

## Birth, Accident and Death: A Narratological Probing of Die-Cut Holes

The first recto page of *Vaginal Examination, a unique pocket guide* (c. 1980s) is not quite blank, is even emptier than blank and is one of the fullest things imaginable.<sup>1</sup> At its centre is a perfectly circular hole surtitled '1cm', a window that gives onto a printed image of something indeterminate and possibly hairy. The second page is similarly die-cut with a hole two centimetres in diameter, and the third and fourth pages, with holes of three and four centimetres respectively, also afford views of this cipher for creatureliness. As the hole grows from page to page, more of the hairy indeterminacy is revealed. Through this interplay of aperture and image, the booklet describes the opening up of a body and emergence of a baby's head. To flick through from beginning to end is to dilate the cervix and fast-forward labour.

*Vaginal Examination* was conceived of by community midwife Jean Aspin as a basic guide for students. It is to be held with the spiral binding at the lower edge, the tongue-like page rising up, sharp corners die-cut into an arch. Though rotated by ninety degrees, the booklet otherwise proceeds according to the conventions of Western bookbinding and narrative progression: the pages below the spine contain the 'past' of any given open page, and those above its 'future'. Each successively larger hole brings us closer to the denouement: an unhindered baby's head.

Perhaps the booklet's corners were rounded off for practical purposes, so as not to snag when whipped out of or thrust into a uniform pocket. But the choice also brings the object figuratively closer to the body. It insinuates knees, lobes, organs, chubbiness, a pate. And yet the perfectly round holes and the white, wipe-clean coated card are a far cry from the hot, wet, messy, noisy, colourful truth. This booklet embodies an imaginary exactitude within fitful biology, science's hallucination of dry orderliness, which nonetheless offers practical yard sticks, hit points and warning signs for the midwife immersed in bloody reality.

*Vaginal Examination* is a specimen of the 'grey literature' genre, which, according to the 'Prague Definition', refers to publications of 'manifold document types produced on all levels of government, academics [sic], business and industry [...] where publishing is not the primary activity of the producing body'.<sup>2</sup> Grey literature has a job to do out in the world. This booklet serves as both score and transcription. It is a hinge, gateway or junction at which the specific and the generic, the mortal and the eternal, contingency and predictability converge. Its drawing of a baby's head is at once a schematised norm, arising from all those born before, and an exemplar by which to anticipate the position of a particular baby being born in real space-time. Its 'narrative' is simultaneously a partial account of an idealised universal trajectory and an itinerary towards a real but by no means certain near-future. An itinerary is a spatio-temporal skeleton of events on which the particularity of experience depends, a totalising document with a stated origin, prescribed plot and a horizon of arrival – an ending. But, unlike most itinerary users, a baby does not traverse this route consciously. *Vaginal Examination's* itinerary relates a sequence of biology's variably predictable and unpredictable moments.



*Vaginal Examination: a unique pocket guide* (c. 1980s); spiral bound; back and front covers same white coated card stock as internal pages; 32 pages, eight of which are die-cut. The guide was designed by Jean Aspin, community midwife at Luton & Dunstable Maternity Wing, and distributed by hospitals for use by trainee midwives. This copy is held in the author's personal grey literature collection, and was acquired in 2015 from Gloria Rogers, a retired midwife who worked throughout the 1980s in maternity units at Minster Hospital (now Sheppey General Hospital, Kent, UK) and All Saints' Hospital, Chatham, Kent.

Mark Currie reminds us that in realist fiction written in the past tense, the past undergoes 'presentification' in the reader's mind.<sup>3</sup> He points out how the 'present' of reading is a synthesis of the text's past and its future, as yet unknown to the reader, but already set in place by the writer. He notes the echoes of St Augustine's analogy for the present: any given moment of the singing of a psalm consists in the memory of the text and melody that has already been sung and the anticipation of what is to come.<sup>4</sup> Within a less determinist context, any given moment in *Vaginal Examination* could be thought of as partly pre-written – in that biological processes follow a script of sorts, and the baby is a 're-membering' of passages from two biological parents' genetic material (which will go on to be interfered with by social, cultural and material conditions) – and partly improvisatory, contingent on how one reader of the present moment – the midwife – acts. The narrative here does not culminate in a preterite future already in place. The user of *Vaginal Examination* understands that the primary author of the situation is 'nature', and that the birthing parent and the midwife have limited means, such as biomechanics (a less than universally accepted form of birth yoga), by which to alter whichever trajectory the baby is on. The ending can be influenced, up to a point.

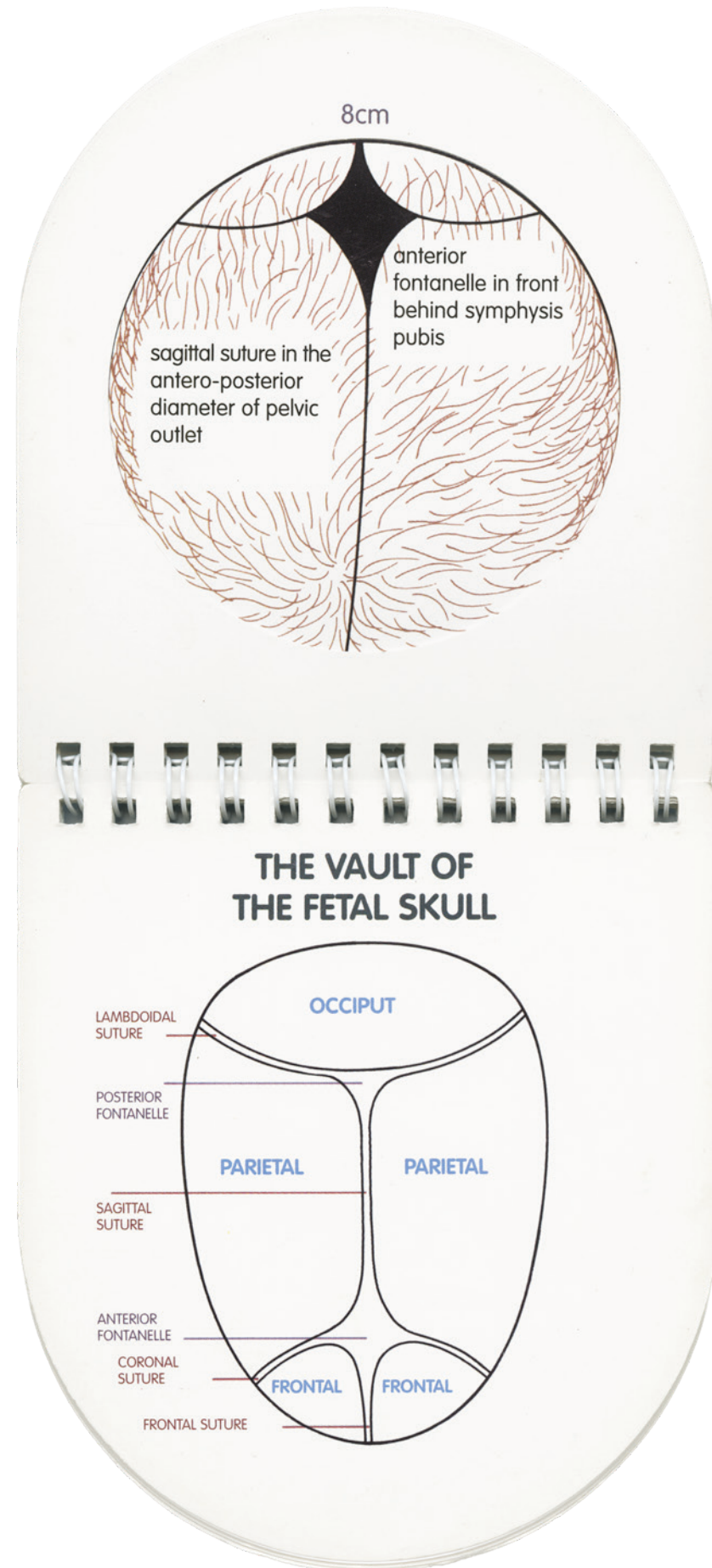


1. *Vaginal Examination: a unique pocket guide* (Wiltshire: Cow and Gate, c. 1980s).

2. Joachim Schöpfel, 'Towards a Prague Definition of Grey Literature', *The Grey Journal*, 7.1 (Spring 2011), 5–18 (p. 6).

3. A point originally articulated by Peter Brooks in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), cited in Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 30.

4. Currie, *About Time*, p. 13.



5. Huge thanks to Ruby Jackson, a Band 6 Rotational Midwife, for her insight into the practical, social and emotional realities of the midwife's role, which I've threaded throughout this piece. Jackson is also the founder of the app Melanatal, which provides information on the signs and symptoms of maternal and neonatal conditions on black and brown skin such as jaundice, pre-eclampsia and mastitis.

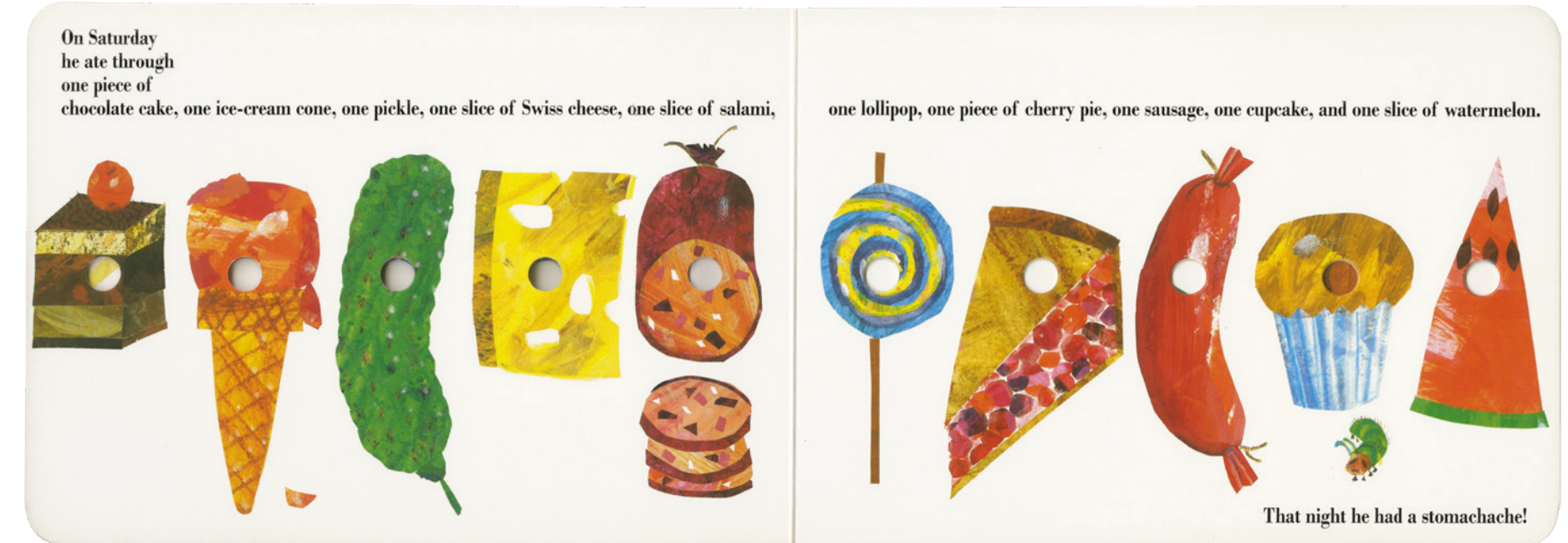
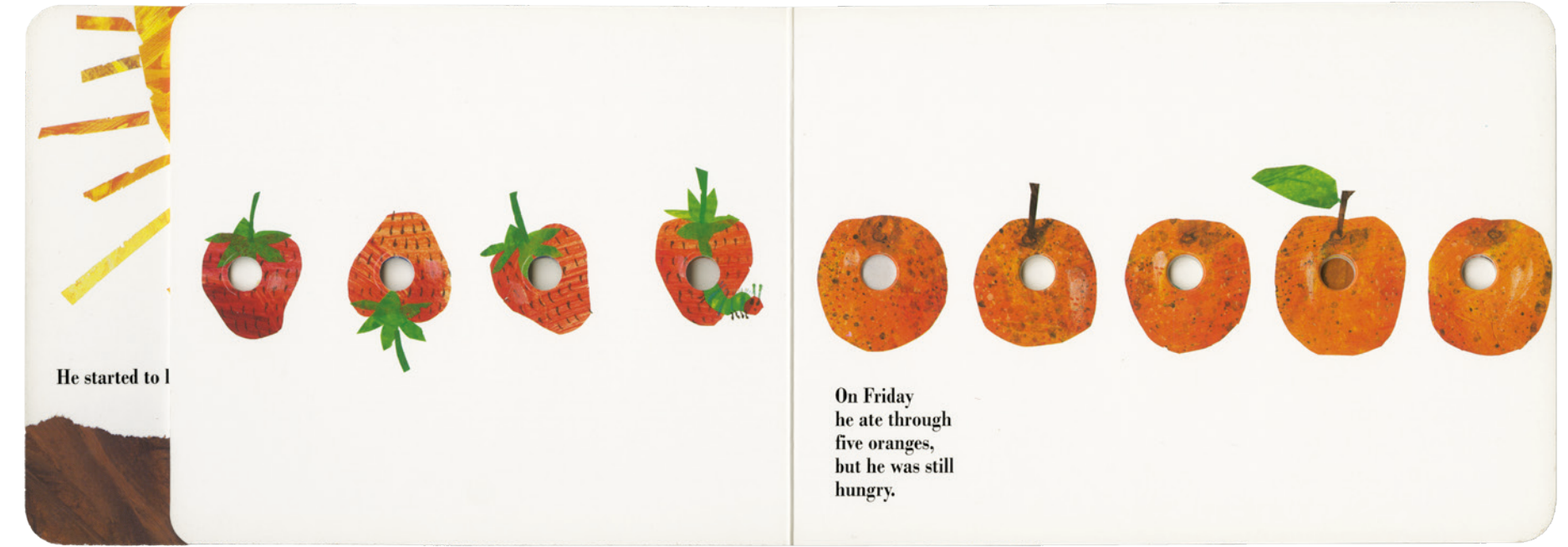
But there are further temporal convolutions that the booklet is not tasked with acknowledging. Practising midwife Ruby Jackson told me that dilation and head position – the pocket guide's primary diagnostic parameters – are but two among a multitude of influential factors.<sup>5</sup> The labour room, she said, is a place of profound complexity, and time as a structuring device goes out the window, since a birth might take anything between a couple of hours and a few days. For her, the narrative arc that necessarily dominates does not run from early contractions to delivery, or from 1cm to 10cm cervical dilation, but from beginning to end of a twelve-and-a-half-hour shift. It is an intimate stretch filled with the swapping of stories and glimpses of the pasts of those present; and this social aspect of the job informs a parent's perception and future retrospective account of the birth. If a good relationship has been fostered and trust built, the experience might be described as 'beautiful' even in the event of some less-than-optimal intervention, such as a forceps delivery or an un-planned caesarean section. But when that relationship has been emotionally cold, or worse, even a vaginal birth with no perineal tearing might be described as 'awful'.

Since *Vaginal Examination* is an introduction to basics, these institutional and psycho-social temporalities are stripped away. The central organising principle of linear chronology is falsely dominant. The timeline is a blunt yet versatile instrument of modernity, from the vast family of measuring and charting tools that continue to enable industrial and colonial expansion through the analysis and control of resources and people.<sup>6</sup> To be able to look along the timeline to the right, to penetrate the opacity of the present to glimpse a future, is the power of clairvoyance. It is not prediction, which remains in the symbolic register of language, a spoken prefiguring of events to come. Neither is it augury, which is the obtaining of guidance from signs within natural materials (entrails; bird behaviour; celestial phenomena...) figuratively expressive of future states of affairs. Clairvoyance is indexical, a 'clear view' of actual events, albeit a partial view of an as-yet-unknowable whole.

Partial views can yield misinterpretations, which B.S. Johnson makes mischievous use of towards the end of the novel *Albert Angelo* (1964). At the bottom of page 149, following a passage in which the narrator, Albert, tells his friend Terry about his fraught relationship with the schoolchildren he teaches, and how he plans to ask them to write an essay on how they feel about him, a die-cut rectangle reveals three lines of text two pages ahead. This passage describes a knife fight from which an unnamed 'him' dies. If you resist skipping ahead to this juicy bit, you will read about Albert getting into a couple of pub scuffles and a policeman warning him not to linger in such a rough neighbourhood, since a drunken man 'might rush out of a house with a knife in his hand and stick it into the first person he saw'.<sup>7</sup> Only after these feints – these not-quite-incidents which fail to deliver the drama foreseen – will you eventually reach the fatal passage, only to find that it describes not a scene in the primary narrative, but the death of Christopher Marlowe in 1593. It is a thematic insertion, a wrinkle in time, a rupturing of linearity, a reverberation through literary corridors. And it is a reminder that, even when looking right at something, we know little about it. The top of the baby's head is only part of the story.

6. For overviews of temporal and spatial aspects of the historically diffuse phenomena of measurement and data representation, see Sandford Kwinter, *Architectures of Time: Toward a Theory of the Event in Modernist Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001) and Rasmus Grønfeldt Winther, *When Maps Become the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

7. B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo* (London: Constable, 1964), p. 149.



Eric Carle, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (New York & Cleveland, OH: World Publishing Co., 1969).

Having learned to read in the UK in the early 1970s, the book that suggests itself most readily to me as a formal relative of *Vaginal Examination* is Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1969).<sup>8</sup> Here, die-cut holes relate a recently hatched caterpillar's prandial journey through several fruits, savouries, desserts and other treats, which make him feel terrible, and a nice green leaf, which makes him feel better. As with *Vaginal Examination*, this book too proceeds through dilation. While the cervix widens from one to nine centimetres, the caterpillar fills up on numbers of portions that increase with each day – one apple, two pears, three plums, four strawberries, five oranges and finally a ten-course meal. In both cases, the potential of a sequence or list to tend towards the infinity latent with numbering remains unfulfilled, and yet our experience of being a body establishes that this dilation is excessive.<sup>9</sup> A reader knows they are at an upper limit. These are literatures of the extreme.

The idea for Carle's book came from his playing about with a holepunch (which was first invented for clipping tickets on the railway).<sup>10</sup> Its protagonist was originally a bookworm called Willi, who munched through volumes to no conclusion.<sup>11</sup> The caterpillar's path to splendour, then, was via an involuted route, originating in the 'misuse' of a tool of control, via an aversion to intimations of infinity. In the eventual book, apart from the hole in the cupcake previewing the next page's brown plant stem (from which the restorative green leaf depends), all other holes in recto pages give onto unprinted whiteness. A metaphor for the caterpillar's seemingly endless hunger, perhaps? Or a portent of its imminent state: a foresight of the ostensible expressionlessness of the cocoon later to be shattered by the vivacity of the butterfly? Either way, the book's temporal structure departs from conventional fiction temporalities: that which is glimpsed through any given recto die-cut page does not straightforwardly represent the caterpillar's future, and that seen through the verso is not its past. The caterpillar discovers, through eating, manifold portals to its own immanence, of which hunger and pupation are precursor and fulfilment.

Where Johnson and Carle disrupt the standard 'book as timeline' with die-cut extensions into distant history and other ontological realms, *Vaginal Examination* pushes the envelope by representing several potential realities in one timeline. A baby rotates during labour, hopefully into an orientation whereby its chin is tucked into the chest, its back is against the birthing parent's stomach and the head presents its narrowest diameter. But this rotation is not to a schedule, nor guaranteeable. And so, interspersed between the booklet's hole-bearing pages, there are uncut pages printed with seven different orientations of the

8. Eric Carle, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (New York & Cleveland, OH: World Publishing Co., 1969).

9. For a great listing of the aesthetic qualities of listing, see Umberto Eco, *An Infinity of Lists*, trans. by Alastair McEwen (London: MacLehose Press, 2009).

10. Benjamin C Smith, 'Conductor's Punch', patent no. 313,037, United States Patent Office, 24 February 1885.

11. The change of protagonist was suggested by editor Ann Beneduce. See Howard Calvert, 'The making of Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*', 26 May 2021, <<https://www.penguin.co.uk/discover/articles/making-eric-carle-very-hungry-caterpillar-story-behind>> [accessed 2 January 2026].

12. Mark Currie, 'Anticipation/Unexpected', in *Time: A Vocabulary of the Present*, ed. by Joel Burges and Amy J. Elias (New York: New York University Press, 2016), pp. 97–110 (p. 99).

13. Peter Newell, *The Hole Book* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1908).

14. C. John Sommerville, *The News Revolution in England: The Cultural Dynamics of Daily Information* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 20.

15. *Ibid.*

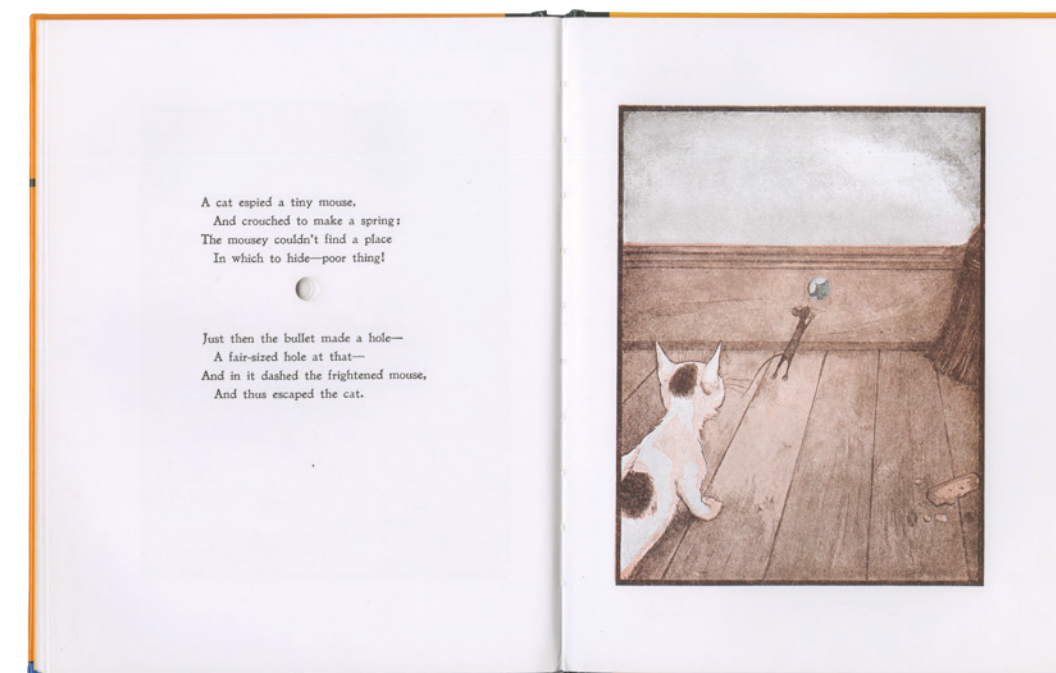
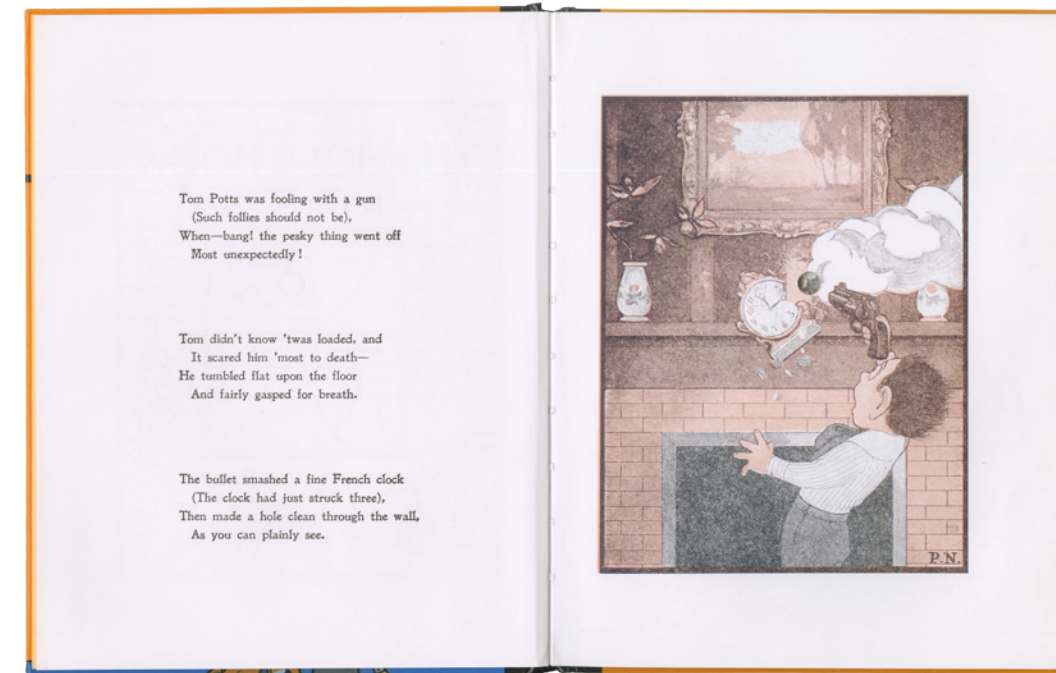
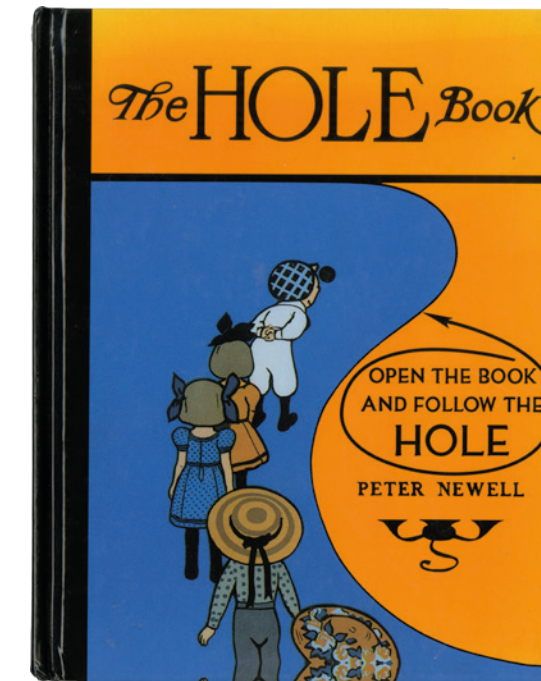
16. Robert E. Park, 'News as a Form of Knowledge', *American Journal of Sociology*, 45 (1940), 669–86 (p. 676).

17. Brian Larkin, 'The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 42 (2013), 327–43 (p. 329).

foetus's sagittal suture and fontanelle. Here the die-cut holes become printed trompe l'oeil, each one introducing a new baby positioning as a waypoint, but also potentially as a different 'ending'. This function of expediency (a pocket guide must fit in a pocket, while being as exhaustive in its coverage as is practically possible) creates a sense of the septupling of vision, the multiplicity of possibilities. The booklet flags the contemporary state of knowledge, which, in Currie's summation, 'has abandoned its most extravagant projects centered on the description of a clockwork universe and has come to reconcile itself with the unpredictable and the aleatory condition of matter'.<sup>12</sup> When even science has delivered us to an ontology of chaotic randomness and illogical interconnectivity, this booklet is a hedge-betting support amidst biology's innate unpredictability and fitful means, and a caution against singular, fixed expectations. It is a morality play about plurality, modality and emergence.

The holes of *Vaginal Examination* cannot guarantee the orientation of that which passes through them. They represent conduits, not autonomous agents of change. Their chief affordance is to let things pass, but other than on matters of size, they have little say. The hole in Peter Newell's *The Hole Book* (1908) is quite different.<sup>13</sup> The book's narrative runs over 23 double-page spreads, each, bar the final one, punched with a hole just above the centre of the page, at a crucial point in the verso illustration and, on the recto, acting as a separator between two four-line verses. Agential, though not artful, the hole is an externalisation of the naughty school boy, Tom Potts, who sets it off on its journey. Tom is 'fooling with a gun' he doesn't know is loaded. (I am performing a reader's 'presentification' of the past, here.) It goes off, the bullet smashing a fine French clock and firing clean through the wall. Over the page, and on the other side of the wall, is the kitchen, where the bullet pierces the boiler and floods the room. Then it penetrates another wall/page and flies out into the yard, where it cuts the rope of a swing on which little Sue is playing. She takes a tumble. And so the bullet continues, wreaking havoc as it penetrates a car's fuel tank, a painting, a fish bowl, a box of mice, a Dutch pipe, a pear tree branch, a top hat, a bag of grain, a fishing pole, a savage wild-cat, balloons, a bass drum, a stove pipe, a skirting board, a door bell, a set of bagpipes, a bee hive, a kite string and a dog chain. It is finally brought to a halt by a cake with icing 'good and stout'. The bullet hole does not pre-exist a bullet which it simply lets pass through. It is a vicious wake. And it is evidence: a trail of destruction into which a small, investigating finger can poke.

*The Hole Book* is an allegory about unconsidered consequences, emphasising the hair-trigger seriality of causal events to show how moments of irresponsibility generate broad, deep and uncontrollable fallout. Given the speed of a bullet, these events would happen in such quick succession as to appear simultaneous. The book depicts something approaching parallel universes: one event – the firing of a bullet – producing different, co-existing outcomes. The book's pages are walls between spaces in which characters go about their business, and they are the infinitesimal periodisation of an already near-instantaneous moment. In the classical model, time stops everything happening at once. Where a menstrual period is that stretch of time between potential moments of conception, temporal periodisation prevents the spontaneous bursting forth of a baby that is all ages at once and dying. Newell's holes – renderings of bullet speed itself – pierce barriers between space-times, bringing his protagonists a paper thickness closer to the ultimate collapse of everything everywhere all at once.



Peter Newell, *The Hole Book* (1908; facsimile reprint Tokyo; Rutland, VT; Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 1985); hardbound; 52 pages.

Periodisation is also a term for the publishing development to which some cultural historians attribute 'the birth of the modern world'.<sup>14</sup> What we recognise now as newspapers – with their multiple stories given near-equivalent weight, demanding the continual shifting of attention, meaning changing at great speed – were prefigured by organs intended to represent as close to newness as contemporaneous technology afforded. In around 1486, King Henry VII's government produced partisan diplomatic accounts to counter rumours; during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, corantos carried news from abroad for public consumption, while ballads were a means of distributing risky, even potentially seditious, commentary, smuggled within an apparently benign form of entertainment. 'Coranto' refers to the current, the stream of information. That which is current is that which is coursing through *now*. (Even ballads would sometimes appear on the same day as the events they related.) In the sixteenth century, newsbooks carried accounts of pageantry and crime, with a particular emphasis on wonder: witchcraft, monstrous births, strange animals, fire and weather, miraculous events, portents, UFOs (angels in Siena, dragons in Ghent, three suns in Cornwall) and the occasional sporting event.<sup>15</sup> In the seventeenth century, the advent of periodicals in Europe kept readers abreast of a multitude of events via a regularly changing mosaic of reports from different places. It is this fodder for discussion and opinion that provided the basis for a new kind of secularised, urban society living in a 'specious present' that is transient and ephemeral.<sup>16</sup> With previous hierarchies of attention distorted, readers began to perceive a world pulsing to many different beats – a world not of theological continuity but one in permanent social revolution.

The private eye – the dick – holds up the broadsheet, his head seemingly plunged into the current. But in actual fact, he is watching through two holes cut in the paper's collage of simultaneous elsewheres. He is scanning the here and now for the person who can lead him to the cuckold party, the briefcase full of money, the one who pulled the trigger ... Maybe, he thinks, this story will make tomorrow's news.

The cutting of holes and excising of paper itself makes *Vaginal Examination* yet another relative of Stéphane Mallarmé's influential poem 'Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard'. In a preface to the poem, printed in an 1897 edition of *Cosmopolis*, Mallarmé compels the reader to consider the space of the page itself and realise the striking importance of the blanks around the type. The materiality of the paper and the absence of ink are given equal precedence in the generation of meaning, rhythm, vibe. Similarly, a hole is as much a thing in itself as it is the absence of that which it perforates. Johnson's hole is a cheeky subterfuge in the meta register. Within Newell's narrative frame, the hole is a cause of death, injury and damage and a means of escape. In Aspin's scenario, it is a transverse section of the birth canal – the infrastructure of passage into life.

Infrastructures are 'matter that enable the movement of other matter [...] they are things and also the relation between things'.<sup>17</sup> The birth canal is not subject to constant traffic in both directions. In one direction, it is but an occasional thoroughfare, along which a baby passes when menstrual periods cease (menopause or some other cause of amenorrhea notwithstanding). A period is a phase in a cycle, periodisation the division of an object of study into chronological periods. In the case of *Vaginal Examination*, the object (birth) is periodised into increments of cervix dilation, thereby performing the translation of a variable temporal span into a bounded spatial one. The unknown

84 (duration) is expressed through the knowable (diameter): we do not know how long labour will be, but we know that the cervix must expand this much.

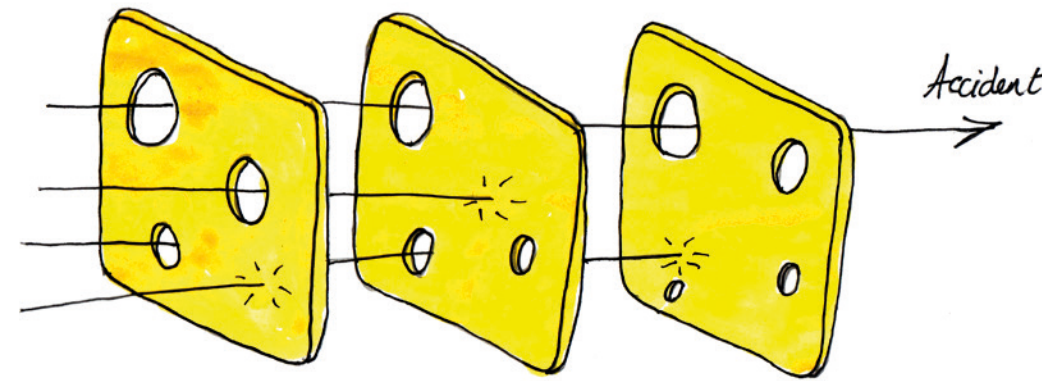
Epochal periodisation has been regularly rejected by humanities scholars as a simplifying act that produces an artificial whole. Caroline Levine, on the other hand, describes it as ‘an abstract, transhistorical organizing principle which literary and cultural studies scholars often use to reveal rooted and local historical specificity, precisely in opposition to abstract and timeless organizing principles’.<sup>18</sup> At any particular site, she points out, periodisation is but one form among ‘a vast variety of chaotically overlapping, repetitive social forms that extend from multiple pasts and replicate themselves, indefinitely, into unpredictable and distant futures’.<sup>19</sup> Periodisation should not be *the* organising principle, but might be one amongst many. The trans-disciplinary practice of ‘[i]nfrastructuralism’ attends closely to this chaos of forms, to the tangle of patterns and routines, rules and values, reiterations and expectations that make up social, political and biological life. The infrastructures of the maternity ward will be just such an analysable jumble of rules, laws, conventions, technical procedures, biological givens and institutional and personal solutions and habits, all adopted or tolerated for the sake of health and safety, efficiency, comfortability, sheer necessity, convention, compassion, the optics...

When fully functional, infrastructure is an ‘apparatus of governability’,<sup>20</sup> of routine and illegible continuity. Spectacular projects aside, the architecture of everyday circulation should be a peripheral concern for those not tasked with its running, maintenance or evaluation. It is in infrastructure’s unrealistic job description to be boring. And yet, since it comprises the very fabric of modern societies, it cannot help but lend its materiality, speed, smells and sounds to cultural experience. Infrastructure colours our understanding of what it is to be alive. And we will be attuned, at some level, to the manifold clashes between competing infrastructures. The scrubbed pastel walls and floors of the maternity ward are contradicted by the vivid birth canal network, which grounds the place in the wet meat of bodies, demanding constant swabbing and scrubbing if the signifiers of sanitation and technological control are to be preserved. Beneath the accelerando of contractions, variable rhythms of breath and *ad libitum* cries that crescendo with birth, runs an institutional composition based in phasing repetitions of shifts, contracts and tenures. *Vaginal Examination* is a visual score for but one of the parts in this huge, unavoidably strained collaboration.

Perdurantism, or ‘worm theory’, views persistent objects as stretching out through time just as worms stretch out through space.<sup>21</sup> When infrastructure ceases to endure, when there is a kink, or worse, in the worm, it becomes a site of material and processual vulnerability, an object of disastrous potential. In the context of civil engineering and utility infrastructure, this might be down to a sudden, unforeseen (or disregarded) catastrophic event – out of routine leaps emergency – or to the slow violence inherent in badly construed and sloppily managed projects, which were always going to decay and decline too quickly.<sup>22</sup>

In the labour room, Jackson describes how, in an emergency, she locks into the moment. Often a decision is required. For instance: should the plan for a vaginal birth be rerouted to the c-section option? A decision of incision. To decide is to cut off, perform a scission, make a break from the path previously followed. A caesarean section is a diversion around the birth canal. Not a severing of its perdurance, but a cautious stepping over of the worm.

Happiness engineer Dr Ali Victor Benazir has calculated that the probability of you, as an individual, being born as you is 1 in 102,685,000.<sup>23</sup> His calculation encompasses the probability of every one of your ancestors reproducing successfully, with the right sperm meeting the right egg for generations reaching back through three million years of human existence. It is necessarily riddled with assumptions – for instance, that when ‘boy meets girl’ there is a one-in-ten chance of them talking, and a further one-in-ten chance of them arranging to meet again – and incorporates neither the risks in the labour room nor the probability of an intelligent technological lifeform having emerged in the first place.<sup>24</sup> But still, as a part-speculative, part-logical estimation, it does a fair job of illustrating the alignments required to bring about what we take as given. It conveys something of the odds that we are.



Author's drawing of James Reason's Swiss Cheese Model of Accident Causality; pen, pencil and watercolour on paper (2025).

To visualise these odds, we might employ James Reason's Swiss Cheese Model of Accident Causality, which represents risk as the alignment of several states of affairs necessary to bring about the event in question. In this paradigm:

an organisation's defences against failure are modelled as a series of barriers, represented as slices of the cheese. The holes in the cheese slices represent individual weaknesses in individual parts of the system, and are continually varying in size and position in all slices. The system as a whole produces failures when holes in all of the slices momentarily align, permitting ‘a trajectory of accident opportunity’, so that a hazard passes through holes in all of the defences, leading to an accident.<sup>25</sup>

In the business community, risk is spun as ‘opportunity’.<sup>26</sup> To seize an opportunity is to dive through a tunnel made by the fortuitous lining up of holes. (From which it follows that aspiration is the attempt to manufacture just such a channel, and blame the charging of another with having allowed a disadvantageous series of coincident holes.) When the passage of a baby conforms to the optimal norm, the desired holes are in alignment and the undesired are not. Benazir's calculation extrudes this coincidence of holes to the sublime scale of a planet-wide and inter-generational causal web. Our passage through the birth canal becomes an illustration of us seizing that tiny and fleeting opportunity to exist.

But it must be remembered that the midwife's guidebook does not cover all eventualities: it will be bricked by a breach birth. There is no diagram here for ‘feet first’. In this scenario, all its holes are as good as closed.

There is a daughter sat at a mother's bedside. The mother has a hole in her chest. After surgery, her heart was too swollen to close her back up. There is a thin layer of scrim and the bed-sheets between her heart and the rest of the world. She is in an induced coma, suspended, while everyone waits for the inflammation to subside. The consultant tells the daughter the mother's probability of survival. It was forty percent before the operation, which had called for the decision: to operate or not. It is even lower now, and dropping with every day the chest stays open. Certain holes in certain slices of cheese are lining up too well, others not well enough. Another decision is pending: to keep the machines running or not.

In an early stirring of institutionalist thinking, the daughter had once made the mother laugh by pointing out that the birth canal and the main sewerage outlet were stupidly close together. Now she is wondering whether any holes can be brought out of alignment, or if their paths were set long ago. What is to blame? Are there opportunities for escape? But there are too many parameters, which means too many holes. And she suffers from trypophobia: sponges and honeycomb turn her stomach.

They say that voices can be heard and recognised by the comatose, so the daughter reads to the mother. Today she is reading from a book of plays by N.F. Simpson. In the first, called *The Hole*, a visionary is sat peering into a hole dug in the road. A group of people accuse him of having a ‘maggoty little private vision’.<sup>27</sup> They cannot see what he sees: a congregation waiting for the ceremonial unveiling of a great window in the south transept, through which he anticipates a great radiance will shine. The people fall in and out of agreement that they can see indoor and outdoor sporting events, an aquarium, a prison, a ritual sacrifice, a junction box. In a final soliloquy, the electric cables are vaunted as ‘the mystery which we call Confusion’.

When these people come together to peer into the depths of the hole, they say, ‘we are not only giving expression by that act to the unquenchable curiosity that is in us, but we are at the same time reaffirming the truth of the eternal and inscrutable paradox – that it is upon this cavity that we build our faith’.<sup>28</sup> The daughter wonders what this might mean to the mother, whose chest cavity she is trying not to peer into, and who she fears is peering into some other fateful, inscrutable hole. Curiosity may carry us ‘forward’ through life, she thinks, and yet we can only realise who we have been in this world with retrospection, once our narrative is coming to its end, at the brink of the ultimate wormhole – that unfathomable infrastructure which will carry us off.

18. Caroline Levine, ‘Infrastructuralism, or the Tempo of Institutions’, in *On Periodization: Selected Essays from the English Institute*, ed. by Virginia Jackson (Cambridge, MA: American Council of Learned Societies, 2010), paragraph 9.

19. Levine, ‘Infrastructuralism’, paragraph 7.

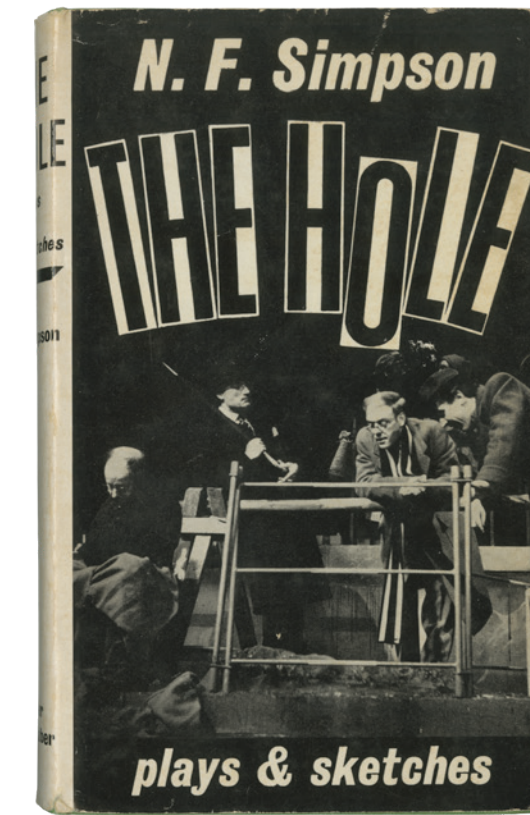
20. Larkin, ‘Infrastructure’, p. 328.

21. See Yuri Balashov, ‘On Stages, Worms, and Relativity’, *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, 50 (2002), 223–52.

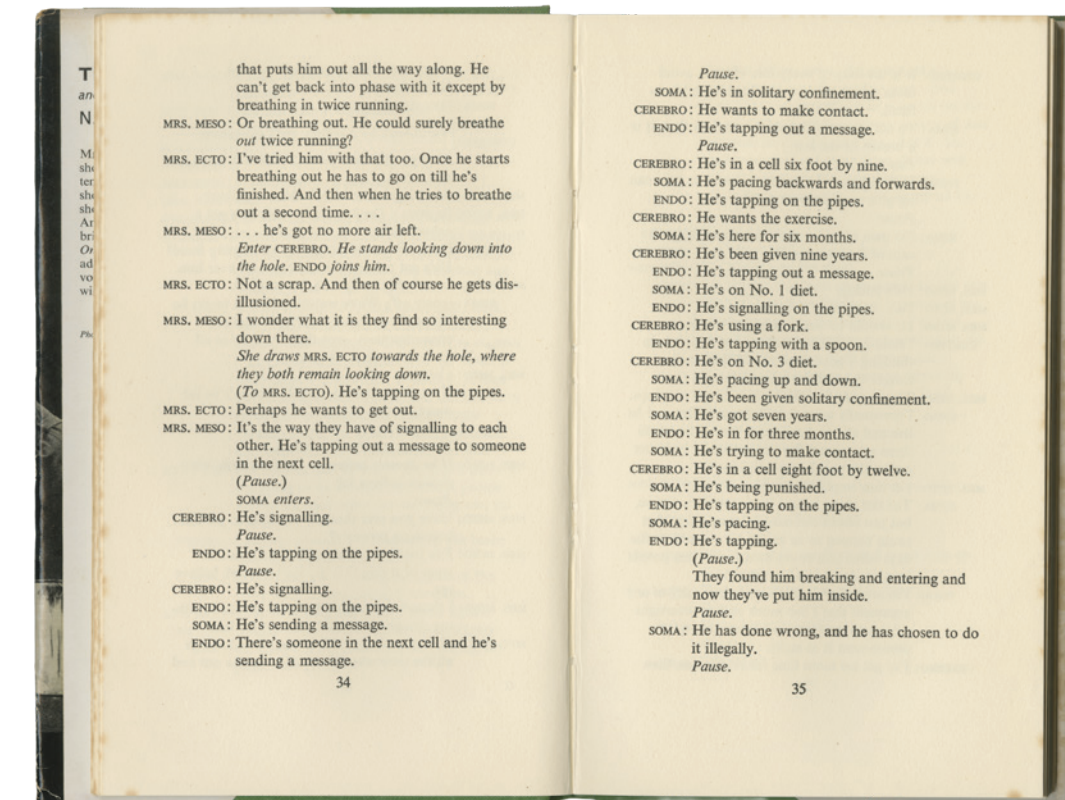
22. For a discussion on the potential for narrative literature, and the figure of prolepsis in particular, to make legible the affective and temporal complexity of infrastructure in the context of climate emergency, and to imagine a future that can create change in the present while retaining more promising resources, see Reuben Martens and Pieter Vermeulen, ‘Infrastructural Prolepsis’, *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*, 8.3 (Fall 2021), 15–39.

23. Ali Victor Benazir, ‘You, the Miraculous: What Are the Chances of Being Born?’, *Happiness Engineering*, blog post, 2 March 2021. <<https://happinessengineering.com/miraculous-you-on-the-probability-of-being-born/>> [accessed 12 August 2025].

24. For a discussion on the Bayesian calculation of this, see David Kipping, ‘An Objective Bayesian Analysis of Life's Early Start and our Late Arrival’, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 117.22 (18 May 2020), 11995–12003.



N.F. Simpson, *The Hole* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964); 1st edition; clothbound with dust-wrapper; 162 pages.



25. ‘James Reason HF Model’, SKYbrary Aviation Safety <[https://www.skybrary.aero/index.php/James\\_Reason\\_HF\\_Model](https://www.skybrary.aero/index.php/James_Reason_HF_Model)> [accessed 16 December 2017].

26. My own father has written a book on the subject. See Patrick O'Reilly, *Harnessing the Unicorn: How to Create Opportunity and Manage Risk* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1998).

27. N.F. Simpson, *The Hole and Other Plays and Sketches* (London: Faber & Faber, 1964), p. 23.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 54.