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Waiting for the Plague: A Field Report from Contemporary Serialization

A Review of *The Silent History* by Eli Horowitz, Matthew Derby, and Kevin Moffett

An interesting contradiction has always sat near the center of *The Silent History*, a digital-born fiction now released by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in print as the joint creation of Eli Horowitz, Matthew Derby, and Kevin Moffett. It's that it wants to be a novel, quite badly, described on the project's website as "a groundbreaking novel, written and designed specially for iPad and iPhone, that uses serialization, exploration, and collaboration." The collaborators refer to the text, both on its website and often in interviews, as the equivalent of a five-hundred-page book. The difference between what counts as the book and what counts as the text, and whether either is a novel, is ultimately a crucial one for accounting for either the novelty or the narrative interest of the project. It's a difference that matters for both print and electronic versions.

The Silent History app debuted in October 2012 and released one Testimonial—the primary narrative unit of the text—per weekday in serial format, concluding the full release of the text in April 2013. These gathered Testimonials record the history of a plague, later identified as a virus, that renders the language centers of infants inaccessible from the moment of their birth through their maturation into adults. Like the narrative units of the great nineteenth-century works of serial literature, the Testimonials are self-contained, digestible stories that intertwine with each other to form a more complex whole yet remain internally coherent. As any reader of the great serialists Charles Dickens or Henry James knows, these serialized parts must not only strive for a coherence that will allow them to puncture the print noise surrounding them, but they also must generate ongoing interest (though as readers of Dickens and James also know, techniques for generating such interest can vary greatly). Readers must be willing to pick up the next week's installment, or in this case, to buy a subscription to the next volume.

Many of the serial novelists of the nineteenth century published triple-deckers; often originally serialized, these novels were bound in

three fascicles to facilitate their lending to multiple readers in circulating libraries. Such novels thus had multiple narrative timelines and structures to suit their multiple formats: the chapter or group of chapters published serially; the part, or third, of a fully completed work that would be read on its own and then returned to the library for another third, making it possible for three separate readers to be reading from what would ultimately be a single print work; and finally that bound work itself, comprising all three parts or bound from individual subscriptions. Authors of such multimodal works thought not only of the pleasure or anticipation produced in their weekly readers, but also were required to produce parts and wholes on multiple scales that could serve many ways in which the novel might be read, transported, and shared. Put more simply, novels have had a long history of working playfully with their distribution methods. *The Silent History* places itself within this tradition, and speaks also to the generation of works that have emerged within digital formats determined to query how the ways in which they might appear or engage readers might change the very shape of the narratives they produce.

In this respect, then, *The Silent History* is an interesting experiment in the movement from serial fiction to multiple-decker novel (it is divisible not only into more than a hundred Testimonials but also into six equal parts, the amount that can be purchased at a time on iTunes). Though not a triple-decker, in many ways it feels like one, weighing in well over the oft-cited five hundred pages and maintaining the allure of its previous electronic release. Two questions remain: to what degree do the serialized, electronic format and limited interactivity provided by the app version of *The Silent History* contribute to its status as an innovative, experimental work of fiction, and if they are indeed essential to the reading experience, why should you read the print novel instead?

The Testimonials that comprise the bulk of *The Silent History* take the form of oral history reports, so that the ostensible narrator/editor of the text is largely absent as a figure from the narration. A series of characters from diverse locations in the U.S. describe their experiences of "the silent epidemic," a plague beginning in 2011 affecting children born in that year and after. Those responsible for providing the Testimonials reappear in the work's timeline, which stretches from 2011 to 2043, or thirty-two years, into a future that looks a lot like a shabbier version of our present. Readers of the iPhone and iPad versions of the book have the ability to unlock and contribute Field Reports, first-person accounts of the plague's local impact contributed by readers in specific locations

and accessible only when the reader holds the device within ten meters of the report's GPS location. These reports are rather ambitiously described as texts that can be understood "only by combining the text of the report with the details of the setting." However, the FAQ provided with *The Silent History* answers the question of how important these reports are to the experience of the text thus: "The Testimonials function as an entirely self-contained, fully-realized narrative, roughly the length of a 500-page book. The Field Reports are designed for readers who would like to explore the phenomenon in more depth or breadth. No single reader will be able to visit all the reports, and many people will choose to focus primarily on the Testimonials." This simultaneously makes *The Silent History* more accessible to a wider geographic readership, as the Field Reports are unevenly distributed and tend to cluster around specific cities in the U.S., and it also makes them feel a bit like slightly more elaborate extra features on a DVD. The makers of *The Silent History* make no claims to true transmedia storytelling, yet the app's self-descriptions ("groundbreaking," "innovative," "a bold storytelling experiment") do suggest a desire to have it both ways.

The histories themselves focus on plague adjacents like Theodore Greene from El Cerrito, California, whose wife dies giving birth to his silent daughter Flora, the first of the silent children we meet outside of a brief glimpse captured by the novel's archivist in its frame tale. Greene is immediately followed by Nancy Jernik, from Teaneck, New Jersey, who balances the plot by giving birth to a silent son ("he felt like an alien in my house"), who will in the course of events find Flora and her father in the middle years of the epidemic. The silent children grow older and gather followers in the form of teachers who would teach them alternate methods of communication, police who would control their erratic movements and squatting preferences, new-age followers convinced of their closer proximity to wisdom, doctors and scientists following them out of interest or the desire for profit opportunities, and the occasional unalienated family member persisting in maintaining a relationship when the majority have moved on and away from their nonverbal offspring. Silent children produce a facially gestural vocabulary ("a brief surface ripple across her face") and form communities that appear frightening to their less precarious and more sound-sociable human counterparts. As August Burnham, a psychiatrist/entrepreneur, describes them, the silents have a tendency toward allegory: they are "forgotten hordes who we locked away in transitional facilities or who languished in abandoned warehouses and strip malls." True to its oral history form, much of the novel remains devoted to recording the

experience of the event as it is constructed by those who experience it, and part of *The Silent History*'s narrative momentum develops out of the promise of reconciling these perspectives that accompanies each character's inevitable movement toward one another.

Readers of *The Silent History* who are hoping for an engaging tale or simply a good story will not be disappointed. As an orally recorded chronicle of a widespread pandemic with both personal and wide-ranging political consequences, it reads very much like Max Brooks's *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War*, and for outbreaks of language plagues, one need look only as far as China Miéville's 2011 science fiction novel *Embassytown* or Ben Marcus's captivating 2012 *The Flame Alphabet* for recent examples of a renewed interest in what William S. Burroughs called language: "a virus from outer space" (if perhaps more narratively adventurous within their more constrained material formats).

I first read the print novel as I like to read fleshy paperbacks of its kind, in several long sittings in rapid succession. There's certainly a compelling aspect to the return of serialization as a guiding force of composition, and the novel achieves the transition to a print book well, but perhaps that's because that's what it was becoming all along. Beyond the larger (and admittedly funny) pun that hinges on providing an oral history of a plague of silence, there's not a lot in *The Silent History*, unlike, say, in the Miéville or Marcus novels, that allows for a new kind of thinking about the paradoxes of language in our contemporary material conditions.

Not only are serialized novels making a comeback, but the technologies to facilitate and embellish serialized fiction are doing more than keeping up, and more companies and editorial collectives devoted to serialized fiction, as well as apps and other services to distribute it, are regularly emerging (see for example, Rooster, an app that "brings great fiction to busy people" by delivering it in smaller pieces on a regular schedule, or Amazon's Kindle Serials project). *The Silent History* makes good on its promise to provide a print novel worthy of its electronic counterpart, and to provide a range of characters, voices, and visions of a semi-post-apocalyptic American landscape that speaks well to the project of collaborative authorship in the twenty-first century. Both versions of the novel, with their evenly distributed and contained narratives, are good for reading in a distracted environment, and who's to say we don't need and desire savvier novels, like *The Silent History*, that can do that?