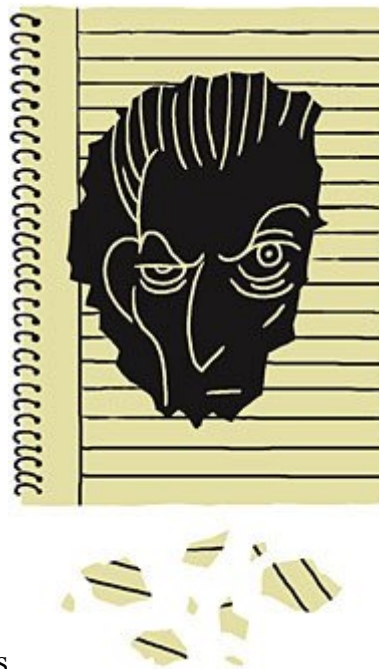


*Travels in the Scriptorium* begins with an old man, referred to as Mr. Blank, alone in a room which is much like a prison cell, and he has no idea who he is or why he's there. He does have feelings of guilt like he's committed some crime. There's a manuscript in the room, and perhaps a report, which may or not be about him. There are photos of other people too, he thinks they must be people from his life (and all previous characters from Paul Auster novels), and some of them come to visit him. He's instructed to write the ending to the manuscript. *Travels in the Scriptorium* is another metaphysical novel from Paul Auster, exploring the issues of life and identity. It's received mixed reviews with The Telegraph saying, "His novels are labyrinths of enigmas, mysteries and riddles, thrillers with no endings, detective stories as told by Samuel Beckett, their premises endlessly shifting, in which the only knowledge is that nothing is, or can be, known. If you dislike writers who disappear up their own wazoos, you should eschew Auster, but if you find them amusing, his stuff is state-of-the-art, and *Travels in the Scriptorium* is a particularly elegant example."

This summary of the novel “Travels in the Scriptorium” has somehow given you a general idea of what the book is about.

Why is it considered a “metaphysical novel”?

Read the following book reviews and take notes about the strong and weak points the book reviewers highlight about the novel. Which review did you like the best? Why?



The Content of His Characters

By SOPHIE HARRISON

Published: February 18, 2007

Paul Auster is not so much a writer's writer as a writer for people who long to be writers. His novels have a habit of unpacking themselves as they go, showing their workings with the gentle condescension of a creative writing tutor addressing a roomful of hopeful amateurs. His frankness

about technique is complemented by the modesty of his sets. All you need is a bed, a chair, a notebook, a room — or perhaps Manhattan or Brooklyn, if you prefer some slightly bigger rooms — and you're there, a modern postmodernist, like Beckett and Kafka, only cooler.

“Travels in the Scriptorium” even sounds like the title of a workshop, and the writing-school ambience takes a while to disperse. On Page 1 a man sits on a strange bed in a strange room. He has no idea where he is. He has amnesia. (Your reviewer confesses to sneaking a look at the end at this point, checking for the sentence “It had all been a dream.”) “Who is he? What is he doing here? When did he arrive and how long will he remain?” the narrator asks, closing his inquiry (Four Questions Every Screenwriter Should Answer!) with an unpromising hook. “With any luck, time will tell us all.” With any luck, Auster will tell us all. He doesn't, of course. This is the democratic classroom of postmodernism: teacher gives the hints, students construct the sense. “For the moment, our only task is to study the pictures as attentively as we can and refrain from drawing any premature conclusions,” the unnamed narrator informs us somewhat priggishly.

It is, in fact, difficult to draw any conclusions at all, but a study of the text will enable the reader to find out this much. The man on the bed is known as Mr. Blank. He is dressed in a pair of pajamas. The first thing he notices is that all the objects in his room are identified by labels: TABLE, on the table; LAMP, on the lamp, and so forth, in a manner that is either deeply mystifying, or deeply cute, depending on one's interpretation of course. There is a desk or a DESK nearby, with a stack of photographs and some pages of a manuscript. There is a window, but the shade is drawn. Importantly, Mr. Blank feels too anxious and weak to investigate the DOOR.

What happens next will make sense only to the keener reader: like T. S. Eliot, Auster expects some homework. First the telephone rings (“a black rotary model from the late '40s or early '50s of the past century” — Auster is not a Motorola kind of man) and a person identifying himself as “James P. Flood” has a mysterious conversation with Mr. Blank. Mr. Blank hangs up. A mysterious woman named Anna Blume arrives and gives Mr. Blank a sponge bath (arousing a minor character, “Mr. Bigshot,” some relation, perhaps, of a similar personality called “Mr. Johnson” in “Oracle Night”). Ms. Blume leaves after feeding Mr. Blank breakfast and kindly performing a masturbatory act on Mr. Bigshot. “The fact is, Mr. Blank, without you I wouldn't be anyone,” she says, suggestively. Mr. Blank reads some of the manuscript on the desk. It's a mysterious science-fiction tale. A man named Samuel Farr mysteriously drops by. Another mysterious woman arrives and shows Mr. Blank her breasts before serving him lunch. Despite there being more coming and going than a parlor farce, Mr. Blank still cannot seem to make it to the door, which unaccountable fact his author tries to cover for by hamming up Mr. Blank's confused state. Mr. Blank is “astonished” to discover his desk chair has wheels, and experiences “immense astonishment” on finding his room has an ensuite bathroom, so is clearly in no state to cope with any kind of excursion. As the title of Auster's 1986 novel has it, this may as well be “The Locked Room.”

Auster fans will similarly recognize that all the visitors are characters from Auster's previous novels. It's neatly done, and very claustrophobic. The novel presents us with a closed room in a closed world, ruled by the creed outlined by the writer, Quinn, in "City of Glass": "What interested him about the stories he wrote was not their relation to the world but their relation to other stories." It should be said that Auster is also interested in what stories are written on. He has always been a stationery fetishist: Sidney Orr is practically debauched by an attractive Portuguese notebook in "Oracle Night"; Quinn, too, is always on the lookout for good spiral notebooks. Mr. Blank has it bad: as if the annotated furniture and the typescript-strewn desk weren't enough, soon, with terrible inevitability, even the ceiling begins to resemble "a sheet of blank paper." All the world's a page!

Or all the world's a book, in which the Figure of the Author (could it be Mr. Blank?) writes with his arbitrary pen. The author writes, and a story unfolds, the purest possible demonstration of chance: characters only coming to be, events only coming to pass, because — hesitating at the top of the page — the writer chose to say this and not that. As Orr says in "Oracle Night," "randomness stalks us every day of our lives." Auster is usually brilliant at evoking this kind of contingency, but it feels thin and unsatisfying here. When his novels work, it's because he successfully persuades us of the writer's oldest trick: that his characters have somehow broken free of their creator. They may be make-believe, products of a playful ideology, but they feel real and their feelings matter. In Mr. Blank's Staples universe, this never happens, which makes it hard to care. Later, Mr. Blank finds the labels on the objects have been changed by an unknown hand — DESK is now marked LAMP, and so on. Which made this reader want to place a label marked WHY? on Mr. Auster.

<http://www.nytimes.com> 18/02/2007

### **"Travels in the Scriptorium"**

**When Paul Auster is at his best he's like a brilliant magician. When he's not -- as with his latest -- it's as if he's sawing away without a woman in the box.**

**By Allen Barra**

Feb. 07, 2007 | "The only thing I don't read much of now," wrote the Irish writer Nuala O'Faolain in her 1998 memoir, "Are You Somebody?" "are middle-range authors -- Kundera, say, or Paul Auster. Writers who play middle-level games." Middle-range sounds harsh, particularly as it veers perilously close to middlebrow -- though if I were a novelist I don't think I would mind being bracketed with Milan Kundera.

Yet, no matter how much pleasure I've derived from Auster's work -- which, with the publication of "Travels in the Scriptorium," includes 14 novels, seven volumes of memoirs and essays, poetry, screenplays for "Smoke" and "Blue in the Face" (set in his and my old Brooklyn neighborhood, Park Slope), not to mention, I'm told, a Madonna video that he directed -- I've only sometimes felt that the resolutions of his Chinese box fictions were as satisfying as I expected them to be while reading.

Then, a writer has the right to be judged from his best work, and Auster is so prolific that it's difficult to bring his entire oeuvre under one critical umbrella. I don't think I've ever met anyone who has read all his books, and among those who have read most of them there is often sharp division over which ones they think best. Those who love his enigmatic and convoluted "Moon Palace" (1989) usually don't care for his post-apocalyptic "In the Country of Lost Things" (1987); those who were delighted by the surprisingly straightforward, autobiographical "The Brooklyn Follies" (2005) don't seem to get "Timbuktu" (1999), his fable-like story told from a dog's point of view.

Auster's most popular novels are usually grouped under the amorphous label of metafiction; but phantasmagorical, I think, better applies to his most famous work, "The New York Trilogy" (1987), composed of three short novels, "City of Glass," "Ghosts" and "The Locked Room." The atmosphere of these books could be described as Kafka by way of Dashiell Hammett. (Hammett is an obvious Auster influence; the plot of "Oracle Night" [2004] was inspired by an anecdote in "The Maltese Falcon.") In these books Auster seemed to be on the verge of creating a new genre in which the classic detective story mated with the novel of postmodern urban angst.

He is at his best when he's being playful -- that is, playing off other genres. When Auster gets cooking, he's like a magician who can amaze us by sawing a woman in half; when he's not, as in "Travels in the Scriptorium," it's as if he's sawing away without a woman in the box. The central character of "Travels," a Mr. Blank, sits in a sparsely furnished room staring at the walls, trying to summon clues about who he is and what has brought him there. (The few objects in the room are labeled with their names, suggestive of the "insomnia plague" that forces the villagers to hang signs on everything from clocks to cows in Gabriel García Márquez's Macondo in "One Hundred Years of Solitude.") Mr. Blank is reading a manuscript he may or may not have written about the near extermination of an aboriginal people (bringing to mind J.M. Coetzee's "Waiting for the Barbarians"). There is also a direct reference to a famous rocking-chair passage in Samuel Beckett's novel "Murphy."

About a third of the way through "Travels in the Scriptorium," you may get an odd sense that you're not reading a real novel -- or at least not a *new* novel. Surrounded by what appear to be allusions to his many influences, Mr. Blank is visited by numerous characters, including James P. Flood and Daniel Quinn, detectives from earlier Auster novels. In fact, all of Blank's visitors are characters from other Auster novels, most of them showing up to berate Mr. Blank for the way he has treated them. (I can't imagine why; I thought Auster was more than fair to most of them.) For those who enjoy this Russian doll-type mystery, "Travels in the Scriptorium" is a feast; the name of the author of the manuscript Mr. Blank is reading is John Trause, a character from Auster's "Oracle Night," and "Trause" is also an anagram for "Auster," who has sometimes used himself as a character in his fiction under his own name.

I fear I'm making "Travels in the Scriptorium" sound like more fun than it is; none of the characters come alive, and if it weren't for our memory of them in previous books, they'd have no identity at all. Those who aren't familiar with Auster's work may be mystified, while those who are may wonder why the characters are dragged back into service for no apparent reason. "Travels" seems less a case of "Several Characters in Search of an Author" than "One Author in Search of Himself Through His Characters." (If Auster's catalog didn't list more than 30 titles, one might suspect that "Travels" was an attempt to work himself through writer's block.)

The term "self-referential" hardly begins to describe "Travels in the Scriptorium." It's intricate, all right, and at times intriguing, but all of its puzzle parts add up to a picture of a perfect blank -- or is that the joke Auster was playing on us with his protagonist's name? Auster offers a solution of

sorts to his puzzle, though none is wanted. Without wishing to tip the ending, the notion that the author is nothing without his characters is surely as wrongheaded an attitude for a writer as is possible. *They're* nothing without him. And the sooner Auster gets around to remembering that, the sooner he'll leave the middle-level games behind.

-- By Allen Barra

<http://www.salon.com/books/review/2007/02/07/auster/print.html>

## Spare with the details

**Paul Auster's *Travels in the Scriptorium* recalls Beckett's bleaker moments - but with more obfuscation, says Killian Fox**

### **Travels in the Scriptorium**

by Paul Auster

An old man. A plain room. A stack of documents and photographs. A procession of visitors entering, speaking in elliptical fashion and leaving again. Paul Auster's slender new novel is not simply a return to the metaphysical territory inhabited by his earlier books, as the blurb for *Travels in the Scriptorium* suggests, but also a nod to one of his literary heroes, Samuel Beckett, to whom old men in featureless rooms were as familiar as paper and ink.

It is tempting to read Mr Blank, the protagonist with the archetypal Auster surname, as a latter-day Krapp, trying, but often failing, to make sense of the souvenirs scattered around him. His memory is shot. He does not recognise his visitors, though they clearly know him well. When, in sliding along the floor, he is prompted to recall ice-skating and youthful love, Blank slips, like Krapp on a banana skin, and falls in an undignified heap.

What is the old man doing in this room and what dreadful things has he done to the people who visit him? Anna and Sophie, his nurses; James P Flood, the ex-policeman; Samuel Farr, his doctor: all refer to treacherous 'missions' he sent them on in the past, and the 'reports' he subsequently wrote. On his desk is the typescript of another report, describing a newly formed state called the Confederation and the plight of one of its citizens. When Sigmund Graf returns from an assignment over the border in Alien Territories, a forbidden area populated by Primitives, who seem to resemble Native Americans, he is sentenced to death.

Blank reads the report in the belief that it is a factual representation of contemporary events, although he dimly recalls that he is living in the 21st-century US, not this crudely fictionalised 19th-century version of Confederate America. Blank clearly has not read enough Paul Auster and does not realise that, in his work, the lines between fact and fiction rarely hold fast.

Auster has always enjoyed playing with the concept of reality in his novels, and is renowned for writing himself into them. He appeared alongside his real-life family in *The New York Trilogy*. The anagrammatic author John Trause was a central character in *Oracle Night*. It is no coincidence that Trause's name resurfaces here - and an understanding of such metafictional sleights-of-hand is required fully to understand Mr Blank's predicament.

Many critics have lost patience with what they sometimes perceive as Auster's displays of postmodern trickery. I, for one, welcome a return to his metaphysical concerns, though this book does suffer by comparison to his earlier work.

If Auster wanted to create a truly economical narrative, he might have excised Sigmund Graf's unhappy tale, which Mr Blank himself dismisses as 'a piece of drivel'. He has not lost his power to intrigue, however, and it is to his credit that a compelling narrative is woven out of such threadbare materials. His prose is as engaging as ever and this short novel propels us briskly towards an elegant conclusion. *Travels in the Scriptorium* is not one of Auster's major works but, slight though it is, fans won't be able to resist consuming it whole.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk>