

The Summer Years

The initial inspiration for *The Summer Years* came from a very—unlikely—source. One day, I was watching a CBS interview from 1989 given by Charles Manson. The interview took place shortly after Ted Bundy’s execution and reporters wanted to know what Manson had thought of him. For the majority of the interview, Manson rambles without any sort of clear meaning. He was prone to doing that sort of thing, but for a brief moment, he says something that makes him almost seem lucid, to a poetic mind at least. “Who do you think I am?” he says. “This is only a couple hours; can you imagine what it would be like, a couple days with me? I live a hundred years a day.” Manson’s crimes aside, it was that last bit that stuck with me, *a hundred years in a day*. Could that really have been what it was like for him? Aside from being in prison for life, Manson was a diagnosed schizophrenic; what if he really did experience Time differently than the rest of us? What would that be like, a man *out of Time*?

With Manson’s distorted perception of Time on my mind, I realized early on that I wanted to write a story involving Time travel. Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and H.G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* served as initial literary examples for the project. The language these authors used to describe characters suddenly being “seen as a ghost” or phasing in and out of Time were powerful visual inspirations, but I really wanted to know some of the science behind Time. How could I translate the science into poetry? Of course, when anyone thinks of Time, Einstein comes up and his Theory of Relativity is one of the first things that came to mind, so I set out to understand that theory as best I could. In simple terms, the idea is that Time is relative to the mass of a given point in space. This means that the more massive an object is the slower Time will pass for a viewer at the location of that massive, gravity-exerting object; this phenomenon is called Time dilation.

While the science behind Time travel doesn’t make much of an appearance in *The Summer Years*, dilated Time plays a big role in the events of the story. If the idea is that, an object can be so

massive that it can alter Time, why can't an event do the same? Words carry weight after all; our actions have gravity to them. If we consider Manson's crimes, could it have been possible that they carried a literal gravity, one that was exerted, not only over his perception of Time, but over Time itself? What would such a thing do to the families of his victims? Having said that, very few people are strangers to the feelings losing a loved one can bring. We experience tragedy and the cliché is that Time stands still. In the aftermath though, the memory of that event lingers. The memory can become stuck, moving in and out of place in our minds, and some of us return to those moments until we come to terms with them...or not. In *The Summer Years*, the protagonist, Jack, is plagued by the death of his beloved, J. and the heartbreak is so—heavy—that Time warps around it, fragmenting his memory and his perception of Time. Over the course of the story, we follow Jack as he slips between moments in his past, the sixties, and his unfamiliar future that is the nineties. This fragmented telling is not unlike Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five* coming unstuck from Time.

Being that *The Summer Years* is so focused on Time and memory, I wanted there to be an underlying theme of nostalgia in the context of the story, a longing for a return to the past, a Time-sickness of sorts. For Jack, his longing for J. and for the sixties can be felt in each moment of the story. As the pages of the book are turned back and forth, moments from his past align with moments in the present. Pages seeming like memories or dreams occur as if they are always at the back of Jack's mind waiting to be brought forth. In writing his plight, I drew inspiration from the stories of numerous literary figures who suffered tragedies at the hands of Time. Be they Jay Gatsby or Rip Van Winkle, characters who idealized the past, who sought to repeat it or get back to a fabled moment served as wonderful templates for the allegory of the project. In that way, *The Summer Years* seeks to tell the story of a coming-to-terms with idealizations like those, whether they take the form of a beloved or a nostalgia for a supposed Golden Age that never was.

Woodstock '69 is one of those idealized moments in American history. On the heels of the summer of love, for many hippies, Woodstock seemed a landmark in a Time when peace was finally gaining ground in the collective conscience. Hunter S. Thompson's "Wave Speech" comes to mind:

"And that, I think, was the handle — that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil. Not in any mean or military sense; we didn't need that. Our energy would simply prevail. There was no point in fighting — on our side or theirs. We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave..."

They thought they were going to win—and then they didn't. As Thompson finishes his speech:

"So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark—that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back."

Thompson's speech came only two years after the first Woodstock. By all accounts, the movement was clearly in decline. But Jack, ripped from Time, doesn't get to see what Thompson saw, nor does he get to experience the myriad of zeitgeists that came in the thirty years that followed. He doesn't get to see the less-than heroic demise of Hendrix and Joplin; he doesn't hear about the crowd at Altamont just a few months later, or for that matter, the wave of horror the Manson Family murders sent through the nation. Instead, Jack sees the half-hearted attempt to repeat that mythic festival at Woodstock '99, where peace, love, and rock and roll are long since revolutionary.

In Jack's falling through Time, I was inspired to juxtapose the cultural movements of the sixties and the nineties by the stark contrast in the messages at the Woodstocks of these eras. Where the struggles of the sixties gave rise to bands with songs about love and ending the war, the energies of the nineties fueled such songs as "Fuck the World" and "Break Stuff." And whether or not Woodstock '99 is truly indicative of a greater zeitgeist in America at the Time, the difference between two festivals that set out to invoke the spirit of peace is jarring to say the least. Woodstock

'69's congregation of Indian yogis and flower power is replaced just thirty years later by pimp coats, sexual assault, and flag burnings. In that way, I wanted readers to see through Jack's eyes—someone who didn't experience the proceeding decades of change—how horrifying it is to see where the dream of the sixties seemingly brought the nation.

Story aside, the form of *The Summer Years* was inspired in part by a subtle dissatisfaction I have with the structure of more traditional works of literature. There's nothing wrong with a traditionally formatted book, but for most of my academic career, I've had the pleasure of studying artist books and modern poetry, and what I've found is that the pieces I admire most don't just stop at putting a story on a page, they go further than that. Take Jen Bervin's *Silk Poems* for example. While not an artist book per se, Bervin's relatively short book of poems on silkworms manages to weave the materiality of the book into the content. The pages are light and nearly transparent; they evoke the feeling of freshly made silk, demanding a gentle touch. The layout of her poems references the DNA structure of silk, which she later ties into the long, violent, history of the silkworm. Works like Bervin's show that a piece of literature can possess a multi-dimensional quality, one that allows a reader to not only read a book, but experience it.

So, when I read a story like Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, I see that same innovation of form in the postmodern novel that I see in poetry. The fragmented narrative structure Vonnegut uses inspires me to push that idea further. In following that tradition, I was driven to think of how a work like *The Summer Years* could merge the experimentation of modern poetics with a story of considerable length and make the materiality of the book-object tie in to the story. Where I found further inspiration was in the genre of Ergodic literature. Ergodic literary works tend to take traditional stories and tweak them a bit, often by gamifying the story or the medium it's presented in by adding elements that force the reader to interact with the story rather than just passively consuming it.

Being the *Moby Dick* of ergodic literature, Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* served as an early textbook of sorts for *The Summer Years*. Being that there are hundreds of ways in which that book forces a reader to interact with the story, I had numerous examples of what I could attempt with the project. Eventually, after a series of imaginings, I came across the idea of a book split into segments after stumbling upon Raymond Queneau's *A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems*. Before seeing Queneau's work, I had never thought that a book could look like that and I immediately imagined a book split in half. To relate the splitting to the plot of *The Summer Years*, I thought of it as a fracturing of Time; J.'s death breaks Time for Jack. In structuring the project in this way, the book offers a chance to recontextualize the events in the story. By having a top and bottom half of the book, I could take a disjunctive narrative like that of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and physically take moments at the beginning of the story and put them in the context of ones at the end at the flip of a page.

In formatting the book in this way, I wanted to emulate how I feel memory works. Here in the present, a stimulus triggers us and suddenly, we are thinking ourselves back to the past. We're there again, physically in a way, if only for a brief moment. In a poetic sense, we travel through Time when we remember and for someone like Jack, unstuck from Time as he is, the metaphor is literal. The summer of '69, where it all fell apart for him, is never really a part of his past and I offer the reader a chance to see that on the page. Jack's past can be placed in the context of most any moment in the story. Each page acts as a memory of sorts—for Jack and for the reader—triggered by events in his past or future that can be brought forth at any Time, at times, creating a new moment out of the pages in front of the reader. Where Vonnegut's Tralfamadorians experience all moments, past and future, simultaneously, I would posit that the past is never all that far from us, we just need to bring it forth.

Though the form of *The Summer Years* may at Times appear jumbled, each page is very deliberately placed so that they can be recontextualized with specific moments in the story. A reader

might find themselves flipping back and forth between the pages, attempting to piece the story together in a more linear fashion or, as I have intended, there are pages in the story that are meant to align outside of the chronological series of events; memories of moments only glimpsed in Jack's falling through Time. With that said, I am deeply interested in the connections that people might make that I did not intend. The story I set out to write is ultimately a tragedy or maybe a coming-to-terms with tragedy, but there are no page numbers, there's no definitive ending to the moments of Jack's life. The story could end on whatever series of pages the reader thinks it should end. Maybe the story isn't a tragedy; maybe a moment where J. and Jack ride off toward their next heist is the moment to which we should hold on.

As an avid consumer of pop culture, *The Summer Years* draws inspiration less from literary works and more from a massive trove of popular songs and movies. From an early age, classic rock hits were a staple in my household. My dad would drive me home from kindergarten and have the Stones or Tom Petty's Full Moon Fever playing. And later, in my teens, I learned that between my mom and dad, there is hardly a classic rock band that they didn't see live—Zeppelin, Rush, Pink Floyd, Skynyrd's last show before the plane crash—rock and roll is a constant inspiration to me and really inspired the core of the project. Oftentimes, I would try to immerse myself in the musical genres of the Times referenced throughout the story; lots of Hendrix, the lyrics to All Along the Watchtower, Joplin, CCR, and of course, the heavier bands of the nineties, Rage Against the Machine, Korn, and the like. My headspace was also influenced by more modern music as well. Queens of the Stone Age, a band doing its best to keep the spirit of rock alive in the modern era, has an album titled *...Like Clockwork*, which is a sort of gothic story of a heartbroken man lost in a Time that's not his own. He is forced to adapt in any way he can which ultimately entails him embracing the darker side of the Times.

Given that *The Summer Years* is so concerned with Time and incongruent storytelling, there were a number of sci-fi movies and mind-bending thrillers that I watched to get insight during the planning stages of the project. *Twelve Monkeys*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Fight Club* (which I've borrowed Jack and Jill's names from) movies that dealt in characters with fractured psyches and uncertain streams of Time were invaluable to the plot, but also to the formatting of the project. Movies like these showed me that a story can be far from linear and can do things that challenge the medium in which they're placed. Where film can have transitions between scenes that should be impossible, books can do the same. Undoubtedly, these movies were also what encouraged me to write the more fantastical and unbelievable elements of the project. If I want to write a story with bank robberies, rock and roll, and Time travel, my answer is, "Why not?"

On a final note, a reader of *The Summer Years* once remarked that they felt a sense of powerlessness over the text, that every Time they tried to follow a moment in the story, the moment would slip from their hands. I find it beautiful that that emerged from the text given the events of the story: powerlessness in the face of Time, an elemental force, a God of sorts, indifferent to all our misfortunes. Throughout the project and this poetics statement, readers will notice that every instance of the word, *Time*, is capitalized. I started that long before I had heard that description of powerlessness, but perhaps it was as a precognizant act, to give such importance to Time. Time: Omnipresent for Jack and for all of us, constantly out of reach, in the background of every moment in one form or another, as an era, a place, a finite and infinite thing.