

Aaron Plasek. "To Apprehend What Is There & What Isn't: John Domini's *A Tomb on the Periphery*." *The Collagist* 7 (February 2010).

## To Apprehend What Is There and What Isn't: John Domini's *A Tomb on the Periphery*

*Aaron Plasek*

*But an arrow is only an arrow; it is never an end in itself. It is everything save what it aims for, save what it strikes, even, indeed, save what it wounds; this is what makes the arrow miss even that what it touches, which thereby remains safe...*

— Jacques Derrida, *On a Name*

*If, when a reviewer whose taste I trust condemns a book, I feel a certain relief, this is only because so many books are published that it is a relief to think—"Well, here, at least, is one I do not have to bother about." But had he kept silent, the effect would have been the same.*

— W. H. Auden, *Dyer's Hand*

While reviews of John Domini's *A Tomb on the Periphery* have been uniformly positive, such reviews seem to have no interest in elucidating what experiences the novel offers readers. Reviewers of *Tomb*, perhaps out of fear the book will not get the readers they believe it deserves, have tried instead to discuss the novel in terms of experiences they believe their audiences have already had and wish to have again. Discussing the novel this way makes the book into an experience-producing machine: in exchange for reading a reader gets a particular experience, a transaction as simple as putting a coin

into a gumball machine and getting a gumball. This tactic may initially garner readers for *Tomb*, but falsely constrains the experiences the book offers readers by placing specious limits on the kinds of reading-activities one can do with the book. Worse, trying to itemize the experiences *Tomb* offers as if the novel were a buffet from which we can pick and choose experiences actually distorts the book, casting deviations from the reader's expectations as flaws of the novel.

It's a problem of ontology, like you trying to sell me a puppy by describing a fire hydrant. I, in turn, having heard your description of a fire hydrant, then encounter the puppy and look for all the similarities a puppy and a fire hydrant have in common: they're about the same height, they both produce liquids, and so on. I then buy the puppy. Of course, there are some problems with thinking a puppy is a fire hydrant. First, I miss out on the experiences I could have had (e.g. going for walks). Second, there are certain things I assume a fire hydrant does well that a puppy doesn't. I can't very effectively put out a building fire with a puppy. I may write you an angry letter complaining that you sold me a bad puppy when what was really faulty were my own expectations: I fault the puppy for not being a fire hydrant, something the puppy had no interest in trying to be.

My purpose in this essay is threefold: (1) to consider the circumstances that allow a critic to write a review that fails to identify the thing it purports to describe, (2) to identify how existing reviews misrepresent the specific experience Domini's *A Tomb on the Periphery* offers its readers, and (3) to write a review of *Tomb* that avoids the pitfalls I have described.<sup>1</sup>

## 1.

Imagine a thug holds a gun to your head saying, "Identify criteria to rank book reviews from *good* to *bad*. Satisfy me or I shoot." So pressed,

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<sup>1</sup>Some readers may find my phrasing for (1) and (2) problematic, saying, "I disagree with your assumption that Domini's text must be read in a certain way because I deny that there is only one 'correct' way to read any text. Shouldn't we consider many possible ways to read his book?" My response to these readers is, "Yes, of course! But even if there are an *infinite* number of possible ways to *read* Domini's novel, this does not mean that there are not some ways of discussing the book that *any* group of readers can agree may harm our ability to *read* by falsely representing the act of *reading* itself." This is exactly what I will argue.

your answer is likely to be informed by the reasons you infer the miscreant reads reviews. The *specific* criteria for reviews of a computer science textbook, a contemporary novel, and a revised folio of Shakespeare's plays are not identical. Disparate audiences have different concerns. You must guess enough about the gunman's interests to provide an answer worth more to him than a bullet.

The aforementioned reminds us that book reviews don't just "tell you what is there"—to borrow Fairfield Porter's assertion—but also tacitly *tell* you the kinds of experiences you value. It is frequently assumed that *telling you what is there* is a review's purpose, while *telling you what experiences you value* is ancillary, likely done implicitly in the book's explication or in the choice of book considered. Yet many reviews routinely deny this, arguing that a book offers similar experiences to those a potential reader presumably values to the point of misrepresenting the very thing the review purports to elucidate. If I wrote a review of *Moby Dick* saying, "This book follows the exploits of Captain Ahab as he commands the starship *Pequod* in search of the interstellar space bandit Moby Dick," anticipating that my review-readers liked stories with spaceships, it would be obvious to both myself and my readers that I had privileged my audience's tastes at the expense of describing the book. Yet reviews aiming to convince an audience to read a particular book (or buy a particular brand of diapers, cars, beer, etc.) need not ever mention specifics that can be tested. Such reviews need only unleash a fusillade of words, idioms, and phrases that a reader has associated with a particular pleasurable reading experience. For convenience, let's identify book reviews concerned with garnering readers for a book above all other concerns as the *bookseller's review*.

To better examine what a bookseller's review is, how it is effective at getting readers for a book, and the consequences for the writers and readers of this kind of review, let's consider an extreme form of the bookseller's review: the book blurb. The blurbs located on book covers are perhaps most ruthlessly intent on trying to get people to read the book discussed, and so it is here we see prominent examples of how words may be used to suggest a "recognizable" yet ambiguous reading-experience. Consider the book blurb from the back cover of John Domini's *A Tomb on the Periphery*, published in 2008 by Gival Press:

Few novels can stand up to the promise of *tour de force*, but here, John Domini is at the top of his form, writing beautifully, humming along like Fabrizio on his Suzuki. This is a delightful crime novel, with a setting to die for, and at the same time a moving story that should interest a wide range of readers.

The ubiquitous term *tour de force* is used, but this proclamation doesn't help me to see what the book is or how it works. *Tour de force* is, I think, being used to mean an exceptional creative achievement, but what exactly has been achieved that is exceptional? The phrases "delightful crime novel," "setting to die for," and "moving story" do not answer this, nor are they intended to. The advertising language a book blurb uses functions similarly to the billboard-framed scantily-clothed woman provocatively reclining beside a six-pack of beer. If either blurb or beer ad are successful at getting me to do what is desired, it's not because of what is explained (if indeed any explanation is present), but because of an implied future good, assumed to be a good I value, which I think the item will help me attain. The woman in the beer ad doesn't tell me anything about the beer advertised, but does, through my response, say something about me and what I value. Likewise, the phrase *tour de force* doesn't tell me anything about the book, but my reaction to the phrase certainly suggests some specific things about me: I don't stop reading when encountering the intermittent Latin, French, or Greek phrase, and have bumped into this particular phrase enough to feel I should know what it means if I don't already.<sup>2</sup> The phrases "setting to die for" and "moving story," like *tour de force*, do more to identify the assumed book-review reader's tastes than to indicate anything about the book itself.

The only seemingly descriptive bit of info given by the blurb is the phrase "crime novel," but, as we shall see, this is as likely to mislead the reader about the kind of experience a book offers as it is to inform. Genre classifications are ill-suited for describing *specific* books because genres in literature, to borrow the phrasing from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*,

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<sup>2</sup>The other two definitions of *tour de force* being "a feat requiring unusual strength, skill, or ingenuity" or "a particularly adroit technique or maneuver, esp. in a difficult situation." After writing this essay I did a quick survey. Of the ten contemporary books of fiction and poetry in the room with me right now, five have *tour de force* written somewhere on the cover.

“have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all.”<sup>3</sup> I might say *crime fiction* involves criminals and their motivations as well as having, at some point or another, crime. I might say *crime fiction* encompasses a range of formal techniques/effects<sup>4</sup>: ways of presenting an enigma for the reader to solve; the explication of how a crime has been committed that rivals the detail of biblical genealogies; perhaps sexual intrigue, too, and so forth. And yet none of these aforementioned attributes strike me as being particularly essential to the term. I can imagine another person might give a very different list of attributes, and yet I would still agree that the new list seemed to work as well as mine.

The term *crime fiction*, like all genres, is not defined by any one particular set of characteristics of content or form, but a set of disparate things and ideas and meaning-making activities of which no particular element is essential.<sup>5</sup> The set of meanings *crime fiction* can connote is infinite.<sup>6</sup> There are many attributes *crime fiction* can have, but to compile a comprehensive list of all attributes seems impossible and beside the point. Some of the meanings pointed to by the term *crime fiction* may contradict other meanings ascribed to *crime fiction* such that one can imagine two books called crime fictions that have no identical attributes whatsoever.

Any term that can be used interchangeably to describe two books that have nothing in common seems useless to me, assuming our stated goal in a book review is to tell the reader what is there. The back cover blurb telling us Domini’s book is a “delightful crime novel” actually tells us worse than

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<sup>3</sup>Wittgenstein is talking about *language* here, not the term *genre* as I imply. However the relationship he wishes to describe about our use of the word *language* is exactly analogous to the relationship I wish to describe about our use of *crime fiction* and, more generally, *genre*.

<sup>4</sup>But the exact formal techniques/effects of the genre *crime fiction* seem less well-defined to me than the content.

<sup>5</sup>It is regrettable that I have resorted to the terms *form* and *content* because such terms suggest a division that is not really there. There is no form without content and vice versa. Yet in trying to parse out the various meanings a genre connotes, it seems difficult to avoid these terms, despite their inaccuracy.

<sup>6</sup>While *crime fiction* can take on an infinite number of meanings, I do not think that *crime fiction* can take on every possible meaning. As an aid to understanding this, consider the example of two sets. One set contains all even numbers and the other set contains all odd numbers. While both sets are infinite, they do not include every possible number nor does either set contain any identical elements of the other set.

nothing. At least if we're told nothing, we know we don't know. Using genre descriptors as a means of talking about a book we haven't read tells us almost nothing too, but gives us the false impression or feeling that we know something about the book. With the term *crime fiction* one is as likely to find Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* as Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*; as likely to find Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. The use of terms that *seem* to provide information is a distinguishing characteristic of the bookseller review. We now need to understand why this characteristic makes bookseller reviews so aptly named.

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In her essay "Against Interpretation," Susan Sontag argues that a discussion of art which treats the content of art work as the art itself inevitably leads to a kind of interpreting that Sontag says, "is virtually one of translation. The interpreter says, 'Look, don't you see that X is really—or, really means—A? That Y is really B? That Z is really C?'" She suggests this process of translation originates from a historical motive to alter or expurgate meaning in problematic texts such as, for example, the lascivious Song of Songs into agreement with Christian spiritual beliefs, without actually altering the words of the text itself. This way of interpreting, Sontag writes, is used when "a text has become unacceptable; yet it cannot be discarded.... Interpretation is a radical strategy for conserving an old text." Acts of interpretation of content, Sontag points out, deny art by making it manageable, tame, and receptacles of values we already have.

Bookseller's reviews are necessarily faced with an analogous task of "translating" the book they discuss into something a reader desires, though it seems more accurate to say this interpretative act is not

*X is really Y*

but is instead

$$\left. \begin{array}{c} X \\ A \\ B \\ C \\ \vdots \\ \infty \end{array} \right\} \textit{is really the same as } Y$$

As we have just seen, this is precisely what genre terms do, and so it is not surprising that book blurbs use them. Yet a genre’s ability to encompass an infinite number of attributes is precisely what makes genre useless whenever it is employed as a self-evident term like “this is a delightful crime novel.” For the blurb or review writer more concerned with convincing someone to read a book than to tell the reader what the book is, genre descriptors’ inability to be pinned down to a particular meaning helps the reviewer sell the book. The blurb-writer has his or her own personal meanings when using a genre descriptor. Blurb-readers necessarily have to supply their own, likely different, meanings for the genre descriptor based on other books they read that were described as *crime fiction*. Thus the bookseller review employs the same trick to entice readers to buy a book that politicians, as pointed out by Orwell in “Politics and the English Language,” use to convince others to vote a certain way. A president says, “We must make the world safe for democracy,” and a listener agrees not because what is specifically meant by *safe* and *democracy* is discernible, but because being *safe* and being *democratic* are thought by the listener to be “good” things. Likewise a bookseller’s review identifies a particular audience and then peppers it with phrases the audience has associated with enjoyable experiences—“a moving story,” “a setting to die for,” “a delightful crime novel,” and so on. The audience then decides the book offers the kinds of reading experiences they’ve enjoyed in the past though it’s not clear what the reviewer means (perhaps not even to the reviewer).

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There is nothing wrong with seeking similar experiences to those previously pleasurable. Such pursuits seem to account for the overwhelming

popularity of porn.<sup>7</sup> Yet exact replication of experience is tedious and untenable. Rereading a poem read years previously is a very different experience because I've changed, not because the words on the page are any different. To read is to construct ontologies—not just from symbols, but of one's own values, beliefs, and desires, vivified through one's understanding of what is read. To read a creative text is to relearn how to read. I invite any who doubt this to spend a few hours sitting in on a first-grade reading class and a college course in literature. Whatever is meant by “reading” in these two disparate classrooms does not differ only in degree—they are often completely different activities encompassed by the same word, much like the term *crime fiction*. That the term *reading* is a continual conflation of meaning-making activities is precisely where the power and pleasure of literature resides, and it is precisely this that a bookseller review attacks.

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The bookseller review tries to limit the activities that *reading* connotes by commodifying them as one might value coins, cattle, or Cadillacs by neatly partitioning experiences a book offers. Such reviews lay all these itemized experiences before the reader as if one was trying to decide between which eggs to buy at the grocery or which car to drive off the lot. To present a book's effects the bookseller review adopts the strategy of the particle physicist: it is assumed that a book can be described by identifying its components, much as a physicist describes the cosmos by cataloging all the elementary particles and forces. Such a book review assumes all the ways to make meaning have already been identified and all activities that count as *reading* have already been learned. All creative writing becomes a tool to achieving a particular effect no more or less valuable than a tire iron used to remove tire from rim. Such an approach allows no space for

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<sup>7</sup> I imagine writing pornography is incredibly frustrating. So many plot decisions are constrained by the necessity of every character having sex, and further constrained by the audience's knowledge of this. The pornographer's task to produce a script seems to me far more difficult than the poet aiming to write a sestina. I can't think of any enterprise more ruthlessly intent on providing a particular experience than pornography, and yet nowhere is novelty more prized as an *inherent* good. Literature is not nearly as constrained to provide one particular kind of experience, but many lit-readers seem more weary when encountering novelty than pornographers, often trying to dismiss novelty by shouting “gimmick!” or “self-indulgent!” louder than anything anyone else has to say.



discovering what we didn't already tacitly assume by the stylistic descriptors we choose to use. For the bookseller review, new literature is always beside the point, is only ever past literature.

To understand experience as something finite and discrete is not only inaccurate but dangerous because it impoverishes what we behold by placing false constraints on how we can experience art and our lives. We may point to certain events in our lives as significant, such as the death of someone loved, or a graduation, or a birth, but what gives meaning to all these experiences is everything that happened and will happen after these events. Experience is not partitioned, not discrete.

The damage suffered by a reader of the bookseller review is not simply the misrepresentation of a book as another permutation of a catalogued list of experiences, nor the mere propagation of the false notion that experiences can be added or subtracted as one might add or subtract bananas, pears, and apples from a fruit basket. The ultimate cost of the bookseller review is a curtailment of our literacy, and so too a reduction in our ability to identify new ideas as new or to recognize new experiences as such.

## 2.

I have described both what a bookseller review is and some consequences for our ability to recognize newness whenever we use such reviews. Now I'll consider how these reviews have served as an impediment to thinking about *A Tomb on the Periphery* specifically: first, by identifying how the use of ambiguous terms in bookseller reviews encourage thinking about *Tomb* in a manner that obscures *Tomb's* idiosyncrasies, and, second, by examining how the practice of bookseller reviews to commodify experience both prevents readers from understanding the specific experiences offered by *Tomb* and prohibitively limits the range of experiences readers may have otherwise had with *Tomb*.

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I found approximately ten reviews of *A Tomb on the Periphery*. The excerpts I present below give a flavor of critics' unanimous response thus far.

And so I guess all this begs for a certain piece of information right away — that for all of you simply looking for a well-done crime novel, you can rest assured that this actually is one, not one of those fussy, overly-written pretentious messes that professors like calling 'a meditation on crime' or whatever the f-ck. —Reviewer 1 [excerpt 1]

And while the book masquerades as a crime novel, it's much, much more. Domini writes of both culture and cultures with a flair not frequently seen in either the mystery or literature sections. —Reviewer 2 [excerpt 2]

Stolen antiquities, small-time thugs, a sultry femme fatale. Such is the stuff of John Domini's new novel, *A Tomb on the Periphery*, a book that takes the trappings of noir then transcends the genre. —Introduction to Interview with Author about book [excerpt 3]

In this crime story, it's the reader who does the detecting, all the while soaking in the atmosphere, as scattered clues are unearthed and reassembled—like the link between the drowned girl and the mummy. —Reviewer 3 [excerpt 4]

The tone of these reviews is uniformly positive.<sup>8</sup> The reviewers seem excited to tell the reader the pleasure the book afforded them, but the actual experiences the book offers, and even basic description, get lost in the murky terms “crime novel” and “crime story.” It appears such terms mean some-

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<sup>8</sup>I'm taking aim at how existing reviews uniformly misrepresent and/or simply fail to accurately describe the experiences Domini's book offers, but I do not aim to vilify specific reviewers of Domini's book. As I pointed out by providing the Auden quote at the beginning of this essay, to say nothing about a new book can be as bad as outright condemnation. Those reviewers who have provided me examples to use in this essay will recognize their own words. And no one who reads this essay will be able to read a review of *A Tomb on the Periphery* that commits the mistakes I discuss here without also being aware that the review is a questionable one. For that hypothetical literary critic who *must* associate the reviews discussed with review authors, a simple Google search will provide all the information desired.

thing very specific to the review writers, but the review-reader can only understand the term in his or her own private sense. Since the reader must rely on his or her own experience to define what a “crime novel” is, the reader is forced to understand *Tomb* in terms of other “crime novels” previously read. Accordingly, by the ambiguity of the terms used, a review-reader is only given the opportunity to apprehend the novel as an amalgamation of previous reading experiences—such qualities, as we’ve already mentioned, are the hallmarks of bookseller reviews. If *Tomb* offers something new for its readers, the bookseller review cannot point to this newness because, as just noted, bookseller reviews only discuss books in terms of replicated reading experience. Excerpts 1 and 4 go so far as to explicitly base their argument for why readers should read the book on the premise that *Tomb* replicates reading-experiences previously enjoyed, though, again, it cannot be clear what these experiences are. As already discussed, to understand reading as a mechanism of pure experience-reproduction is false. Reading itself is always provisional, is always being added to.

It’s worth noting that excerpts 3 and 4 do mention specific nouns from the book—“Stolen antiquities, small-time thugs, a sultry femme fatale”; “the drowned girl and the mummy”—but such lists do exactly what Sontag is railing against in “Against Interpretation.” The lists mistake the content of the art for the art itself. Every review I’ve excerpted, indeed every review I found for *Tomb*, confuses story summary for the experience the book offers its readers. To do this homogenizes the book; it hides the idiosyncrasies of *Tomb* which would show how our understanding of what it means *to read* is changed, and so help us to apprehend what is new as new. Some reviewers make an attempt to get beyond plot summary, but the vocabulary used to give a sense of the experience nearly always obscures their meaning.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The review from which excerpt 4 is taken does start to move away from plot-as-explication to an attempt to show experiences through a list designed to suggest a range of particular experiences, including the most concerted effort of all the reviews I found to attempt an explication of the ways in which *Tomb* uses language. Domini’s language, the reviewer writes, “startles, stabs, tickles and at times dazzles, delighting us from the first page.” To the reviewer’s credit, a quote from *Tomb* is given as example.

We might compare ambiguous language to a fog that prevents us from apprehending the outline of the things we aim to observe. I look across a fog-laden valley in the morning and have trouble distinguishing tree from windmill. Ambiguity of language is the fog between what is looked at and my eye. While this analogy makes some sense in the context of an introductory composition class, the analogy ultimately suggests a false notion of how language works. One can imagine mistaking two similar objects in a fog—what I take to be a cow is really a horse. It is much more difficult to imagine mistaking a dragonfly for a Saturn V rocket because of fog, but this is exactly the kind of ambiguity language allows.

A more useful analogy to help us understand how ambiguity works in language is to imagine we are hunting elk along a series of mountain cliffs. We sit on one cliff bank with binoculars and scan the adjacent cliff face for elk, knowing elk frequent the area. I scan individual aspen trees, sage bush, small patches of tall grass and exposed rock for telltale movement. I find many cattle and deer, but no elk. An hour passes. Finally, through my binoculars, in a small clearing between two groves of aspen trees, I *see* an elk! Yet as we stare through the binoculars for 5 seconds, for 10 seconds, for 20 seconds, the shape of the sighted “elk” dissolves into a particular combination of fallen log, boulder, and shadow cast by tree. How best to describe our mistake? The problem has nothing to do with my eyes, for what my eyes observed when I saw an “elk” or when I subsequently saw the log/rock/shadow combination hasn’t changed. The problem is not of perception, but of ontology. I saw an elk because I believed, because *I knew*, an elk was on the cliff somewhere. There was never an elk at the moment I glanced through binoculars at the forest clearing, but my thinking there was made it briefly appear to me.

Yet if I were to repeat my elk hunting from the 30th floor of the Sears Tower, I could never make this mistake, say, by observing a particular configuration of chance arranged garbage dumpster, bicycle, used Chinese takeout box—not because I could not make from these objects a pattern and coloring similar to the outline of an elk, but because I find it difficult to imagine a situation where I would *believe* an elk would be in the alleys or streets of downtown Chicago.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The Sears Tower was renamed the Willis Tower in 2009.

The elk hunting analogy suggests two mutually-dependent observations about ambiguity in language:

*Observation 1:* Ambiguity is not an imprecision of description like a child who colors outside the lines of a coloring book, but is instead a situation that arises when there are many different patterns of ideas and relationships that all seem equally justified by what is being attended to. In this way honest reviewers are able to argue a book offers certain experiences the book doesn't by using only certain elements from the book and ignoring other elements, much like one can make constellations by picking certain stars in the sky and ignoring others.

*Observation 2:* Ambiguity does not tell us what is there, but what *is not* there, what is excluded, what is denied, what patterns simply don't count (e.g., an elk on a downtown Chicago street.)

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The inadequacy of genre descriptors to discuss specific books and of the bookseller review itself become particularly acute in reviews of Domini's *Tomb* because much of the book's content and effects are not neatly encompassed by the term *crime fiction*: there is an ancient teenage ghost; there is a sociological commentary about the practice of artifact forgery and immigration law; there are fairly explicit sexual scenes and sustained sexual tension; and the language used has been described by many reviewers as "literary" (though it's not clear to me exactly what is meant by this). Most reviewers argue tacitly and sometimes explicitly that Domini's book inhabits a variety of genres: part romance, part ghost story, part "literary" fiction, and so forth. Accordingly, it's argued, the book will appeal to a wide range of readers because there is something for each reader of a particular genre to enjoy. As the reviewer from excerpt 1 writes:

...[T]hen there are the privileged few [novelists] who manage to find that super-fine balance between dense literary complexity and mainstream appeal...who are able to turn in award-winning tomes that still appeal to the beach-and-airport crowd.

Such a claim illustrates the impulse of the bookseller review to partition experience, and in doing so to disfigure the experiences. The fallacy of the assumption that we can consider distinct elements of an art work without any regard to how such elements interact becomes more obvious if we consider the assumption in a different context. If future scientists genetically engineer an animal with a lion's body and the head, wings, and forepaws of an eagle, we won't think of the animal merely as a composite of animals or of animal behaviors—the specific combination of parts make a different animal we name “griffin” with a completely different set of behaviors. Similarly, John Domini's *A Tomb on the Periphery* includes elements from many disparate texts (or, to talk *ambiguously*, many different genres), and so the book has *completely different* specific effects than the specific effects we might expect to find when considering elements of the book in isolation (as has been done by almost every reviewer considering this book). To write “this is a delightful crime novel” or “a delightful [insert genre here] novel,” as so many well-meaning reviewers have done prevents us from experiencing the book because such specious comments, as I've already suggested, allows us no space for discovering what we didn't already tacitly assume based on genre descriptors.

While I will discuss what experiences I think *Tomb* offers its readers in part 3 of this essay, let's consider the audience for this book based on what we already know. The challenge *Tomb* faces is the same that all books discussed only in terms of bookseller reviews encounter when aspiring to a broad readership. Those casual readers of Domini's book grabbing a few pages as a distraction on the subway, the beach, and so on will have expectations based on how they define the genre they're reading, which is most likely *crime fiction*. These readers will be pleased when the book meets their expectations, that is, when they can engage in the specific ways they've learned to take pleasure from attending to a particular genre. But the same readers may be confused by the ways in which the book deviates from their expectations, and may be likely to conclude that these deviations represent a failure of the author and not an opportunity to expand their notion of what it means to read. As example, consider the following passage, in which *Tomb*'s protagonist Fabrizio waits one morning for his sextop, his partner in crime:

And those commuters alongside the Bay, what a show. Look how the cars caught the light! You'd think it was noon already,

the fires the sun was setting along the chrome and steel, and on the fishing boats that hadn't gone out today. Those boats, their glossy hulls rocking, teasing glimmers out of the traffic-stirred ripples around the pilings. You'd think those boats were sending signals in some fierce color code, between the passing Fiats and Audis. Or was it the fish themselves? Airborne fish just visible in the sun's unstable refractions, fish or more precisely octopi, pinwheels with arms and mouths sea-yellow, sea-green, and the pink of a wound. (107)

While some readers who find value and pleasure in, say, the long genealogies of the Bible are likely to find this passage beautiful, those who only conceptualize *reading* as bookseller reviews do (i.e. that the term *reading* does not change to include new activities) may ask, as some students in my introductory literature course have innocently asked of similar passages, "Why doesn't Domini just get to the point?" For such a student—perhaps a good deal less casual than the reader who conceptualizes all of literature in terms of genre—Domini's use of many different techniques from a variety of disparate texts may be interpreted as mistakes of craft or judgment. Alternatively, more pretentious readers might very well apprehend Domini's interest in exploring the possibilities of what reading can be but may remain dismissive specifically because of their belief that Domini *chose* to write *genre* fiction, because this is how reviews have framed all discussion of this book. Perhaps counter to our intuition then, Domini's ability to weave together so many ways of meaning-making will actually reduce his audience to a limited set of people who are (1) willing to alter their own tentative idea of what activities the term *reading* can encompass and (2) are as excited to read, say, comic books as they are *Moby Dick*.

### 3.

We've identified a prevalent type of review that privileges audience over the book discussed, considered various false assumptions that such reviews necessarily make, including how genre descriptors like *crime fiction* ultimately act as an impediment to describing the reading experience, and have considered how such reviews have served to obscure the experiences that *A Tomb on the Periphery* offers us. Let us now attempt an alternative to the bookseller review.

One could never say of Domini's *A Tomb on the Periphery* that nothing happens. The novel has murders ancient and modern, ladder-climbing mobsters, theft of Greek artifacts, forgeries of jewelry and documents and identities, coronaries, the minutia of courting sex and disaster, and migrants struggling to remain in an Italy hellbent on demonizing them. What is so strange about a book with so much action is that I find myself reading not to discover what will happen next, but to discover what Fabrizio (local college-drop out, expert jewelry forger, and *Tomb's* protagonist) *thinks* about what happens. The book is never far from Fabrizio's thoughts, and everything is presented through the gaze of Fabrizio's own judgments and feelings. To wit, at the behest of his grave-robbing partner Shanti, Fabrizio finds himself neck deep in fresh excavation, and an ancient krater provides the reader a glimpse into Fabrizio's own feelings:

The vase remained almost upright, its base sunk into the dirt. Shanti kept her light on the thing long enough to reveal a bright black and orange picture of two more dancers, or possibly wrestlers. You saw a lot of that, two women grappling, one going down; the story always had to do with a mortal who'd challenged a god. Stupid mistake. (32-33)

The book reminds me that no object encountered is neutral because our individual perspectives disallow this, as we see again, for example, when Fabrizio is having an unpleasant conversation with a doctor:

Nonetheless the view out the office window offered no relief, only another parking lot, a struggle all too familiar. Cars were crammed in sideways, backwards, frontwards, one or two in spaces you wouldn't have thought possible. No vehicle could budge without the say-so of another widefaced little dictator, this one in blue rather than white. (83)

Though the present action of the novel occurs during the course of three evenings, each object, each situation is an opportunity for the reader to learn how the characters' past choices influence their thinking about their present choices. The book is written in third person, and often shifts seamlessly from present moment to memory and then back to present moment. Consider the following passage during which Fabrizio and Shanti sneak



into a grave they will soon rob. As Shanti crawls on her knees, Fabrizio's thoughts turn to his previous relationships, then to the inevitable sex, and then:

So too, he'd only had one prostitute.

A looker, actually: a well-put together whore of about eighteen, with a touch of the oriental about the eyes and cheeks. She'd arrived recently from some Balkan trouble-spot, the name of which he never got straight. Yet the fine shape on this working girl, the sweet angles of her eyes and her willing though broken Italian, all these had the opposite effect from what a man would expect. Or from what the man who'd brought Fabrizio to this house must've expected. His host was that evening's buyer, a high-roller who'd believed his skilled young accomplice would enjoy an introduction to this downtown "parlor." Once Fabbro and the Balkan girl had been shown to their room, she'd gone down on her knees before him. Like Shanti, yes: Shanti now, on her knees and wearing a naughty smirk, just after he and the American had trespassed onto government property. (28-29)

The novel's oscillations from present to memory and from memory to present mimic how I perceive the world as I act in it; how a tiny item or minute trait or gesture or situation may conjure past experiences previously forgotten, quite independent of my own desire. On a radio show I hear that scientists find no physical difference between remembering a memory and creating a new one. I cannot speculate on the validity of that claim, but the claim itself is a useful analogy for Domini's technique of explication—because the language throughout so closely mirrors Fabrizio's own emotions and attitudes, the distinction between past and present seems less important than how the past and present are similar and are both imaginative acts. I write, "I am typing this now." But I may just as well write, "I am hungry now," or "I am responding to the caffeine in my coffee." That I choose to write "typing" and not something else *is* an imaginative act. It is exactly the same imaginative act I perform when I look back at a memory and say, "This is *the* reason I did (or failed to do) X." Because the narrative so closely follows Fabrizio's own thinking, it is difficult for me not to develop empathy for Fabrizio, despite his mistakes. Yet this narrative that *seems*

to be Fabrizio's voice (because it mirrors Fabrizio's thinking so closely) is contrasted by our awareness that the narrative cannot be Fabrizio's actual thinking/speaking (because the narrative is in third person). This allows for strange and most startling moments in the novel in which we observe Fabrizio observing himself:

After a while Fabrizio searched the pocket under his seat for a paper bag. wasn't that what they used on TV, when a person started to hyperventilate? A paper bag, held balloon-like over the nose and mouth?

Mama, Mama, you wouldn't believe how your toughneck boy kept crying. Fabrizio never found a bag and the pocket of Kleenex he turned up wasn't nearly enough for him.... (103)

As the reader gets closer to the end of *Tomb* the book shifts away from histories to emphasize how Fabrizio resolves the problems created throughout the novel, the solutions of which usually involve previously dissociated plot lines bumping into each other. If much of the book dwells in the present as a means to access the past, the conclusion of the book dwells in the present for a glimpse of the future. The many happenings I listed at the outset, although often unexpected and unanticipated, rarely surprise because the characters, from Fabrizio to knife-carrying-mobster to the many-identified Shanti, seem products of their histories. Domini's characters feel deterministic—that every action could be predicted if it was possible to have all relevant information. One gets the feeling reading that there are no random events anywhere if one examines with sufficient resolution and sufficient timescales. Yet this sense of prescience is contradicted (or at least challenged) by the hope Fabrizio has to do better for his ailing mother, his ivory-tower-contained brother, and those destitute strangers to whom he promises aid; to do better than what his own previous failures would seem to allow. I am reminded of the closing sentences of *The Great Gatsby*: “It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . . And one fine morning— / So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.” The lack of surprise in what Domini's characters do does not detract from my enjoyment of the book. The pleasure is not in the events occurring, but the experience of

discovering the characters' histories and thinking through each event that causes me to read on to the next page until none remain.