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These waves of memories¹: A hyperfiction by Caitlin Fisher

By Raine Koskimaa

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Abstract

The web-based 'hypermedia novella' *These Waves of Girls* by Caitlin Fisher (see review in *dichtung-digital*) won the first prize in the fiction category awarded by the Electronic Literature Organization in 2001. In this article I'll take a closer look on some of the aspects of this work, which is a confessional autobiography about a girl coming to terms with her lesbian identity. The article is structured around a set of relations: the relation between the critic and the work; textual and audio-visual representation; personal and social relations; hypertextual structure and autobiographical, unreliable narration. *These Waves* is a class-room example of the so-called associative hypertext. The hypertextual structure is also closely linked to the problematics of autobiographical narration.. As readers we get to ponder about the nature of remembering, of telling stories about one's life. One of the genuine accomplishments of Fisher's work is to bring forth these questions in a tangible, and still discreet, way.

In the category of electronic literature, Fisher's work can be further characterised with such labels as web fiction, hypertext fiction, and multimedial fiction. *These Waves* is published in the Internet, and it is available through Internet connection and a web browser. As such, it situates itself in the huge docuverse of the Internet –even though there are no links from the work reaching outside of its self-contained whole, through the web browser functionality it is always just one click away from other documents in the Web. The work employs the basic web site solutions like a menu based navigation and a page split into separate frames.

Multimediality in *These Waves* relies heavily on the combination of text and visuals. Pictures and colors are fundamental part of the signifying structure of the work. Some of the images are mildly interactive in a way that moving the cursor over them distorts the picture like it was 'squeezed'. Also, the lay-out of the work takes advantage of web page possibilities –horizontally and vertically scrollable page is

not spatially limited in a way print page is. There are also sound effects and parts of the text can also be listened to as audio files.

Naturally, there are other aspects in the work, too, it can't be reduced to its digital being, as there are also various literary qualities to be considered. Formally, *These Waves* is an autobiography, furthermore, it is a confessional autobiography about a girl coming to terms with her lesbian identity. It is female writing, and also unreliable narration.

1. The relation between the critic and the work

There has been some critique towards *These Waves*, in which its exemplary status has been called into question. In one particular case the criticism has been quite harsh, and indirectly, it has been also pointed towards the ELO Fiction Prize Judge (Rau 2001). In this case it is especially the innovativeness of the work, praised by the judge, that this critic feels is utterly lacking from the work. Her attack is twofold as she first devalues the technical quality of the work, and, after not finding anything innovative there, turns to the content of the story and deems it outdated too.

The criticism of sloppy, outdated, and ultimately, malfunctioning technical realisation does bring into fore, however, quite important aspects of cyber and hypertext criticism. While it is easy to agree with the mentioned critic in that there are such features in the work which very much look like simple mistakes or errors, there are also those of which it is impossible to determine if they are unnoticed errors, or, intentional solutions –if they are bugs or features. Especially the use of nested frames in a way which would clearly be unacceptable by Web design manuals, may be a successful device in a hyperfictional context. Here we are facing the classical intentional fallacy problematics. To say that there is an error in the way the html code has been executed implies that we know what the author has intended to do, and furthermore, we know better how it should have been done. We can interpret the instance of nested frames as a meaningful element in the work, and that is much more convincing a solution than start to speculate what the author possibly truly wanted to do (but was not cunning enough).

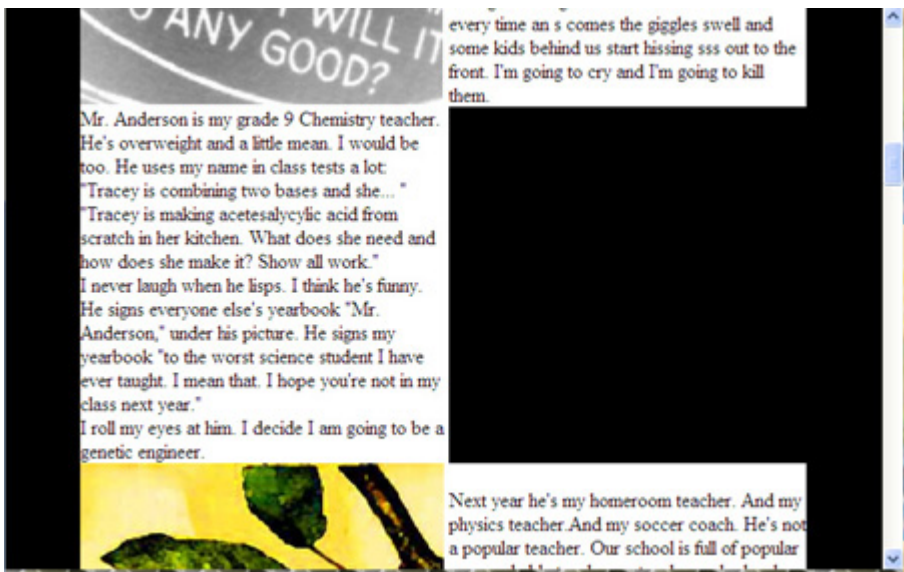
All in all, we can say that *These Waves* does in many places look like unpolished, and that has to be taken as a conscious choice by the author. If that is aesthetically pleasing is a matter of dispute, but to dismiss the work as 'erroneous' or 'dysfunctional' is only an intellectual cul-de-sac.

2. The Audio-Visual Dimensions

Horizontal and vertical dimensions

The lay-out of the novella is based on the tension between the horizontal and vertical dimensions. This tension, the constant shifts between the horizontal and vertical dominating the lay-out, is very effectively played to heighten the central tendencies in the textual content.

There is, for example, one node telling a story about the narrator's science teacher, Mr. Anderson, the node being one narrow, but long column, continuing line after line when scrolled with the vertical scroll bar. The reminiscences related in this node raise in intensity the further down along the column the reader goes, plunging into a thick sexual fantasy about the teacher in the very end, or bottom.



[Fig. 1: Excerpt from the node "Mr. Anderson"]

The text gains much of its intensity from this continuous descending movement, which finally ends with confession shedding light on the deepest levels of intimate memories.

This is clearly a case of a very particular instance in the past, a singular chain of events. On the other side of the equation there are horizontal episodes, which rather paint a landscape, give the overall tone of certain periods in the childhood.

Theoretically speaking there are no physical directions in a hypertextual structure – one node is not to the left or to the right, nor on top or below some other node. The only question relevant is, if there is a link between two nodes. It is, though, interesting to notice how small visual tokens will create a certain spatial interpretation of that structure; using a right pointing arrow as a 'next page' button, in connection with the horizontally designed lay-out, gives the feeling of continuous stripe of nodes, reaching towards some unknown limit in the east... Without the arrows this could quite easily turn to a book-like interpretation, where the nodes are seen as stacked on top of each other like pages of a book, instead of them laying side by side.



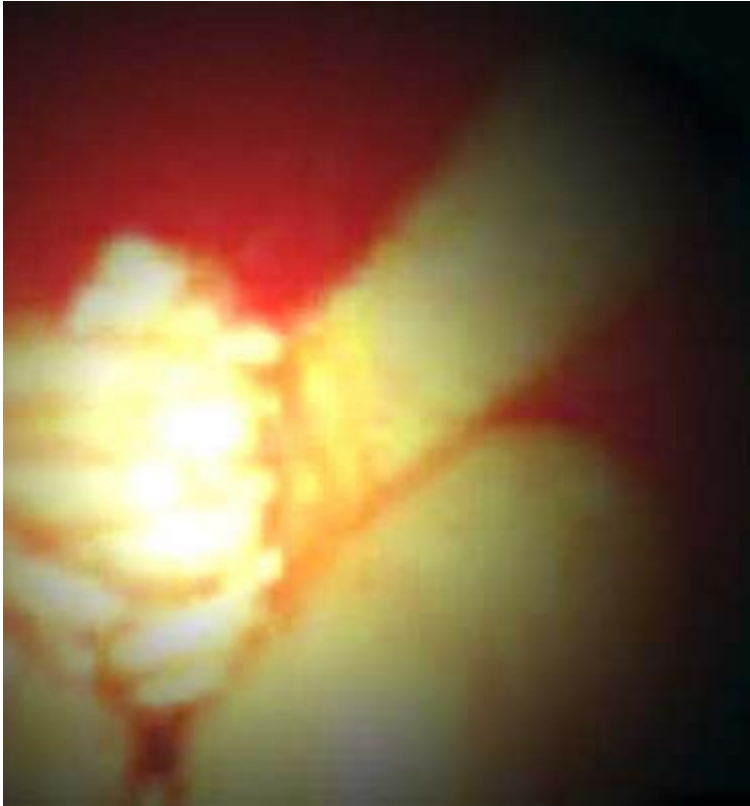
[Fig. 2 Spatial Arrangement of Nodes through Directional Arrows]

The relation between text and images

The illustrations in the work are mainly photographs, which look very much like they were taken from a family album. This put together with the oral nature of the narration gives us one possible framework for *These Waves* – we can quite easily assume a situation, where the narrator is flipping through a photo album, and recounting related stories to a real or imagined audience. This is one variation of the basic hypertextual approach, where hypertextual structure is used as an interface for an archive of various materials, in this case childhood stories packed in a family album. From this perspective, the pictures do not serve as a secondary illustration for primary narratives, but they are rather the source of stories.

The situation, however, is not nearly this simple. One glimpse of *These Waves* is enough to show that the images are not used in a straightforward, referential way. The images are strongly manipulated, the colors and dimensions distorted, often

shown as negatives, and very tightly framed to just some minor detail. All this brings in some deeply ironical, even ominous quality to the pictures themselves, but also to the whole work. It is like the feeling of being different, not being able to do things deemed as normal, but feeling and thinking in ways which others find sick and dirty, works as a filter distorting the innocent childhood pictures.



[Fig 3. A Tightly Framed Image from the Work]

There are several instances of very concrete ‘manipulation’ of images, as in a couple of nodes there appear picture which are interactive in such a way, that moving the cursor over the image animates it as you were stretching or squeezing it. This effect works best with a picture of a female breast (the same image occurring in a couple of nodes). Grabbing of the computer mouse is here made to simulate the act of squeezing someone’s breast, which brings a rare feeling of tactility in the reading act. On another level it works, in its banality and mechanicality, as a highly ironic comment on the Barthesian erotics of reading; or, it can be seen as the safe, feeding mother’s breast, or an objectivization of female sex. But also, it can be seen in a

plainly mimetic way, as there is much of feeling, touching, caressing, and squeezing of female bodies in the story of a young lesbian.

Soundscape

Whereas text and images seem to be mixing well in multimedial fiction the situation on the auditional front is much more problematic, even to the extent that there is a significant part of multimedial works with no sounds at all. In *These Waves* there is the aural dimension too. The sounds are used in a very modest way, but, at certain points, to quite a powerful effect. There is the mechanical laughter at the splash screen, which very much sets the tone of the following stories. [alkukuva] The laughter is quite hilarious, but as it continues a while it gets more and more strained. This can be understood either innocently just as girlish mock-laughter, but as well it could be laughter as last resort, laughter to conceal tears. In this sense it works very much like the distorted images which appear later.

There is also a chorus of voices, a page where the reader may start a dozen audio players simultaneously, each telling a different story. Here we are facing the confusion of somebody trying to tell about her past, trying to deal with all the competing memories fighting over attention. This quite concretely demonstrates the fact that all persons are composites of a multitude of identities.

3. Autobiography and unreliable narration

The so-called (auto)biographical pact dictates that in biographical narration the events are recounted honestly –of course, the capabilities of human memory set limits to truthfulness of the facts told, and also, there are certain things which may be omitted, but still, there should be no intentional forgeries, and definitely no lies, there.

Even if it is a question of fiction, as with *These Waves*, if it uses the autobiographical form, the readers suppose that the narration is truthful *in the fictional world*. But the narrator deliberately makes this assumption questionable. At one point she teases the audience by asking herself, if things really happened the way she tells them.

I write, but it doesn't need to be my life, exactly. It lets me fill in the parts I forget. One name. One moment. A hand on my thigh that reminds me of all the other hands. Of yours. (hand_on_my_thigh.htm)

The desire to write is the desire to fool you, seduce you. Here I am - again - always getting the girl, saying the right thing or (toss this in for effect) something deliciously, winsomely wrong. Look over there - that's me, at four... (desire_to_write). The

narrator asks if it is believable that she really was that successful in her courting with other girls. Wouldn't it rather be that she tells *how she hopes things would have been*? Thus we as readers have to decide, if we want to read the story as realistic narration, where the things mainly have happened the way they are told, or if we treat the set of small stories as figment of the narrator who is just making it all up as she goes. This is a class-room example of unreliable narration, as it forces us to ponder about the reliability of text we read.

It is quite common these days to subscribe to some sort of constructivist perspective on life writing; one's life story is always, to some extent, constructed in the act of writing. Raymond Federman, an author who has used (and misused!) autobiographical form and written extensively about it, takes more radical approach, however. Referring to Ferdinand Celine, he claims that "one's life is something one invents afterwards". It is not only a question of "filling in the parts I forget", but conjuring up a whole life, an act so creative by nature, that there is no use for the distinction between autobiography and fiction. As readers we get to ponder about the nature of remembering, of telling stories about one's life; how does it change our reception of a story if we believe it is about the author's own life, or does it really matter? One of the genuine accomplishments of Fisher's work is to bring forth these questions in a tangible, and still discreet, way.

What is more relevant for our discussion here, though, is the way how this whole thematic is buried deep in the hypertextual structure of the work.

4. Relation between linear and non-linear

The Associative Structure

During the relatively short history of hypertextual practices, there has been a strong connection to the idea of associative writing. For Vannevar Bush, the inventor of the hypertext system, the idea was to have a device with which it would be possible to record the associations done by the reader, during the reading, and also making these recorded associative structures available to other readers. Ever since, one of the main functions for hypertext links has been to serve as a means for pointing out and making associations. For example, the page "Wake_up_fairy4" ends with the following paragraph:

I ate my lunch from a blue and yellow astronaut lunch box and liked my thermos to be broken so I could shake it and hear glass. I sipped my warm warm drink looked a long time at the teachers and memorized their license plates and that's why *I* was late.

There are two links in this paragraph, of which the first one is attached to the anchor phrase “shake it and hear glass” –if the reader clicks on this link, she will end up in the page “Neil1”, which starts:

Neil gets off the schoolbus, runs to the door of his building on Howard Avenue, trips on the step and pushes his arm through the security glass.

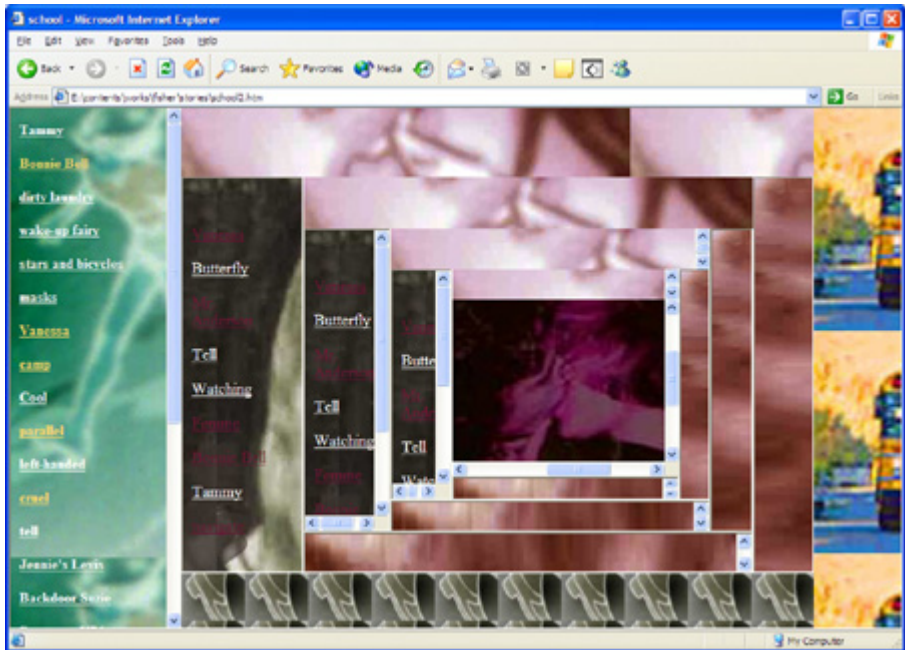
The sound of glass in the broken thermos activates in associative manner the memory of the event in the schoolbus. Here the association is easy to follow as there is the explicit motive of broken glass in both cases –in many other instances the connection is not nearly this evident.

Regarding Fisher's work one is tempted to say that it is a paradigmatic example of the associative hypertext. It is a work of autobiographical reminiscences (whether it is a 'true' autobiography, or a fictional one is not relevant here), where the hyperlinks are mainly motivated as a means to point the interconnections, overlaps, and coincidences between several episodes recounted by the narrator. The hypertext serves both to simulate the associative working of the (narrator's) memory, and a way for the reader to follow potential associations.

Temporal Order and Strange Loops

Traditional realistic narration follows the causal and temporal logic, where later events are prepared by the previous ones, and later things cast new light on older things and give a (new) meaning to them. This kind of logic is hard –if not impossible– to maintain in hypertext. *These Waves* does not even try to do it but, rather deliberately, play totally against it. There is, potentially, an extremely clear cut temporal framework at hand, the school grades, from the first class to junior high etc. But even despite this scale, the work very strongly resist the causal-temporal ordering. Things not necessarily follow each other because something happened before, but the logic of order may as well come from the retrospective perspective of the narrator, or they may not actually be (causally) related at all.

Another way to work against the linear order (both temporal and causal) in *These Waves* is the case of ‘nested frames’. The screen is divided into two parts by using the frames option of html coding; in one part there is the menu, and in another there is the current page. Usually by clicking a link (in the menu or in the text itself), the contents of the current page change. In “Vanessa”, there is an exception though, instead of just changing the text, it re-opens the whole screen in the right-hand side frame (see picture). There is still the same text on the screen (even though in smaller frame this time) and it is possible to click on the same link once again, resulting in reproducing the whole screen once again inside the frame (see figure).



[Fig. 5 Nested frames]

This creates the same kind of experience as putting two mirrors opposite to each other, and then seeing your own reflection in infinite ever smaller scale. In visual arts this kind of illusion is called *mise-en-abyme*, in fiction Brian McHale has called the similar effect as “strange loops”. There is a sense of short-circuiting in the way these screens are piled inside each other, and instead of linear development, it is basically a circular structure, starting all over again. As such it is a denial of change, and it can be seen referring either to the similarity of days following each other, nothing happens but things just repeat themselves, or once again, there may be the more sinister interpretation where one is always in danger of getting too deep in one’s thoughts and memories and stories, ending in a coma or trance like pathological state, unable to break free from the stasis.

Thus, in order to analyze a hypertextual fiction, the analysis of the hypertextual structure is necessary (in order to understand how it works), but it is not enough, as the narrative components in the work cannot be reduced to the hypertextual infrastructure.

5. Personal and Social Relations

These Waves of Girls is, as the title suggest, a collection of stories about girl's life. The basic unit here is the school class, inside of which there are the strict rules of friendship. There is the best friend, the other close friends, those who are not friends at all, but rather enemies, and then the older school kids, to whom there is usually a distance; things related to them only are heard through somebody who's older sister/brother is in the upper class. Maybe the most important way to demonstrate the trust in the best friend is to share secrets, of which there are a plenty. About those who are not friends there are always a multitude of rumours and gossip, that get circulated and inevitably distorted on the way. And here is another motivation for the hypertextual structure (the first being the simulation of the associative workings of the human memory) – following the hypertextually linked story fragments is very much like hearing a piece of gossip here and there. Some of the things are very hard to get by, whereas some stories you'll hear over and over again.

Another level of secrecy comes from Tracey's (the protagonist) sexual identity, her knowing early on that she likes more of other girls than boys. In addition to all the usual secrets between preteen and teen girls, she has the great secret of not-out-of-the-closet-yet lesbian. As a coming out story, *These Waves* has the strong feeling of deliverance, of letting out all the things that the narrator had to keep inside her while still a girl. The hypertextual structure collapses the two temporal levels together, so that the self-conscious older narrator and still unsure narrated girl blend to each other –even when coming out with the truth, she is still hiding the revelation in the labyrinth of the hypertext, in the entangled web of girl's secrets.

These Waves of Girls is finally, in many ways, quite a traditional *Bildungsroman*, a story of the growing-up of a girl to a fullfledged individual in the society. But it is also a growing-up story of hypertext fiction. Instead of developing and polishing technical and programmed qualities of the new digital media, it takes the technology available and uses it for its own ends. When reading *These Waves* one is not so much invited to appreciate the latest developments of dynamic web coding, but instead, it makes one to ponder about the invented and constructed nature of the narrated past or the ideological power relations working in the society. Even though the claims that hypertext resembles in some concrete way the synaptic network of brain functions is already discarded, *These Waves* manages –in a more symbolic way– to depict the activity of remembering, and mental constructions of the past, the identity, and the self. It also uses the hypertext structure as a means to reproduce the feeling of secrecy, whispered gossips, and ever circulating rumours playing an important role in school girls lives. It manages to breath life to its technical platform, a feat that justifies its position as an exemplary case of digital literature.

The Challenge

The challenge for e-lit criticism, posed by works like *These Waves of Girls*, is thus to combine all the complexity of literary criticism with all the complexities hyper and cybertextual programming creates, without reducing the work to only one of its multiple dimensions. Theoretically, especially the categories of 'implied author' and 'narrator', and also the concept of unreliable narration, have to be reconsidered. This kind of clarification would make further discussion much more fruitful.

Notes

1. This text is a modified version of an article published in the book *Digitale Verdener*, edited by Ida Engholm and Lisbeth Klasttrup and published by Gyldendal (in Danish).