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Hypertext 2000: Reading Room Trip Report

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This year's ACM Hypertext 2000 saw the first "Reading Room" of this conference's already long history. The Reading Room is a social event that allows authors of literary hypertexts to read from their works in a sort of performance evening aimed at the hypertext community at large. It was the first time that such an event was part of the official conference program, and there was considerable excitement and expectation among the literary folks. Diane Greco and I were asked to co-chair the Reading Room by the Conference's Program Chair, Frank Shipman, who gave us absolute freedom as to organizing the event.

The call for submissions yielded quite a mountain of fine hypertexts for Diane and me to choose from, which proved an extremely difficult job. The time for the event was limited, and we had to cut the number of presenting authors down to six. We weren't unfortunately able to invite all the authors of the many quality hypertexts that we had reviewed, but at least we can be sure that the six chosen works are certainly outstanding.

Deena Larsen, a well-known hypertext author who has been experimenting with the medium for the past ten years, and whose *Samplers* is considered by many a landmark in hyperfiction, went first. She read her short hypertext, *Dancing in Your Soul*, a very evocative piece of poetic prose built around the form of a Japanese pictogram. This beatiful hypertext plays with the spatial meanings suggested by the Japanese calligraphy, associating the various brush strokes with ideas and impressions. Deena Larsen's personal webpage can be reached at this address.

The poet Robert Kendall read his hyperpoem *Penetration*, a work that makes use of the flexibility and author-control features of the *The Connection System*, a library of Javascripts that he and programmer Jean-Hugues Réty have created. The system allows the authors of HTML hypertexts to implement features such as random linking, or to record the history of a reading in order to control the reader's movement through the hypertext, so that the hypertext responds to the reader's actions. The public participated actively choosing the various options in a fascinating reading. *Penetration* and other works by Robert Kendall, as well as *The Connection System* can be found here.

Marjorie Luesebrink, a well known electronic author whose pen name is M.D. Coverley, has just had her hyperfiction, *Califia*, published by Eastgate Systems. She delighted us reading from *Fibonacci's Daughter*, a novel that narrates the story of a woman whose life seems intricately tied to numbers. Relationships, love and numbers are all important themes in this work, that uses colours and images as more than mere illustration to convey meaning and give a sense of structure. You can read Fibonacci's daughter here.

Jane Yellowlees Douglas, who has just published an important work on hypertext criticism, *The End of Books or Books Without End* (see interview in dichtung-digital), read her work, *Uh, dad?*, a short hypernarrative about family relationships, sexual discovery, identity and how hazardous communication can be in our everyday exchanges. The piece plays with various outcomes and plot variations according to decision points, and it's written in Storyspace. Jane's lively reading and wonderful voice made for a very enjoyable performance, whose sense of humour the audience appreciated. Her personal website is here.

The final reading was *The Unknown*, a novel that was cowinner of the 1998 trAce/AltX Hypertext competition. It was written in collaboration by William Gillespie, Scott Rettberg and Dirk Stratton. Dirk Stratton couldn't attend, but William and Scott were helped in their reading by Nick Monfort. *The Unknown* is a huge collage of cultural references tied together by the motif of a trip through the United States, where the authors describe all sort of situations and encounters. The novel is witty and sharp, and the three readers performed brilliantly, punching a hotel bell each time a link was encountered, thus inspiring the audience to choose new paths. You can read The Unknown at this address

Elin Sjursen was going to present her hyperpoem, *Opuscula*, which uses words, music and images to suggest a beautiful atmosphere of loss and talks about how wounds can be healed. Unfortunately, she was unable to attend the conference due to a schedule conflict with her University work. You can visit Elin's website clicking here.

Nevertheless, the evening was a success, the audience were enthusiastic about the works and the brilliant performances of the authors. People who had up to now been reluctant readers of hyperfiction, and even those who had never tried it, came to tell us that they had been thrilled by the literary possibilities of the medium. Seeing people exchange URLs and comment excitingly on the various hypertexts that had been presented was the best reward for us organizers.

NOTE: This report was written with the help of Diane Greco's good memory, as I had forgotten the author's reading order and other important information. Thanks Diane!