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Narrative Materiality and the Contemporary Book

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1. Happy Reading

In 2019, the publishing house Penguin Books ran an advertising campaign across the UK for its imprint Penguin Classics entitled "Happy Reading." The campaign comprised of photographs of individually owned books from the Penguin Classics range that have been handled, used, and thoroughly read. One campaign poster, for instance, displayed a copy of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) complete with bent cover, annotation labels, and the marks of a book worn with use.[1] More than just a celebration of their stories and worlds, the campaign sought to vividly display (and sell) readers' physical encounters with the printed book. As its promotional material stated, each book photographed "tells a story of its own, through its cracked spine, dog-eared pages, scribbled margins or its missing cover."[2] The story contained by the book is only half of the book's story.

Penguin's attention to readers' tactile handling of the book is clearly attentive to what Leah Price terms "the manual dimension of reading," and in this respect, the campaign is strikingly contemporary.[3] "Happy Reading," after all, notably appears at a time when the sociology, media history, and literary study of the book and of reading have captured the attention of the academy. This coincidence need not be limited to criticism either. Twenty-first-century Anglophone fiction, as many remark, has increasingly turned to a thematic and formal emphasis on the materiality of its printed inscription in response to a changing digital media landscape.[4] An archive of this material might include the textual experimentation of Mark Z. Danielewski's *The House of Leaves* (2000), Ali Smith's printing of two versions of *How to Be Both* (2014), Chris Ware's book-in-a-box graphic novel *Building Stories* (2012), or Nicola Barker's typographic play in *H(A)PPY* (2017), but also less explicitly experimental

texts that explore the permutations of their bookish form, such as James Smythe's *No Harm Can Come to a Good Man* (2014), discussed shortly. As Jessica Pressman suggests, these literary engagements with the "bookishness" of the codex book "describe an aesthetic practice and cultural phenomenon that figures the book as artifact rather than as just a medium for information transmission and, in so doing, presents the book as a fetish for our digital age."[5]

In this scholarship's expansion, however, less has been made of the impact of the book on readers' comprehension of narrative. In cases where it has been, the textual archive has remained largely pre-twentieth century; likewise, media-conscious narrative theory has often turned to nonprint media due to verbal narrative structure's dominance in narratology.[6] Yet the rise of "bookish" books, coupled with renewed focus on the material dimension of reading, clearly invites reconsideration of narrative comprehension attentive to this form. This essay therefore asks two related questions. First, what kinds of narrative dynamics should we look to when incorporating the printed book into a consideration of narrative? And second, what can bookish form make perceptible of twenty-first-century digital culture amid the proliferation of new forms of reading, writing, and consuming narrative?

I consider both by way of an analysis of James Smythe's British science fiction novel *No Harm Can Come to a Good Man*.[7] Despite lacking the experimental aesthetics normally associated with "bookish" books, *No Harm* thematically reckons with the bounded nature of its printed form to offer vivid reflection on the book's narrative temporalities. The novel follows the story of Laurence Walker, a U.S. senator running for nomination in the 2020 Democratic Party presidential primaries, whose political campaign runs aground once a ubiquitous data service called *ClearVista*, italicized throughout, predicts that he has 0% chance of success. ClearVista, which offers users forecasts of the likelihood of seemingly any event in a digitally quantified world, provides the novel's speculative vision for the methods

of capture, "datafication," and statistical forecasting that underpin the technological and ideological regime of "big data" in the twenty-first century.[8] It is a technology that, as Laurence is told, "finds out everything about you, and it learns you, and it predicts you."[9]

In what follows, I argue that *No Harm* conceives of the book to be an object whose material presence shapes the modality of narrative comprehension in ways that have an impact on readers' orientation toward the narrative future—the medium's ability to shape narrative comprehension I term "narrative materiality." In comparison to the more explicit foregrounding of printed codex form found in the above examples, *No Harm* instead relies on careful alignment of its narrative structure with the book's organization of time, exploiting the connection between its plot and the book's already realized future. In this respect, *No Harm*'s less immediate foregrounding of bookish form is, I would argue, all the more enlightening for it. Just as "Happy Reading" casts attention to an object more often looked through than at, *No Harm* excavates a dynamic of narrative comprehension that in no way is exclusive to it but rather underpins narrative sense-making of the book more generally.

In this essay's second half, I argue that the novel puts these narrative dynamics to surprising diagnostic use in the service of its broader commentary on datafication and control. Rather than positioning bookishness to be a recalcitrant remainder that eludes digital abstraction, or merely a fetish for the digital world, the novel knits the narrative momentum it derives from its bookish form to its plot in such a way as to amplify the processes of representation, production, and futurization that ground the logic of data capture, suggested by digital culture critics to be central to the fantasies of big data today. In this way, *No Harm* maps big data's ideological and temporal endgame onto the book's already realized narrative future. My concluding point is that *No Harm* ultimately lingers on book reading to stage its critique of that regime. Just as the time of reading can cut through and open up the book's closure, reading, the novel suggests, can also unsteady the temporal reductions of that same

technological regime through its capacity to contradictorily revive a present that appears to have already happened.

2. Narrative Materiality

"Happy Reading" knows something about the relationship between time, reading, and the book. Its photographed worn objects speak to how books embody their own kind of duration, which readers move through sequentially in and over time. Yet, as book historians show, books equally complicate sequence and progression, encouraging readers to open them at will to any page, to flick through, to reread, to anticipate to read, or to read nonsequentially, too.[10] A principal outcome of focusing on the book for an understanding of narrative comprehension therefore has to do with time. Specifically, I connect recent book-historical work to arguments in narrative theory concerning the ontologically doubled nature of narrative futurity. I argue that *No Harm* takes this doubled narrative temporality, molds it around the coordinates of its plot, and transforms it into a critical resource for a dystopian depiction of big data's regime of prediction and control.

The novel begins with a short prologue in which Laurence watches a video of himself holding his family at gunpoint. The video is a digital production of ClearVista's making, designed to support its prediction of the 0% likelihood of Laurence's party nomination. This is not ClearVista's first video. In the first, a digitally distorted Laurence stands in the foreground while approximations of his wife and two daughters contort in panic behind him. Laurence's team requests that the algorithm rerun the data, leading to a second video. A further iteration is later sent to his campaign advisor, Amit Suri. ClearVista's subsequent videos flesh out the first video's grisly details. In the prologue's narration of one of these later videos, his family looks even more terrified, and Laurence holds a gun. The sound of sobbing plays in the background, and it ends with the sharp crack of a gunshot and a scream.

The unreality of the video's digital facsimile of Laurence—a "broken" composition of "photographs and screen grabs" that makes him sick—is the first of the novel's many representations of digital capture's distorting effects.[11] By beginning the novel with this video—"Laurence Walker presses play and the video begins" is its introductory sentence—*No Harm* pointedly opens with an image of imperfect mediation: both digital video's mediation of nondigital phenomena and the representation of one form of media (digital video) through another (the book).[12] In this way, the prologue's stress on broken, digital approximation draws mediation to the foreground, a form of ekphrasis that is at pains to describe an unclear and unsettling digital image through words on the page. This heightened reference to media, at the very moment when Laurence encounters his predicted future, significantly anticipates the novel's alignment of this predicted future with the future of the book that lies materially ahead in wait.

No Harm's plot centers around ClearVista's prediction: can Laurence avoid it, or does it force him to act in a way that brings it about? Spoiler alert: it's the latter. Laurence's encounter with ClearVista's video here is also an encounter, it turns out, with a future that comes to pass. In this respect, the prologue offers a form of narrative prolepsis. Despite the video providing a prediction of rather than reference "in advance" to events in the story's future, the prediction is retrospectively proved accurate in a way that I would suggest renders it so.[13] *No Harm* utilizes this device to critique the ideological fantasies of big data through an emphasis on the circular and often murky relationship between representation and production that underpins the logic of datafication. But my point for now is that the video catalyzes a reading experience that draws on interpretative dynamics often associated with narratives that indicate their future in advance.

A pervasive sense of the present's coincidence with that predicted future underpins the novel, with ClearVista's forecast providing an outline that characters find themselves

both knowingly and unknowingly repeating. When Laurence snaps at his daughter Lane for shaving her younger sister's head, for instance, he quickly recognizes how "the layout of them, the three of them" eerily repeats ClearVista's video.[14] *No Harm* compounds this effect throughout, from the repetition of the colors of Laurence's suit and tie to his wife Deanna's familiarity with the distant sound of sobbing, significant details in ClearVista's forecast.[15] On the one hand, these details indicate the unshakable impact the videos have on their viewers. But on the other, because ClearVista's forecast does happen by the novel's conclusion, the effect also suggests the impression or presence of that future in the narrative present, too, as if casting its shadow backward and contributing in part to the narrative's ineluctable momentum. This certainly speaks to how advance indication of the narrative future is said to reorient interpretation.[16] For Gary Saul Morson, when narratives indicate or imply what is to come, narrative time undergoes a process of transformation. Causality begins to run backward as well as forward, and narrative events, he suggests, accrue a teleological temporality in which they appear "not only pushed but *pulled*" toward a future that lies in wait.[17] By beginning with ClearVista's prediction, *No Harm* is remarkably suspenseful, inviting its reader to measure the prediction against what they think may happen. Yet the narrative's teleological pull remains insistent. This is no clearer than in the moments when Laurence's present finally does coincide with ClearVista's prediction. At the novel's conclusion, a crowd sets fire to the lake house in which Laurence holds his family at gunpoint. The narration stipulates, tellingly, that the "flames seem to catch before the torch even hits the wood . . . as if this house was always meant to be burned."[18] Events that happen in the novel such as this strangely appear to manifest a future that precedes them, as if they are "always meant to be." And just as the novel draws its reader into this teleological momentum, tracing the imprint of a possible future on the narrative present, its characters also gradually resign themselves to or anticipate an ominous fate, including Laurence

himself.[19] Less clear, though, is if the future was "always meant to be" because of ClearVista's assertive presence or because of the novel's knowing recognition of its material inscription.

After all, from a perspective of the book, *No Harm*'s narrative future *has* already happened. Perhaps the best-known critic of narrative temporality and the future is Peter Brooks, who suggests, in his theory of plot, that, if "the past is to be read as present, it is a curious present that we know to be past in relation to a future we know to be already in place, already in wait for us to reach it."[20] Brooks's wider discussion concerns the relation between verbal tense and narrative endings, but his comments here equally describe the narrative dynamics of book reading, in the sense that readers orient toward two futures at once: both to the anticipated future intimated by the present of the story's events and to the narrative's future that they know already lies in place. The reader's perspective is therefore split between the sequential movement of decoding each sentence, which coincides with their mental construction of the plot's spatiotemporal coordinates, and a metatextual awareness of their own spatiotemporal coordinates handling the book, this latter awareness reminding the reader that the narrative's conclusion already lies ahead at the book's terminus.

Brooks's point regarding reading's "curious" present ties both to a phenomenological tradition of narrative theory—for example, Wolfgang Iser's remarks on the "wandering viewpoint"—and, implicitly, to an understanding of narrative time that takes the book as its native medium.[21] Narrative theorist Mark Currie extrapolates this account of narrative temporality through reference to the book: "In written text, the future lies there to the right, awaiting its actualization by the reading, so that written text can be said to offer a block view of time which is never offered to us in lived experience."[22] Currie points to a particular kind of temporal doubleness in narrative sense-making. Reading, in this light, involves comprehending something past that issues from a closed future as if it were present. Narrative

temporality is therefore doubled in this case, and reading affords the strange ontological leap by which a future one knows to already have taken place can also produce the appearance of contingency and incite forms of anticipation toward the unknown future, despite foreknowledge of its closure.

The book models Brooks's and Currie's formulations of narrative temporality. But this is not to exclude nonprint media from the picture entirely. After all, *No Harm*'s plot would similarly lie ahead in wait if read on a Kindle, an advance outcome determined by its digital inscription. Nevertheless, I would suggest that the printed book provides the most vivid expression of this doubled temporality of narrative sense-making. To draw on Andrew Piper's account of book reading, books can visualize and provide access to the narrative future through their capacity to be grasped "as a totality."[23] For Piper, the printed book's pages, held and turned, measure the time of reading in ways that offer tactile visualization of the bounded nature of the book's temporal enclosure. Digital reading devices may use percentage displays, but the screen lacks the printed book's same tactile corroboration of the time of reading, where past and future pages on which the narrative is inscribed lie to the side of the one that the reader faces.[24] Digital texts have their own kind of materiality, but as Piper suggests, the differences between the future enclosed by the pages of the printed book and the digital book—the latter contained instead by an interaction between the digital file, operating system, and storage location—bear on how readers may visualize, verify, and access that future.[25]

Readers grasp printed books, then, as forms of totality, and through this, they glimpse a different kind of time to that available in life: simultaneous and closed as opposed to the open and contingent present. That readers can visit the future out of turn by flicking the page with ease testifies to this, a capacity for nonlinear reading argued to be intimately related to the book form.[26] With Piper once more, wrapping the sequential time of reading into the

possibility for the book's random access and its simultaneous totality, "the book is an amalgam of the arbitrary, the simultaneous, and the sequential."[27] My understanding of narrative materiality takes this complex temporal reference as its starting point to emphasize the ontologically doubled nature of narrative futurity involved in reading the book. *No Harm*, I argue, steeps readers in a narrative structure that draws momentum from its life as a book, and it plots accordingly around the coordinates of the book's already realized future. It is difficult in this light to put aside references to paper and print in the novel just as Laurence's future coincides with its prediction. Laurence's burnt house folds inward "like origami," the lake reflects smoke as if it were full of "ash, or ink," and Laurence himself "feels as if he is made from paper."[28] Laurence's story is therefore one of being trapped inside of a possible future that seems to have already happened, where the plot maps the outline of ClearVista's prediction to the book's finite pages. *No Harm*'s bookish qualities stem, then, from its narrative emphasis on a temporal dynamic that the printed book most readily (although not exclusively) unleashes, emphasizes, and models.[29]

In a television interview late in the novel, Laurence debates the status of the ClearVista video that gets leaked to the press with his interviewer. The interviewer suggests that the video "*is* real" insofar as it exists in the world.[30] Laurence disagrees: "Right, but the video hasn't happened."[31] With just a small leap, the anchor's gesture to the video's ontological status speaks outward to the qualities of the narrative future that the video also stands in for: materially "real" in the sense of lying ahead of the reader even if not yet narrated. Laurence's insistence here duplicates by contrast his insistence throughout that the future is his to make, and in this respect, Laurence's debate captures something of the doubled nature of time implied by narrative materiality.[32] Laurence's belief in the future's flexibility mirrors a readerly inhabitance of a narrative present that, according to his perspective, appears contingent. His point articulates something of the imaginative pull of

reading more generally: stories immerse readers in worlds, perspectives, and plots that can very much appear uncertain, open, or like a "curious" present from the perspective of the reader's sequential actualization.[33] Such a perspective, though, mixes with an awareness that Laurence's future has already taken place, albeit at an ontological remove; the book's ending is "real," an artifact of its medium, and imprints on the narrative's same "curious" present. One perspective gives the appearance of an unknown and contingent future, the other a totalized and necessary one.

No Harm interrogates these dynamics of reading emphasized by the printed book in the moment of its narrative climax. It concludes with Amit rushing to the remnants of the house to which Laurence has taken his family and around which a crowd gathers:

> The whole thing is gone, or will be. . . .
> *This* is how the video ends.
> From the house he hears a bang, the crack of a pistol; and then Alyx's voice screams through the darkness. . . .
> Everybody stands still, to see what happens next.[34]

In the moment of the narrative catching up with ClearVista's prediction, past, present, and future murkily coincide. Amit's anticipation of the effects of the fire ("or will be") blur into his view of the house's current state ("is gone"). His perspective compacts multiple points of time into one—something that both has not and has already happened—just as the narrative catches up with the gunshot and scream that ends ClearVista's video forecast. More significantly, though, as for what happens after, we don't know. Beyond a short epilogue in which Laurence swims with his now-deceased son, addressed shortly, this is where the novel's temporal arc ends. Events that follow ClearVista's prediction exceed the book itself.

The novel's climactic suspension is less a refusal of narration than it is a recognition of powerlessness to escape the alignment it establishes throughout between the content of ClearVista's video and the book's narrative future. By marrying its materiality to the video,

the narrative has to end where the video does, and in so doing, the novel illuminates the import and significance of that marriage. *No Harm*'s ending, in other words, exploits the fact of its inscription in a temporally past future made visible by the book, ultimately relinquishing the page's capacity for divergence from anything except the narrative future that ClearVista forecasts from the start. In this way, *No Harm* derives its narrative dynamics from the time structure of its printed form, foregrounding and making use of the contradictory qualities of futurity that issue from the book's containment of narrative. Laurence's belief in an open future, which is at odds with the plot's fatalistic structure, finds correlative in readers' actualization of a present they know to be past, a future that is already realized from a perspective of the reader's handling of the book.

3. Making the Future

Writing on the cultural impact of big data, Inge van de Ven asks how narrative fiction should make sense of increasingly quantified lives and worlds. The paradigm of big data, van de Ven suggests, requires an epistemic shift away from narrative's causal and semiotic properties to that of the database, a nonselective and open form of data to be manipulated by users.[35] Indeed, if causality would dominate modern accounts of probability, then correlation is now the model for prediction in the world of data analytics. As media theorist Wendy Hui Kyong Chun argues, big data analyses challenge perceptions of change and causation because they insist that "clearly noncausal relations—seemingly accidental relations—seem to be better predictors of future behavior than so-called essential relations."[36] In other words, big data—a technological paradigm that seeks to quantify a vast range of phenomena for the purposes of analysis, management, and prediction—calculates through the correlation of seemingly nonrelated phenomena rather than through appeal to causation. These predictive methods, Chun argues, have little concern for why things happen or indeed why correlations occur.

And often when applied, particularly in sectors such as marketing and security, this method of basing predictions on perceived correlations without questioning the why raises concerns about the bearing these systems have on the future, because of their tendencies of control toward "amplifying certain already existing behaviors and preempting others" rather than understanding behavior, changing behavior, or, indeed, in their more surreptitious forms, permitting behavior "that remains uncertain or virtual."[37]

I argue that these temporal implications lie at the heart of *No Harm*'s speculative depiction of ClearVista's quantification, prediction, and management of daily life, expressed in the novel through the performative bearing of datafication and prediction on the futures forecasted. Late in the novel, Amit investigates the reasons for why ClearVista produced the video that it did. Thomas Hershel, programmer of ClearVista, breaks down the software to him as a combination of cloud-powered data mining operation and predictive algorithm. So far, so ordinary. *No Harm*'s speculative twist, however, is that ClearVista also *produces* the future that it predicts. When Laurence applies to ClearVista, it provides him with a 0% chance of campaign success. To some respect this appears improbable because up until then, he is a successful politician. But Hershel explains the prediction to result from several factors. Firstly, Laurence's competitor, Homme, asks ClearVista the question first, receiving a 62% likelihood of success. As Hershel explains, the algorithm follows an absolutist logic, and so Laurence's implied odds mean that he is likely to lose. Secondly, ClearVista's calculation of Laurence's background—including his military experience in Afghanistan and grief over his son's death who drowns early in the novel—suggest that according to the algorithm, Laurence "was always going to have a breakdown."[38] But the third crux for Hershel is that because it factors every variable it can find into its predictions, ClearVista also reflects itself in those calculations. By factoring the likelihood of users seeking its counsel as a variable in its predictions, ClearVista therefore calculates that its predictions influence users' decisions

and therefore the futures predicted. So if, according to its own logic, "Laurence's breakdown was inevitable," an event that Hershel both speculates will happen if Laurence loses and that also provides a reason for why he will lose, then ClearVista forecasts a future that incorporates the influence of this forecast into the outcome it predicts.[39] Consequently, ClearVista predicts that Laurence has 0% chance to materialize both Homme's 62% chances and also Laurence's crisis. It then leaks Laurence's video to the press, the final nail in the campaign's coffin. ClearVista forecasts a future, factors the influence of its forecast in that predicted future, and then releases the video to make that future happen. As Hershel states, "It wrote itself into the prediction, and then all it could do was fulfil it."[40]

No Harm draws on its narrative structure of a prediction becoming proleptic to replicate ClearVista's strange, circular functioning. The software, Hershel insists, is adaptive, responding to new input and information, reiterating and adding detail to its original prediction. After Laurence's disastrous television interview, Amit receives a final video depicting Laurence as he just was on the screen, updated and refined, "[a]s if the algorithm realized that suddenly the version it was looking for, that it was trying to create" was there all along.[41] The idea of a prediction becoming proleptic suggests a particularly active relationship between prediction and the future it can produce. Mark Currie's notion of "performative prolepsis" expresses this circular logic, which entails the process by which a prediction seeks to produce the future that it envisages through the bearing of that prediction on the present.[42] Reminiscent of a self-fulfilling prophecy, *No Harm* extracts this trope from the realm of the divine or metaphysical into the everyday digital media landscape, with the novel's repeated gesture to the impact that predictions, statistical models, and media reports can have on shaping events.[43] Note, after all, the thin distinction between ClearVista "looking for" and "trying to create" an image of Laurence for its final video above. Its forecasting rests uneasily somewhere between a search for Laurence's image, imminent in the data, and an

active invention of that image.

ClearVista's interventional production of its prediction would remain in the realm of speculation if it were not for its expression of the looping relationship between representation and production integral to datafication and big data's statistical foreclosure of futurity. For advocates of big data, datafication is representational rather than interventional, a means of "captur[ing] quantifiable information" from phenomena.[44] There is material phenomena and there is their dematerialization into data.[45] However, critics of datafication and big data complicate this account. Chun suggests that there is "an odd paradox at the heart of capture systems" integral to the systems of big data because datafication's relation to material phenomena is "both representation and ontology, data and essence."[46] While presented to be a neutral quantification or representation, Chun's point is that processes of data capture equally intervene in and refigure that which is captured, whereby the informational syntax extracted of the datafied process shapes both that process and users' interactions with it.[47] In other words, the thing captured into data is subtly reconfigured by its informational model. If datafication involves selection and exclusion to extract that model, as other suggest, then it follows that the representation of phenomena as data is also a reshaping of that phenomena.[48] Data capture systems "actively restructure what they allegedly discover."[49]

In cutting through the claims of big data, Chun's argument goes some way to explaining why the ideology of big data struggles to admit—in any sense—the genuinely novel future: its predictive models rely on a quantifying method that restructures phenomena in their own image. Arguments such as Chun's remind us that datafication does not simply "dematerialize" the material world, then, but transforms and restructures it. In this respect, as Rita Raley describes in the context of surveillance, data is "performative": the composition of profiles out of datasets preemptively produces the terror suspect.[50] Or as Louise Amoore suggests in writing of the eerily named cybersecurity company Recorded Future, such

systems produce "action in the present, based on possible correlations between past data archives (such as national security lists) and archives of the predictive future," and this is to say nothing of the ways in which big data analyses reproduce and exacerbate existing social inequalities.[51] It strikes me that ClearVista narrativizes precisely this blurring of representation and production through its autonomous production of an event that it initially predicts. *No Harm*, after all, repeatedly literalizes ClearVista's capacity to control or "steer" events. Its everyday impact registers everywhere from encouragement to drive a certain car to personalized television viewing, but the novel is also cannily prescient on the technology's predictive influence, too, such as when Laurence's competitor Homme eventually acts out his own prediction, "telling the audience that they asked for this, and lo, it has become true," a vivid example of the workings of performative prolepsis.[52]

Through datafication's restructuring of that which it captures, put to use in forms of data analysis that predict and preempt existing behaviors, the ideology of big data can entail a performative metaphysics of temporal capture in which the future is rendered accessible and even producible through its prediction. Yet, more than *No Harm*'s narrativization of this through prolepsis, I would argue that the novel also derives its aesthetic critique of big data through its emphasis on its bookish form, offering a narratological diagnosis of big data's ideological endgame in the form of a future determined in advance. After all, the printed book is itself an engine of temporal closure. By bookending its narrative with ClearVista's predictions, and by deriving much of its narrative momentum from the already past nature of the narrative future, *No Harm* maps the temporal foreclosure of the book to ClearVista's fixing of the future. In this way, the novel finds in the book an expressive shape for big data's attempted closure of the future through prediction.

If the ideology of big data is made possible partly by datafication's elision of representation and production, then the capacity of these systems to shape the future, like the

doubled temporal reference of the narrative comprehension of the book, would result from the interaction between the material and supposedly immaterial. This is why the novel's repeated querying over the reality of ClearVista's prediction speaks both to the effect of the printed book on readers' comprehension of its narrative *and* to the impact of ClearVista's video on the plot's events. As family friend June says of Laurence's video: "Real as anything, seeing it on a screen like that."[53] By putting its form into contact with its broader thematic critique of ClearVista, *No Harm* narrativizes the impact of big data systems' modeling of past, present, and future. The novel's emphasis on the way in which the book impinges on the comprehension of the narrative's future results in a narrative that gathers considerable momentum from the temporal foreclosure it knows stems from the book's materiality. In this way, the novel textually amplifies the consequences of big data—consequences that result from datafication's elision between the representation of events and the production of events—not through a nostalgic return to the book, but through its emphasis on the book's doubled temporality.

4. Reading Contingency

I want to conclude with a small detail from the "Happy Reading" campaign. The phrase "From the bookshelf of" lies beneath each photographed book in small print, followed by the owner's name. Each book's worn qualities are therefore material impressions of each individual reader's handling and reading. Such manifestations of a reader through print recollects the association of reading with private, individual experience.[54] But the campaign's emphasis on the individual owner and reader takes on further meaning in the light of changes undergone to personhood, let alone reading, in twenty-first-century digital culture. With the increasing division of the subject into datasets of demographic information and behavioral profiles, there is perhaps something comforting, we may interpret, in the embodied and

individualizing interaction between printed book and reader so vividly displayed in "Happy Reading."

These possible comforts of book reading find correlative in strategies of aesthetic critique that emphasize aspects of subjectivity that exceed datafication. This is certainly the case for *No Harm*. The novel frequently pushes against ClearVista's technological determinism; as Laurence insists, he is "a good man," one of the novel's many gestures to ClearVista's incapacity to quantify his character, which he and others supplement and reiterate.[55] Yet Laurence's belief that he is a good man appeals to a markedly specific interiority that isn't as universal as he hopes. As Amit and Laurence consider: "He needs to go back and be a husband and father again. All he can do is blame technology and focus on humanity."[56] If Penguin's "Happy Reading" campaign recollects reading's historical association with bourgeois individualism, then *No Harm* here leverages a similarly liberal and individualistic understanding of the human against datafication. Laurence is a good man, husband, and father. The irony that ClearVista numerically quantifies these qualities in its initial report, and that such characteristics contribute to the forms of "prototypical whiteness" that structure contemporary technologies of biometric, racialized surveillance in the first place, is evidently lost on the novel's protagonists.[57]

This is not to say that *No Harm* is entirely without teeth, though, and nor is it to suggest that novel engagements with bookish form must result in nostalgic or fetishistic responses to twenty-first-century digital culture. Some final words from Chun prove apposite here. Chun suggests that rather than completely dispensing with big data's predictive models, we might instead challenge the ideological closure they imply and recalibrate our temporal orientation toward them: "we must frame the gap between their predictions and the future as calls for responsibility."[58] Chun stresses a means of decision-making, in other words, that emphasizes the "gap" between the future's analysis, modeling, and forecasting and the actual

future.

I would argue that *No Harm* exploits this temporal "gap," doing so in the service of its broader critique of the ideology of big data, by lingering on the narrative dynamics of book reading. *No Harm*'s epilogue is a short, two-page scene that precedes the majority of the novel's plot, involving Laurence teaching his son Sean to swim at the lake in which he later drowns. This epilogue follows immediately and abruptly after the gunshot at the lake house, as if waking the reader from a bad dream. In it, Laurence, seemingly untroubled and looking into the early morning sun on the horizon, talks to Sean about their future: "This is what our life, when we get a chance, should be."[59] The irony of Laurence's gesture to chance given its seeming lack in *No Harm*'s plot is a cruel twist of foreknowledge, but in the light of my broader argument, it is telling that this passage, in the same present tense narration, focuses primarily around Laurence's anticipation of the unknown future. My point is that if Laurence's living out of the ClearVista video just prior vividly renders one half of the doubled temporality of narrative materiality (bringing about a conclusion perceived to be inevitable and that has, from a perspective of the printed book, already happened), then the epilogue's return to Laurence's narrative perspective stresses this doubled structure's other side. The epilogue's narration perspectivally maps the moment of reading to the spatiotemporal coordinates of a present that for Laurence pivots toward an unknown future. Here, the apparently open future pulls tensely against information about Laurence's future that we now hold. But my point is not that the epilogue envisions a counterfactual past, nor that it retreats into prelapsarian, pre-ClearVista idyll, but rather that the narration flaunts the ontological leap by which past is comprehended as a "curious" present in the process of narrative comprehension. In doing so, the epilogue cuts through the novel's oppressive momentum; it demands a particular kind of comprehension on behalf of the reader, one that reinserts the effect of contingency and the unknown future derived from Laurence's present

into one's foreknowledge of the plot's future.

This may seem contradictory, but if we understand narrative comprehension of the printed book to always involve a balancing act like this, then the epilogue merely emphasizes a capacity of narrative sense-making always in play. The epilogue therefore exploits not just the fact that, in Morson's words, one perspective of the book provides "a future that has long since been determined," but also that from the perspective of reading, narrative comprehension equally injects "process" and "an open future" into that same textual materiality, too.[60] If book history opens up the ways in which the codex book can habituate contingency through encouragement of nonsequential reading, then narrative materiality expresses the process by which the horizon of reading rejuvenates the narrative future that we know to be past in such a way as to become perspectivally present; a leap, in other words, from the temporal necessity of the book's totality to the perspectival appearance of contingency in the narrative world.[61]

The novel, as I have argued, ensures ClearVista's prediction proleptic and draws on the temporal closure of the book to render an equivalent, attempted foreclosure of the future in twenty-first-century digital culture through the materialization of the world into data. Yet the book also recognizes in this epilogue the contingency envisioned by the act of reading itself, that in reading, the past is made present and even the most determinate future can be cleaved perspectivally open. Book reading amplifies and models Chun's temporal "gap." Not, that is, because the printed book's narrative future isn't fixed (it is), nor simply because we can choose to put the book down and suspend the narrative, but because the "curious" present of reading can render even the most determinate time-locus present and contingent, a temporary actualization in this epilogue that briefly relieves ClearVista of its otherwise oppressive temporal control. Through doing so, it highlights the pockets of contingency and temporal gaps that open between the totality of the book and the moment-to-moment

movement of reading, flaunting narrative comprehension's production of the appearance of the open and unknown future in the grip of its printed determination. In this way, the novel brings a narratological concern into contact with the ideological claims of big data in order to ignite a particular kind of feedback loop between book and reader, the time of reading and the time of living. The result is its encouragement of a critical relation to the present that reads contingency into any kind of modeling of the future, thereby providing the "grounds for creating new and different ones" precisely through stress on that gap between predicted and actual.[62] Taking this suggestion to heart in a novel centered on how technologies of data capture and predictive modeling seek closure of the future, *No Harm* stages the temporality of reading to be its means of cultural critique.

As "Happy Reading" suggests, books shape the comprehension of their stories, a realization more pertinent than ever in the light of the proliferation of multiple forms of reading, writing, and consuming narrative. Novel engagements with the book form in the twenty-first century clearly signal that books are more than just containers of story to be extracted and interpreted, and as narrative materiality proposes, this comes to the fore in how we understand the shaping of narrative's temporal reference. *No Harm*'s focus on the closed temporality of its narrative is therefore a form of bookish expression, which it puts to use in the service of its broader efforts to draw out and critique the temporal implications of datafication and statistical forecasting in twenty-first-century digital culture. In a contemporary digital landscape where the present is increasingly abstracted into datasets and the future is claimed to be accessible in a matter of seconds through algorithmic analysis, the printed book provides a technology that similarly fixes the future in place; but as *No Harm* encourages, this is done not simply in order to control the present but also to invite a present that cleaves that future open.

[1] "The Classics We Fell in Love With, As Chosen by Our Authors and Readers," Penguin Books UK, June 28, 2019, https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2019/jun/the-classic-i-fell-in-love-with-as-chosen-by-authors-and-readers.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Leah Price, *How To Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press, 2013), 22.

[4] See Jessica Pressman, "The Aesthetic of Bookishness in Twenty-First-Century Literature," in "Bookishness: The New Fate of Reading in the Digital Age," ed. Jonathan Freedman, special issue, *Michigan Quarterly Review* 48, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 465-82; Christina Lupton, "The Novel as the Future Anterior of the Book: Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* and Ali Smith's *The Accidental*," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 49, no. 3 (November 2016): 504-18; Mary K. Holland, "Materiality in the Late Age of Print," in *American Literature in Transition, 1990-2000*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 169-84; Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, Kári Driscoll, and Jessica Pressman, eds., *Book Presence in a Digital Age* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

[5] Jessica Pressman, "Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes:* Memorial, Fetish, Bookishness," *ASAP/Journal* 3, no.1 (January 2018): 97.

[6] See, for instance, Christina Lupton, *Reading and the Making of Time in the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018).

For a helpful summary, see Markus Kuhn and Jan-Noël Thon, "Transmedial Narratology: Current Approaches," *Narrative* 25, no. 3 (October 2017): 253-55.

[7] James Smythe, *No Harm Can Come to a Good Man* (London: The Borough Press, 2015).

[8] "To datafy a phenomenon is to put it in a quantified format so it can be tabulated and

analyzed." Viktor Mayer-Schönberger and Kenneth Cukier, *Big Data: The Essential Guide to Work, Life and Learning in the Age of Insight* (London: John Murray, 2017), 78. I use "big data" to refer to the technological paradigm of datafication, monitoring, and predictive and algorithmic analysis of high-volume datasets that quantify social action. Big data's paradigm is, as José van Dijck argues, also ideological, and built on particular epistemological assumptions. José van Dijck, "Datafication, Dataism and Dataveillance: Big Data between Scientific Paradigm and Ideology," in "Big Data Surveillance," ed. Mark Andrejevic and Kelly Gates, special issue, *Surveillance & Society* 12, no. 2 (2014): 197-208.

[9] Smythe, *No Harm*, 26.

[10] See Lupton, *Reading*.

[11] Smythe, *No Harm*, 1. The scream that concludes the prologue's video may indicate that this is the third video, which Amit receives, which Laurence has the opportunity to watch while Amit is sleeping, but which the novel does not otherwise narrate. Laurence's daughter, Alyx, screams at the novel's conclusion.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (1980; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 40.

[14] Smythe, *No Harm*, 148.

[15] Ibid., 299, 261, 305.

[16] For a helpful discussion of prolepsis and narrative sense-making, see Teresa Bridgeman, "Thinking Ahead: A Cognitive Approach to Prolepsis," *Narrative* 13, no. 2 (May 2005): 125-59.

[17] Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (London: Yale University Press, 1994), 50. Morson's account of foreshadowing's sign of "what *will* happen" is readily applicable to prolepsis. Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, 47. Like foreshadowing,

narratological prolepsis depends on the actual narrative future to distinguish it from anticipation; see Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 29-50.

[18] Smythe, *No Harm*, 364.

[19] Ibid., 322, 339, 369.

[20] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 23.

[21] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 109.

[22] Currie, *About Time*, 18.

[23] Andrew Piper, *Book Was There: Reading in Electronic Times* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 14.

[24] Ibid., 17.

[25] On digital reading devices: "No matter what the page number says, we have no way to corroborate this evidence with our senses, no idea where we are while we read." Ibid. A more detailed account of the narrative future in relation to digital materiality exceeds my scope, but it would necessarily engage with Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* (London: The MIT Press, 2008). This is also to acknowledge that printed books today are already shaped by digital processes; – see Lisa Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents* (London: Duke University Press, 2014), 7-8.

[26] See Peter Stallybrass, "Books and Scrolls: Navigating the Bible," in *Books and Readers in Early Modern England: Material Studies*, ed. Jennifer Andersen and Elizabeth Sauer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 42-79.

[27] Piper, *Book*, 54.

[28] Smythe, *No Harm*, 370, 372, 369.

[29] Of course, *No Harm* is not unique in its portrayal of a future that threatens to come to pass. For instance, on inescapable prognostication in Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*, see Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, 58-61. Elsewhere, science fiction can often turn to the unchangeable nature of historical time through glimpses of the future, particularly when occupied with time travel paradoxes, as outlined in David Wittenberg, *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 148-77.

[30] Smythe, *No Harm*, 273.

[31] Ibid.

[32] As Laurence states earlier: "You've all seen the video of something that hasn't happened, and is not going to happen." Ibid., 218.

[33] For an extended discussion, see David Wylot, *Reading Contingency: The Accident in Contemporary Fiction* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2020), 95-125.

[34] Smythe, *No Harm*, 372.

[35] Inge van de Ven, "The Monumental Knausgård: Big Data, Quantified Self, and Proust for the Facebook Generation," *Narrative* 26, no. 3 (October 2018): 325. See also Chelsea Oei Kern, "Big Data and the Practice of Reading in *Super Sad True Love Story*," *Arizona Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (Fall 2020): 81-105.

[36] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "On Hypo-Real Models or Global Climate Change: A Challenge for the Humanities," *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 3 (Spring 2015): 696.

[37] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (London: The MIT Press, 2017), 58-59. Chun draws on Antoinette Rouvroy, who argues that the rise of autonomic computing in these sectors, made possible by the paradigm of big data, decreasingly tolerates "unpredictability and spontaneity." Antoinette Rouvroy, "Technology, Virtuality and Utopia: Governmentality in an Age of Autonomic Computing," in *Law,*

Human Agency and Autonomic Computing: The Philosophy of Law Meets the Philosophy of Technology, ed. Mireille Hildebrandt and Antoinette Rouvroy (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011), 130.

[38] Smythe, *No Harm*, 337. When Deanna asks ClearVista if Laurence will become president prior to his son's death he's given a 63% chance. Ibid., 16.

[39] Ibid., 336.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid., 279.

[42] Currie, *About Time*, 43-44.

[43] As Deanna recognizes after the news broadcast of the ClearVista video and Laurence's interview, "[t]hey have made their own news." Smythe, *No Harm*, 281.

[44] Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier, *Big Data*, 78.

[45] Bill Brown terms this the "dematerialization hypothesis" in "Materiality," in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen (London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 55.

[46] Chun, *Updating*, 60.

[47] Chun, building on the work of Philip E. Agre, describes this through a five-step process of analysis, articulation, imposition, instrumentation, and elaboration. Ibid., 193.

[48] On selection and digitization, see Seb Franklin, *Control: Digitality as Cultural Logic* (London: The MIT Press, 2015), 14.

[49] Chun, *Updating*, 60.

[50] Rita Raley, "Dataveillance and Countervailance," in *"Raw Data" Is an Oxymoron*, ed. Lisa Gitelman (London: The MIT Press, 2013), 128.

[51] Louise Amoore, *Cloud Ethics*: *Algorithms and the Attributes of Ourselves and Others* (London: Duke University Press, 2020), 50. See also Simone Browne's account of

"digital epidermalization" in *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (London: Duke University Press, 2015), 109-10.

[52] Smythe, *No Harm*, 288, 304.

[53] Ibid., 295.

[54] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 174-207. For a longer history of Penguin Books and interwar democracy, see Richard Hornsey, "'The Penguins Are Coming': Brand Mascots and Utopian Mass Consumption in Interwar Britain," *Journal of British Studies* 57, no. 4 (2018): 812-39.

[55] Smythe, *No Harm*, 116, 72.

[56] Ibid., 265.

[57] Ibid., 81-82; Browne, *Dark Matters*, 110-19.

[58] Chun, *Updating*, 90.

[59] Smythe, *No Harm*, 373.

[60] Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, 43.

[61] See Lupton, *Reading*, 92-121.

[62] Chun, *Updating*, 91.

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