

Writing in The Plague Years: COVID-19 And The Collapse of Narrative Distance for Novelists

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ABSTRACT: The COVID-19 pandemic significantly interrupted the chronological, emotional, and sensory distance that has typically permitted novelists to represent terrible events. The purpose of this essay is to investigate the impact that the collapse of narrative distance had on the manufacturing of fiction during the pandemic. Ali Smith's speculative distance in *Companion Piece* (2022) and Gary Shteyngart's hyper-domestic emphasis in *Our Country Friends* (2021) are two examples of strategic approaches that are compared and contrasted in this essay. In the study, references are made to Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) criticism of historical enclosure, Cathy Caruth's (1996) theory of traumatic belatedness, and Gérard Genette's (1980) concept of narrative distance. The essay argues that effective pandemic fiction actively creates distance by fracturing narratives, distorting genres, and lowering them. This contrasts with the traditional approach of merely reducing the geographical dimensions to zero. The initial attempts at "instant realism" were unsuccessful due to the fact that they reduced the distance between the characters without making any aesthetic adjustments. By demonstrating that prose fiction can process continuous collective suffering in real time, the study challenges the widely held idea that literary representation must be temporally distant.

KEYWORDS: narrative distance, COVID-19 pandemic, trauma theory, Ali Smith, Gary Shteyngart

1. INTRODUCTION

As lockdowns swept the globe in March 2020, novelists were presented with an unprecedented predicament. In the age of worldwide media, they faced an unprecedented tragedy that changed the world with no end in sight. Suddenly the normal writerly posture of retrospection, of waiting for the dust to settle before forming narrative structure, was not an option. It was not a memory to be worked at a safe distance, the plague year, but a raw, immediate, deeply confusing reality.

The paper argues that the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted narrative distancing and compelled novelists to devise new approaches to narrating a continuing calamity. Narrative distance, as described by Gérard Genette (1980), is the gap between the telling of an event and the event itself, which may be temporal, emotional, or experiential. Pandemics have been written historically in retrospect. Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1353) comments on the Black Death from the perspective of survival; Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) adopts the fictive voice of a memoirist writing several decades after the tragedy. COVID-19 took away the time buffer.

There are six sections in this article. Section two uses Genette, Bakhtin, and Caruth to create a theoretical framework for understanding narrative distance. Section three uses Ali Smith's *Companion Piece* (2022) as an example of speculative distance. The fourth section uses Gary Shteyngart's *Our Country Friends* (2021) as an example of hyper-domestic attentiveness. The first disadvantages of "immediate realism" are discussed in Section 5. Section 6 examines the consequences for trauma theory and creative writing teaching. A brief conclusion on the likely reception of pandemic-era literature.

The COVID case is unique in that it occurred simultaneously and at a rapid pace. Instead of writing about previous catastrophes from a safe distance, novelists wrote from the heart, typically dealing with disease, bereavement, raising children, and the general complexities of life. The time-based concepts that have traditionally been employed to characterize group trauma in literature must be reconsidered.

2. WHAT IS NARRATIVE DISTANCE? A BRIEF CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Before we can discuss the impact of COVID-19 on "narrative distance", we need to grasp what is meant by "narrative distance." The concept of narrative distance was developed by the French narratologist Gérard Genette, who has conducted extensive research on narrative mood. Distance, Genette explains, is the extent to which the event being conveyed is mediated by the words used to tell it. Pure narration is narration in which the narrator simply recounts what happened. It is less involved in the events than mimetic

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narration, which focuses on showing rather than telling. The minimum feasible distance is direct communication, speech without a tale (Genette, 1980, p. 162). Genette's narrative is divided into two modalities of distance: the narrative of events and the narrative of words, with direct dialogue as the minimal distance between the narrative and the fabula, according to a significant assessment (Garcia Landa, 1990, para. 7).

A supplemental perspective that underscores the temporal context in which a literary work is situated is presented by the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin expressed profound skepticism regarding the tendency to interpret a work exclusively within the limited context of its moment of origin, which he identified as enclosure within the immediate historical epoch. The "constrained historical perspective of contemporary literary research" was condemned by him. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 37) "Enclosure within the most recent historical period." Bakhtin posits that significant literature is potent because it transcends temporal boundaries, allowing the past to communicate with the present and the present to reinterpret the past (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 14). A temporal scope of this nature was precisely dismantled by the pandemic.

Cathy Caruth's study of trauma theory offers a third perspective. Caruth (1996) posits that the temporality of trauma is what characterizes it. Traumatic events induce intrusive feelings, flashbacks, and recurrent experiences that are not perceived during their occurrence. Caruth (1996) asserts that "the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time" (p. 9). Consequently, the conventional trauma theory posits a temporal disparity between experience and its perception. An author requires time and distance to heal from emotional pain. The epidemic compelled writers to articulate trauma from the core of the wound, rather than retrospectively.

The COVID crisis can be perceived as a triple collapse when examining all three frameworks: Genette's mediational distance (the novelist was unable to adopt a detached perspective and was fully immersed), Bakhtin's temporal horizon (there was an absence of retrospective vantage), and Caruth's traumatic latency (the event necessitated representation prior to assimilation). We will analyze how two renowned novelists addressed this triad of pressures in the subsequent sections.

It is vital to note that these three collapses are more than just theoretical entities. They address unique literary challenges. How does a storyteller build authority without involving a mediator? In the lack of a temporal framework, how can a narrative reach its conclusion? In the absence of traumatic latency, how does a novelist avoid exploitation? The following case studies offer solid answers to these practical questions.

A third problem arises when we remember that all three theories were designed to study completed, closed events. Caruth was writing from the perspective of survivors of events that had already taken place, Bakhtin was evaluating novels that had been written decades after the events, and Genette was reading the completed masterwork of Proust. The closure was prevented due to the epidemic. They apply their theories to a real-world environment where a certain amount of theoretical elasticity is required that the original writers could never have anticipated. The pandemic did not invalidate their conclusions, but exposed their implicit premise that space is intrinsically fixed rather than socially generated.

3. CASE STUDY 1: SPECULATIVE DISTANCE – ALI SMITH'S *COMPANION PIECE* (2022)

Companion Piece (2022), written by Ali Smith, was an immediate outcome of the epidemic. This book follows the story of Sandy, a collage artist whose studio is on lockdown, her aging father, and an enigmatic phone call from a former classmate who is now in the custody of the border patrol. An additional storyline that occurs during the Black Death era supplements the present one. Here on this site, we leverage Smith's usage of this parallel sickness to define speculative distance.

A genuinely realistic pandemic novel would obliterate distance altogether, but Smith recovers it through genre. The modern portions are filled with strange elements such as talking doors, riddles, metafictional digressions, and linguistic play. The book opens with the line, "A story is never an answer. A story is always a question (Smith, 2022, p. 3). This epigrammatic comment makes clear that Smith does not want to offer a simple, realistic picture. Instead of writing the outbreak as it unfolds, she poses formal questions about what a pandemic novel can be.

In a conversation about the book, Smith talked about how hard it was to write while a crisis was going on. The Norwegian translation had suggested another name for the book: *Andre tider*, which means "other times." Smith characterized this as "a shoulder-shrugging possibility of things changing when you think they can't change [...] a perfect phrase instead of Companion Piece [...] about times and the workings of otherness and so on" (Calder, 2024, p. 5. This move toward different times and otherness is at the heart of Smith's plan. To create a sense of distance, she avoids writing directly about the pandemic and instead uses historical parallels, allegory, and linguistic play.

Consider how the book depicts people's loneliness. Sandy is unable to visit her father in person, so she is confined in her studio alone, receiving disturbing phone calls. An author who is merely realistic may write about it with journalistic clarity, describing vacant streets, encounters with masks, and Zoom fatigue. However, Smith gives Sandy a perplexing choice: "Curlew or curfew... you choose" (Smith, 2022, p. 16), and then enables the plot to shift to medieval England. The curlew, a bird associated with migration and the outdoors, represents the loss of this sense of freedom. The curfew began as a reminder to residents to put out the fires in their houses, but it evolved into a symbol of captivity. Smith wants to combine two similar-sounding words to eliminate the pandemic as the only story. She wants a second story. That could be history, hypothesis, or language.

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There is a lesson in this strategy for trauma theory. If you can't show the traumatic event directly, you have to deal with it indirectly and later on, says Caruth (1996). It seems that Smith shares that view as well. Her approach takes a more lateral approach than a direct mimicry of the epidemic; she utilizes the pause between "curlew" and "curfew," shifting focus from fourteenth-century England to contemporary London. She is engaging in a form of avant-garde postcritical reading by avoiding the temptation to reduce the text to a series of hidden causes or social determinants. She chooses to leave the story unresolved, leaving readers with more questions than answers.

Some could argue that Smith isn't exactly breaking new ground here; after all, writers have long made use of allegory and historical connections. However, during a pandemic, these tactics acquire a new significance. What was formerly an aesthetic preference is now essential to the building's functionality. Smith employs theoretical distance for no apparent purpose other than that direct representation would collapse under its own weight. Science fiction written during the epidemic differs from its predecessors in that it addresses this requirement.

Another important part of Smith's creation of distance is the reader. In historical fiction, readers are supposed to admire the author's study. But Smith's speculative leaps make readers think and act. The reader has to keep track of both the fourteenth century and the twenty-first century at the same time and keep asking how one era sheds light on the other. This mental work is an example of rebuilt distance. Smith keeps the pandemic from being a background event by not letting the reader get lost in the story. Instead, the pandemic is a question that needs to be answered again and again on each page.

4. CASE STUDY 2: HYPER DOMESTIC DISTANCE – GARY SHTEYNGART'S *OUR COUNTRY FRIENDS* (2021)

Gary Shteyngart's *Our Country Friends* (2021) adopts a markedly distinct perspective on the phenomenon of diminishing distance. Although Smith avoids reality, Shteyngart gives it a far more authentic feel. Eight people, some familiar and some unfamiliar, gather in a single upstate New York country house to face the pandemic; this is where the drama takes place. The six-month plot unfolds in a few rooms, the backyard, and the neighboring pond. There aren't any reversible doors, abrupt time jumps, or medieval breaks. When narrative distance dissolves, it is not avoided but rather embraced and highlighted.

Shteyngart calls the novel his "pandemic project," saying it reflects his experience of sequestering in upstate New York with his wife, child, and two close friends. This autobiographical connection is uncommon for the novelist, who has mostly written about caustic dystopia. The story begins with Russian author Sasha Senderovsky following the March 2020 news. By lunchtime tomorrow, his closest pals, who had trouble gathering in previous summers, will arrive. Though connected by a growing tragedy, they remain unified. This paragraph illustrates a commendable formal operation. It understands the impending disaster but does not let it overpower the sentence. The "but brought together nonetheless" clause stresses togetherness, whereas the "to be sure" clause confuses. Shteyngart masterfully balances human connection with tragedy in his writing.

Referring to the book as his "pandemic project," Shteyngart asserts that it is an exact replica of his own experience isolating himself in upstate New York with his wife, child, and two close friends. The novelist's previous writings have usually dealt with sardonic dystopia; thus, this autobiographical connection is uncommon. In March 2020, the protagonist, novelist Sasha Senderovsky, who was born in Russia, learns the news. His closest friends, who had not been able to get together in past summers, will finally get together by tomorrow lunchtime. They are still linked even if the origins of an expanding disaster have brought them together. An admirable formal operation is demonstrated in this text. Although it recognizes the catastrophe that is taking place, it does not let it dominate the phrase. While the "to be sure" clause is unclear, the "but brought together nonetheless" sentence encourages unity. Shteyngart skillfully balances the acknowledgment of disaster with the value of enduring human connection. Smith and Shteyngart are similar. Smith envisions new links between various eras in light of the closing distance. In response, Shteyngart explores the present in greater detail—albeit a very constrained one, contained within the confines of a single home. Both methods aim to restore distance in order to satisfy the demand for spatial or temporal representation. As the following section will demonstrate, attempts to portray the epidemic without such reconstruction are unsuccessful.

Shteyngart's style, which is very home, does have some problems. As a result of being so focused on one thing, the book might lose sight of the world outside the house. They might feel claustrophobic and not want to do anything. That being said, Shteyngart is aware of the tone, which can be anything from sarcastic to real. What you get is a story that is both familiar and strange, a paradox that is also an experience of global proportions.

One could also think about the moral ramifications of Shteyngart's choice. The novel carries the risk of appearing unaware of the uneven pandemic impact by depicting affluent friends seeking safety in a house. It largely disregards important workers, unemployed people, and bereaved people. Shteyngart argues that hyperdomestic concentration is not a claim about prioritizing but rather a legal restriction. A book cannot possibly cover every angle. *Our Country Friends* avoids the pseudo-universalism of epidemic realism, which appears to represent everyone but is actually just as limited in scope, by being honest about its narrow focus. The house becomes a microcosm of a single, limited, and authentic subject position rather than a representation of humanity as a whole.

5. WHAT FAILED? EARLY INSTANCES OF MISJUDGED PROXIMITY

Not many works from the pandemic era effectively reconstructed distance. Some early endeavors in "instant realism" may be described as proximity devoid of form. These works aimed to chronicle the pandemic in real-time with minimal official interference. Consequently, fiction often became ensnared in the immediacy it sought to depict, rendering it obsolete almost immediately upon publication.

Consider the plethora of short story collections published in 2020 and early 2021, many of which featured characters engaging in activities such as sanitizing groceries, disputing over masks, and refreshing news feeds. These narratives often functioned as time capsules, precisely encapsulating the essence of early pandemic existence. Nonetheless, they could not achieve what Smith and Shteyngart accomplished: a sense of intentional significance, narrative structure, and deliberate detachment rather than one that was endured. Their closeness to the event was not the problem. The problem was their uncertainty about managing their intimacy.

The example presented in Lawrence Wright's *The End of October* (2020) is one that is more challenging. While Wright finished the narrative before the pandemic came, it begins with a viral epidemic that is hauntingly similar to the one that occurred with COVID-19. This particular instance of the breakdown of distance was not purposeful but rather inadvertent. When the reader is living through a genuine pandemic that is similar to the one that is imaginary, the novel's thriller storyline, its epidemiological protagonist, and its intrigues that spread all over the world all read differently. A number of reviewers praised the novel for its prophetic nature. Some people thought that the genre trappings were too superficial for the society that it now resembled. A conclusion is required for a thriller. False pandemics do not exist.

It is clear from the instances that were either completely unsuccessful or partially unsuccessful that collapsing distance is not a literary method in and of itself. In order to find a solution to this tricky situation, the novelist needs to demonstrate formal ingenuity. The leaps of supposition made by Smith and the spatial contractions made by Shteyngart are examples of this. The act of merely documenting is not.

The failure of instant realism should be read as a failure of instant realism, not as a critique of the use of timeliness in fiction. It is an argument, rather, for convenience through mediation. There was no need for novelists to wait for the epidemic; they had to invent new ways of waiting within the construction of their writing. Both Smith and Shteyngart were successful in their tales because they had aspects of delay, indirection, and framing. The workmen tried unsuccessfully to sprint where they should have been pacing.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR CREATIVE WRITING PEDAGOGY AND TRAUMA THEORY

A number of long-held beliefs in trauma theory and creative writing education have been put to the test during the epidemic years. Most people believe that writers shouldn't write about recent events too soon after they've happened, according to long-standing creative writing conventions. A person's viewpoint, memory, and the substance that may be derived from their experiences are all shaped by the passage of time. This traditional wisdom had to be reevaluated because of the pandemic. Smith and Shteyngart show in their writing that intimacy may be beneficial if the writer knows how to formally handle it. According to one educational heuristic, effective proximal fiction either severely restricts the area of attention (Shteyngart) or builds a temporal or geographical bridge to another time or place (Smith). Lacking any kind of institutional framework, a direct depiction of the present is prone to fall flat.

In a way that is pertinent to trauma theory, the pandemic questions Caruth's (1996) focus on tardiness. According to Caruth, the impact of a traumatic event is not felt immediately but rather develops over time and manifests as symptoms and recurrences. The author, like trauma survivors, needs this delayed temporality to convey the wound storytelling. When writers are open to using genre, space, and language as prosthetic distancing techniques, Smith and Shteyngart demonstrate that representation can happen in real time—or very near to it. There is still a need for physical separation, even after the pandemic. This proves that distance is not something that can only be passively anticipated, but that it can also be actively created.

The final perspective is drawn from Rita Felski's (2015) investigation of postcritical reading. Hermeneutics of suspicion is a process that incorporates the analytical practice of analyzing texts in order to reveal hidden meanings and intentions. Felski provides a critique of this tradition. Her argument is that those who are knowledgeable about literature should not look for hidden meanings or causes outside a book. According to Felski (2015, p 12), they were required to take a position in front of it and reflect on the significance and functionality of the object. This postcritical viewpoint on pandemic fiction encourages us to concentrate not on the hidden horrors that are depicted in the story, but rather on the formal possibilities that are generated by the story (p. 12). The wordplay of Smith and the compression of space in Shteyngart are not conditions to be diagnosed; rather, they are works of art that should be admired.

7. CONCLUSION

There was no longer any narrative distance due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For two years, writers were consumed by an unstoppable disaster. A reality that was both temporary and unrealistic came about because some people reacted in a distressed manner. Respondents who displayed formal ingenuity included Ali Smith and Gary Shteyngart. By manipulating words and metaphors, Smith created imaginary portals to other times. Until the outbreak was under control, Shteyngart dove deeply into the hyper-domestic.

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Both approaches share the common denominator of not viewing disaster as the final outcome. Some ground had been lost, but it could be made up. Unlike the old-fashioned method of reflection, this new distance is man-made, created, and transient. Even when COVID-19 is a distant memory in 2035, the continued relevance of these works is anybody's guess. Being overly attached to one's roots might cause some people to feel stuck in their lives. On the other hand, some people may have persisted because they understood that closeness requires shape. Nobody should ever talk about the year of the epidemic. It remained a free-form question. The lesson for literary criticism is equally apparent. We require new categories for evaluating proximate fiction that do not penalize timeliness or prioritize retrospective analysis. Pandemic novels are not an unscrupulous subgenre. It functions as a laboratory for investigating the manner in which fiction adapts when its most fundamental resource, time, is abruptly withdrawn. This study should be broadened to include non-Anglophone pandemic literature and other crisis genres in future research.

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