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# *The Meaning of Meaninglessness*

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**Brian Evenson**

*TLOOTH*

Harry Mathews

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Mathews is the only American member of Oulipo, a group of (predominantly French) mathematicians and writers which has included Raymond Queneau, Georges Perec, and Italo Calvino. A loose collective of very different writers with an interest in games, mathematics, and permutational logic, Oulipo advocates using arbitrary rules to organize literary writing. Mathews offers a perspective on novel writing that is uncommon in our country. His early novels in particular—*The Conversions*, *Tlooth*, and *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*—thrive through an elaborate interchange of hidden patterns, permutations, and various arbitrarily chosen rules, some of these readily decipherable, others incredibly arcane. The point, finally, is not the rules or systems themselves, but what the use of arbitrarily chosen rules can allow. By restricting oneself to a set of arbitrary rules, one is forced out of the standard solutions one employs as a writer, forced to employ new strategies. Theoretically, having an arbitrary problem to solve occupies enough of the conscious mind that the unconscious opens up, thus allowing the text to develop in unexpected and sometimes revelatory ways.

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*No solution will suddenly explain the book, capture its essence, for there is no essence.*

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What is impressive about Mathews's work is that, though the arbitrary systems are present, they don't get in the way of Mathews's ability to tell a compelling and stylistically intriguing tale. Despite having only the barest bones of a plot, *Tlooth* is an incredibly readable book. Indeed, *Tlooth* is a demonstration of how one can bleed away narrative without giving up the satisfactions of either storytelling or game playing.

Ostensibly, *Tlooth* is a revenge/pursuit novel, starring a dentistry-obsessed narrator whose sex remains deliberately unclear until the end of the novel. The narrator pursues a doctor who, while in a Russian prison camp partitioned according to religion, manages to botch a surgery and amputate two of the narrator's fingers. The digressive pursuit takes the narrator out of the prison camp, into Afghanistan, Venice, Morocco, and France, to a very unusual "showdown."

The "tlooth" of the title remains mysterious until 2/3rds of the way through the book, when it describes the sound made when the narrator extracts a foot from a fortune-telling bog. "Aha! Rather enigmatic," a count accompanying the narrator says, "but there won't be more. And," he chuckled, "you can't try again for another year." One might speculate (for starters) that "tlooth" refers at once to

truth, to tooth, as well as to speech-impedimented versions of truce, to lose, and to loose. All of these terms are relevant to what occurs in the book, yet finally even the title of the text itself cannot be seen as a mystery waiting to be solved: no solution will suddenly explain the book, capture its essence, for there is no essence. Rather, the title is a game to be played, a substitution ritual that gains force from its inability to settle on any single term. Mathews brings us into contact with the human desire to organize everything into a system and the human failure to force that system to “mean.”

This human desire for meaning is explored in the chapter entitled “Spires and Squares.” Here, one of the narrator’s companions speaks of an arcane and fascinating series of linked word puzzles that she discovered in a library’s stacks. First, she reconstructs an elaborate and intriguing theological solution for the puzzles (part of which the narrator sleeps through), but then, after exhausting the topic, she shows how the solution dissolves into the air in the face of a much more banal reality.

Such puzzles and thwartings abound in *Tlooth*. They range from a scene from a pornographic screenplay that offers a series of complex letter swaps, to simple anagrams (Grand Canal, for instance, becomes Rio Ciga Acnil), to much more complicated and much larger formal principles. As a reader, one toys with such puzzles and patterns, sometimes seeing their solutions quickly and immediately, sometimes barely sensing that the pattern is there at all, sometimes passing over them without seeing them at all. In a way, the intention of such patterns is not only to distract the superego and ego of the writer as he writes; it is also to distract the superego and ego of readers as they read, allowing them to open themselves up to a work to which they might otherwise

remain resistant.

What is finally most appealing about Mathews is his extravagant, almost rarefied inventiveness. Mathews’s world is populated with marvelously unlikely and ardently described objects, presented with a narrative verve that makes them somehow real in spite of themselves. These include an elaborately constructed exploding baseball, a philosopher-dentist who advocates speaking to the teeth, the “Black Pope” enigma, the home-made animal race, detailed discussions of musical instruments made from the human body, and so on.

As the best of Mathews’s early novels, *Tlooth* both deserves to be read quickly and explored with care. By adding *Tlooth* to their other reprints of Mathews’s novels (including *Cigarettes*, *The Conversions*, and *The Journalist*), Dalkey Archive has brought together in one place the texts that define Mathews as one of America’s foremost ludic experimenters. Dalkey should be congratulated for making *Tlooth* available to a new generation of writers, mathematicians, gamers, religionists, puzzlers, eruditionists, exhibitionists, dentists, bicycle-builders, and readers.

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