

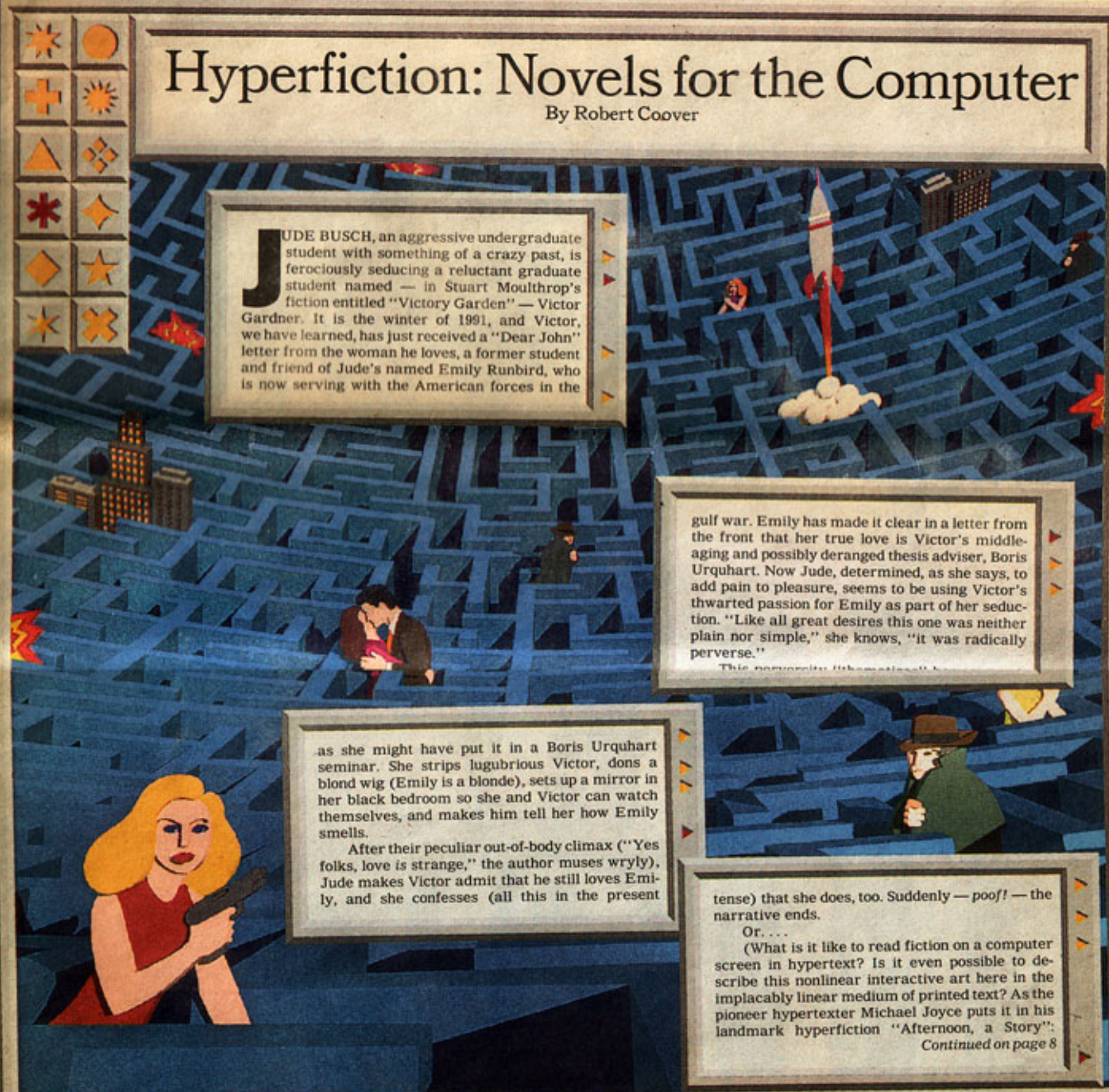
# Book Review

August 29, 1993

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## Hyperfiction: Novels for the Computer

By Robert Coover



**J**UDE BUSCH, an aggressive undergraduate student with something of a crazy past, is ferociously seducing a reluctant graduate student named — in Stuart Moulthrop's fiction entitled "Victory Garden" — Victor Gardner. It is the winter of 1991, and Victor, we have learned, has just received a "Dear John" letter from the woman he loves, a former student and friend of Jude's named Emily Runbird, who is now serving with the American forces in the

gulf war. Emily has made it clear in a letter from the front that her true love is Victor's middle-aged and possibly deranged thesis adviser, Boris Urquhart. Now Jude, determined, as she says, to add pain to pleasure, seems to be using Victor's thwarted passion for Emily as part of her seduction. "Like all great desires this one was neither plain nor simple," she knows, "it was radically perverse."

as she might have put it in a Boris Urquhart seminar. She strips lugubrious Victor, dons a blond wig (Emily is a blonde), sets up a mirror in her black bedroom so she and Victor can watch themselves, and makes him tell her how Emily smells.

After their peculiar out-of-body climax ("Yes folks, love is strange," the author muses wryly), Jude makes Victor admit that he still loves Emily, and she confesses (all this in the present

tense) that she does, too. Suddenly — poof! — the narrative ends.

Or...

(What is it like to read fiction on a computer screen in hypertext? Is it even possible to describe this nonlinear interactive art here in the implacably linear medium of printed text? As the pioneer hypertexter Michael Joyce puts it in his landmark hyperfiction "Afternoon, a Story":

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## Computer

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Joyce hyperfiction, in  
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any other art form.

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## And Now, Boot Up the Reviews

In a sidebar to an essay in the Book Review last year, entitled "Finding Your Way in Hypertext: A Guide to the Software," I listed some of the fictions reviewed here, and in the essay itself, "The End of Books," I quoted from a couple of them. But that essay was a purely descriptive exercise, based in large part on my experience of teaching a pioneer hyperfiction workshop at Brown University. The works themselves were not reviewed. Indeed, only a few of them were actually available at the time, existing only as works in progress. That is fast changing. I know of at least as many more full-length hyperfictions now being written around the country as are listed here, and the electronic departments of many commercial publishers and film and music companies are developing a variety of hypermedia projects, foreseeing a vast new audience as the skilled hypertexters now in grade school — the electronic baby boomers — grow up and ask for more. Unless so stated, the following narratives run on Macintosh models Plus and above, with no additional software required.

ROBERT COOVER

**AFTERNOON, A STORY**

By Michael Joyce.

Eastgate Systems, \$19.95.

Since its first appearance in 1987 (it has been hypertextually upgraded more or less annually ever since), this work by one of the co-developers of the popular Storyspace software has been the bench mark, and thanks to the quality of the writing and the subtlety of the narrative links, it continues to be the most widely read, quoted and critiqued of all hypertext narratives. What is perhaps its most famous line — "There is no simple way to say this" — has become identified with the effort to describe hypertext to the uninitiated, or indeed to explain to oneself the odd experience of reading in this unique environment. There is a high degree of intentional indeterminacy here, so it is not easy to pin down the "story" of "Afternoon," but it circles about the fear of a guilt-ridden poet and copywriter that his ex-wife and son may have been killed in a car wreck: "I want to say I may have seen my son die this morning."

The motivation for much of the action is the interrogation of people who might, but do not, disabuse him of his fears: his wife's current lover, the headmistress at his son's school, a colleague who may be sleeping with his former wife, the colleague's therapist wife and others. He avoids obvious sources like hospitals or the police, thus avoiding the authoritative view while exploring the ambiguous byways and paradoxes of the more indeterminate ones. (When he seriously considers calling the authorities, or when the reader considers it, the hyperfiction restarts.) All of the other characters, not least the central character's current mistress, a former prostitute from South Asia, tend to be good storytellers, so the narrative styles and subjects range widely. The story is something like a hypertextually expanded novella, with a great many of its 539 text spaces devoted to self-conscious speculations about hypertext, "interanthology" quotations, criticism, subtly altered repetitions and text fragments, as well as single words

that sometimes make sense in sequence but more often serve as echoes of other plot elements that the reader may or may not know yet. Perhaps in the end too much is left unsaid and the piece remains too much of a tease, but it is a graceful and provocative work and utterly essential to an understanding of this new art form. Now available for both Macintosh and IBM-compatible computers (requires Windows 3.1).

**AMBULANCE**

By Monica Moran.

Electronic Hollywood, \$17 postpaid.

Also distributed by Eastgate Systems, \$15.

Produced by Jaime Levy, the publisher of the offbeat West Coast electronic magazines *Cyber Rag* and *Electronic Hollywood*, "Ambulance" is definitely a Hollywood product, a kind of animated, sound-tracked sadistic comic strip, heavy on melodrama and flat brutal text. It follows a one-way beginning-to-end track, with occasional "moving comics" footnoting: the reader may click on some of the cartoon illustrations and cause them to move or make noises or give way briefly to an alternative screen. A drug addict, fresh out of rehab but still on the habit, is picked up at his flat by four old friends. They crash on a lonely road and the driver is killed. A psychotic killer comes to the "rescue" by waylaying an ambulance he has called, killing the driver and paramedic, then overwhelming the four wreck survivors and abducting them in the ambulance to a lonely cabin. Massive slaughter follows, detailed in crude prose but with chop-licking delight. It is pretty sick stuff, unworthy of the Eastgate list, and not even good hypertext.

**ITS NAME WAS PENELOPE**

By Judy Malloy.

Eastgate Systems, \$19.95.

Random selection of grouped text is the operating principle of this relatively short and simple but elegant hyperfiction by Judy Malloy. Originally published by her own Narrabase Press and available to users of the Internet, "Its Name Was Penelope" is about the length of a long short story. It has no author-designated links, but uses, in five of its six sections (which are roughly chronological), stacks of text spaces, selected by a random number generator: with each click of the mouse, the deck being read is reshuffled and a new text space appears. As with many such random shuffles, of course there is a certain amount of repetition. The sixth section is strictly linear: to change the text space you click as before, but now the spaces follow each other in a precise and inalterable order.

The narrator is a photographer named Anne Mitchell, and the short text spaces, following randomly upon one another, are much like shuffled snapshots. In the opening section, Anne's career begins when, as a child, she takes a distant snapshot of Ted Williams. Before or after this, depending on the shuffle, she listens to her father read about Odysseus and the sirens; in a sense her father's voice provides the structural metaphor governing the rest of the narrative. Quotations from the "Odyssey" introduce each of the following four sections. After accounts of Anne's early affairs and her life as a young artist, the Homeric theme becomes resonant in the third of these sections as the maturing artist, quoting Penelope, has "the happy thought to set up weaving," in this case five-foot strips of color photocopies of thematically linked photographs (we do not see these pictures in this hypertext, but in a full hypermedia presentation we might). Her mind is now focused wholly on her artwork; when her lover leaves her, she takes it in stride.

This intensity fades with failure. In the next

**Where to Find Hyperfiction**

**Eastgate Systems**, 134 Main Street, Water-town, Mass. 02172.

**Electronic Hollywood**, Box 448, Prince Street Station, New York, N.Y. 10012.

**Fait Divers**, 1630 Boylston Avenue, Seattle, Wash. 98122.

**Hyperbole Studios**, 1756 114th Avenue South-