only by her diction, but by her actions. There are numerous instances throughout the novel where Jen asks Eric to meet up. Her first request is met with a definitive no (Dorst, 25). Later, Eric agrees to meet, and they decide on a meeting point, but Eric doesn’t show up. He never even offers an excuse, possibly because Eric does not exist as a physical person. Jen is very angry, writing that he disappointed her, addressing him by saying “either you’re lying, or you just don’t know who you really are” (Dorst, 33). This sort of language suggests that something is unusual about his identity. At another point, Eric and Jen agree to meet up, but Jen doesn’t end up going because she feels too sick (Dorst, 166). Still later, Eric says he will return by a certain date, but doesn’t (Dorst, 203). This continued struggle to actually meet each other begins to test Jen’s patience. When Jen tries to give Eric a stone to help her analyze the book and Eric says that he cannot meet up with her, Jen gets angry, writing “You’re willing to risk losing the stone b/c you’re too anxious about meeting me…This is fucking ridiculous. So not worth it” (Dorst, 115). It is highly improbable that the extent of the repeated struggles that Jen and Eric have meeting is simply bad fortune over and over again. Rather, it is more likely that they result from Eric being a figment of Jen’s imagination.

Later in the novel Jen and Eric do succeed in meeting up, first by going to a theater together, and then by moving to Prague together (Dorst, 417). This could be construed as evidence that Jen and Eric must be separate people—after all, if they live together and see each other every day, how could they be the same person? However, DID often gets worse over time, and it is not unprecedented for alters to become very close with each other, particularly after having an extended relationship through journaling (Morris, 7). It is also possible that the reason Jen and Eric are able to move in together is that Eric is an alter of Jen who is so close to her that they can essentially carry out conversations. Supplementing this is the fact that while Jen and Eric supposedly live together in Prague, they still write to each other in the margins, even for so simple a thing as thanking each other for making tea (Dorst, 421). This is not normal behavior for two separate individuals living together in an apartment.

The fact that Eric is so elusive to Jen when she tries to meet him in person makes sense with how nonexistent he appears more generally in the world. For example, in high school he “got left out of the yearbook completely” because “it just never occurred to anybody to record (his) existence” (Dorst, 43). On top of that, Eric was supposedly “expunged,” meaning “erased or removed completely” (Neufeldt and Guralnik)—i.e. there is no record of his existence at Pollard State University. Finally, he managed to travel across campus many times to pick up the book without ever being seen. This is unrealistic even for the least noticeable of people, let alone for someone who is tall (Dorst, 245). Jen herself points out the hypocrisy when Eric writes that one “can’t assume you understand (someone) completely (if) all you have is her writing—and not much of it” (Dorst, 77). All Jen has of Eric is his writing.

There is also a link between Eric’s elusiveness and the actual text of “*Ship of Theseus*.” When S attempts to assassinate the Mayor of the New Village, there is a commentary on the baby in the canoe with Anca and Waqar. At the end of that narrative, Straka writes “perhaps there was no baby in the first place. Perhaps S imagined it entirely…there is no evidence at all to suggest that the baby was real, apart from S.’s dubious memory” (Dorst, 369). The baby is neither mentioned again nor explained. Jen and Eric are very interested in the baby. It could be likened to Eric—there is no evidence of his existence, aside from Jen’s writings and memories.

Building upon the above mentioned evidence that Eric may not exist in the real world, there is not very much of his backstory throughout the novel. We learn that his parents were devoutly religious, that he went on a trip with his friend Griff, who later struggled with mental illness (Dorst, 195), and that he had a bad experience boating with his uncle (Dorst, 202a). Beyond this there is little information about his life and his day-to-day actions. Even Jen questions his existence at one point, writing “**You’d** better be real. I’m starting to get freaked out here & if you’re not who I think you are I’m going to **LOSE IT**” (Dorst, 191)

Even though Jen displays many symptoms of a person with DID, and the limited documentation of Eric’s life is similar to that of an alter, if her and Eric’s lives made sense, it would be logical to assume that they do not have DID. This is, however, far from the case; the most compelling evidence that they may be one person comes in the logical fallacies of Jen and Eric’s world.

The most significant problem with their lives is the fact that rather than just leaving notes occasionally, they have long correspondences with each other. For example, at one point Jen and Eric go back and forth eleven times on one page (Dorst, 87), and this sort of thing is not uncommon. For this to happen, each of them would have to read through the entire book many times. On top of this, there are several instances where we are led to believe that Jen and Eric pass off the book three to four times over the course of several hours; in at least three instances, they talk about meeting up within a day and both respond multiple times, such as when they discuss meeting at a theater at 9:15, and they respond to each other at least three times (Dorst, 240). At another point, Eric states “You wrote 112 notes today. Average of 28 per pass” (Dorst, 16)—Jen went through the book four times. That means that they have less than twelve hours to skim a combined 1,824 pages, not including footnotes and the foreword. On top of that, handing off the book is not a simple task; both Jen and Eric live off-campus, so it takes time to get to the library. This is especially true for Eric, since he has to move through the tunnels.

Carrying out entire conversations by means of skimming an entire 456 page novel is unrealistic, implying that the comments may be written in some other way. The only plausible options are either that they do absolutely nothing other than read and pass on the book, or that they write in it together. Jen cannot dedicate her whole life to reading the book since she is enrolled in college, taking classes, and working a job. While she struggles in school, she still gets her work done, meaning that she does not merely read the book all the time. The only logical explanation is that they are together when they write the book. This could only happen if they were the same person, since there are many instances of Jen and Eric talking about how they have never met each other (Dorst, 25).

If the temporal inconsistency of Jen and Eric’s writings were not evidence enough, the evolution (or lack thereof) of their handwriting is inconsistent with scientific findings. It has been widely documented that people’s handwriting evolves over the course of people’s lives (Why Handwriting Changes as You Age, 2). Eric’s first notes in the book come when he was supposedly sixteen years old, and by the last ones he is at least twenty-eight (Dorst, 12), yet his handwriting looks exactly the same. This implies that his notes were not actually spread out over that length of time.

One could argue that this is simply a matter of printing ease for Dorst and Abrams; it is true that altering the font of Eric’s handwriting over time would be slightly difficult. That said, no other expenses are spared in the making of “*S*”; inserts are included, there are drawings on the pages, and the notes in the margins include arrows and colors. There are even instances of the boldness of the handwriting fading over the course of a single note (Dorst, 384), further demonstrating the attention to detail in the novel. It is possible that Dorst and Abrams did not consider the evolution of handwriting over time, but regardless of intention, this is yet another inconsistency in Jen and Eric’s world that could be explained by DID.

If Jen and Eric were one person with DID, they could communicate quickly, since shifts can take place as quickly as a few seconds. This would enable the conversations that they have in the margins. Additionally, if they were the same person, that could explain why their handwriting stays the same over time. It would also make sense that Jen’s handwriting differs from Eric’s since alters often have different styles of writing and speaking.

Another inconsistency in Jen and Eric’s writing is that at the beginning of the novel there are mostly blue and black notes and by the end the notes are mostly black. For example, the first black note from Jen doesn’t occur for over 100 pages (Dorst, 101). If the notes were left over dozens of readings spanning a long period of time, we might expect the notes from different time periods to be evenly distributed over the course of the novel—it seems unlikely that they would read 100 pages without leaving a single note, only to begin leaving many notes on the later pages. Some colors or notes are concentrated at the beginning of the novel and some are left to the end, implying that they came from just a few readings, not dozens.

Putting the earlier notes at the beginning and the later notes at the end makes it easier for the reader to make sense of Jen and Eric’s story. However, Dorst said in an interview that his goal was to throw a lot of information at the reader (Rothman, 11); clearly it was not his goal to make “*S*” an easy read. While the notes in the margins do follow somewhat of a chronological pattern, it is not strictly chronological. If the book was meant to make perfect sense, the notes should have been in a simpler order.

As well as writing their notes in a very loosely chronological order, Jen and Eric make numerous direct references to mental illness throughout the novel, starting at the very beginning of the text, which provides further evidence that they may struggle with psychological disorders. In the “Translator’s Note and Foreword,” Eric notes that there were claims that FXC was schizophrenic (Dorst, viii). After Jen dismisses these claims as “idiotic,” Eric confesses that he has recently had “people make judgments like that about who (he) is” (Dorst, viii). Despite his admission, Jen continues to correspond with him. Shortly thereafter, Jen casually equates “eccentric” with “crazy,” which Eric strongly objects to (Dorst, x). His passionate rejection of the term “crazy” shows that he is sensitive about the subject. These two early references could be a coincidence, but regardless of whether or not they are intentional, they are further evidence of the theme of mental illness in “*S.*”

Jen and Eric’s discussion of mental illness continues throughout the novel. Jen uses the word “crazy” again, and Eric once again says that he doesn’t use that word (Dorst, 53). Later Jen accidently uses the word again, but Eric says that he doesn’t care about it anymore. When Jen asks why, Eric responds “I don’t know but I think it’s because we’re doing this” (Dorst, 375). His correspondence with Jen seems to help him come to terms with the public’s perception of the word “crazy.” At another point, Eric brings up a psychotherapist named Hubbell1 (Dorst, 171). Finally, Eric notes that his friend Griff, with whom he went to Florida, struggled with mental illness, more specifically depression, and he ended up committing suicide (Dorst, 368). There is a link between DID and depression, and people with DID are at a very high risk for suicide (Psychology Today, 3).

There are also multiple instances throughout the book of notes mysteriously appearing in the margins that both Jen and Eric claim not to have written. At one point a few lines are underlined in the classic grey that normally denotes Eric’s first notes. Jen and Eric discuss how the lines had not been underlined earlier (Dorst, 103). Either one of them wrote it and forgot, unlikely since there are no other instances of them forgetting something like that, or someone else has written in the book. At another point, Eric tells Jen that he’s impressed with her skill at drawing the S symbol, to which Jen responds that she doesn’t draw them (Dorst, xiii). At the end of the novel, Jen once again brings up the subject, asking Eric if he was the one who drew the S symbol. Eric responds by swearing that he didn’t (Dorst, 448). This implies that the illustrations were done by another person, or another personality.

If indeed another person was writing in the novel, these notes would not make any sense. The person clearly doesn’t contribute to their discussions, so he or she is not trying to help Jen and Eric solve the mystery of Straka. Nor is this person simply spying on Jen and Eric, since then there would be no reason for them to leave any markings at all. Finally, if the person were trying to stop Jen and Eric from doing their work, it would be more effective to be more direct, or to simply take the book away. There is no logical reason for a third party to leave such marks in the book, unless the third party is in fact another alter of Jen.

There are admittedly things that would not make sense if Jen and Eric were the same person. Some of these examples can be explained and some cannot. The fact that there are occasional instances of Jen and Eric seeming to be separate people is not conclusive evidence that they are. Since all descriptions of Jen and Eric come from their own points of view, there is a fundamental difficulty in proving anything about them. We see only *their* perceptions of themselves. Most readers assume that characters have a basic understanding of their reality, but this is not necessarily the case. If one assumes that everything character-narrators say is true, some things in the work make sense (though not everything, as demonstrated above). If instead one considers the possibility that some of their accounts are delusional and incorrect—that there is an “unreliable narrator”—the inconsistencies of their world make more sense.

An unreliable narrator can be defined as “a character whose telling of the story is not completely accurate or credible due to problems with the character’s mental state or maturity” (Unreliable Narrator, 4). There are many examples of unreliable narrators in literature, such as Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, (Nabokov) and Montresor in *The Cask of Amontillado* (Poe). Sometimes the narrator is so delusional that the plot is majorly distorted, such as the movie *Fight Club*, where the narrator actually suffers from DID (Fincher). Some literary critics have gone as far as to argue that all first-person narrators, which Jen and Eric are, are necessarily unreliable since they are subject to their own biases and prejudices (Unreliable Narrator, 4). In this context it would be very reasonable for Jen to be an unreliable narrator suffering from DID, and for Eric to be one of her alters.

After the first reading of “*S*,” Jen and Eric come across as melodramatic and not completely psychologically sound, but they still appear to be regular, healthy people. Upon closer examination, however, glaring issues arise in the world they describe. The system of time doesn’t make sense, Jen is too paranoid, and Eric is too elusive, among other things. Upon further investigation, more and more cues appear, such as the way their handwriting never changes, and the way they repeatedly mention therapists and mental illness. Finally, even according to their own writings about themselves, Jen fits the description of someone who is suffering from DID. The evidence favors the interpretation that Jen is an individual with DID and Eric is one of her alters. Identity is a major theme in “*S*,” from S’s struggle to discover his past to Jen and Eric’s attempts to reveal Straka’s true identity. The possibility of Jen being one person suffering from Dissociative Identity Disorder shatters traditional readings of “*S*,” painting a darker picture of identity as a confused and subjective term, rather than as a constant that defines who a person is.

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