

New Notables (v.1): Ben Fama, Johannes Göransson, Sarah Gerard

written by Christopher Higgs | February 23, 2015



Perhaps, Iggy Azalea. Perhaps.

On the other hand, because of the internet I am able to learn about new notable books by exciting writers like Ben Fama, Johannes Göransson, and Sarah Gerard. Plus, it allows me to watch Kanye West's performance on the SNL 40 show.

A truly captivating performance for a few reasons. First, the staging. It opens with Kanye splayed out on the ground, rapping upside down to the camera, his face contorted and deformed, his body simulating a man being pressed down on the ground, struggling to breathe. His voice strained. His face defamiliarized. Deformed. As he stands, moving into another song, we hear his voice more clearly and it's as if he's become hoarse, as if he's given all he can give, as if he's been screaming for a long time and these are his last utterances. For me, his performance embodies the intensity of uneasiness I seek in my experiences with art.

I believe

In dark magic

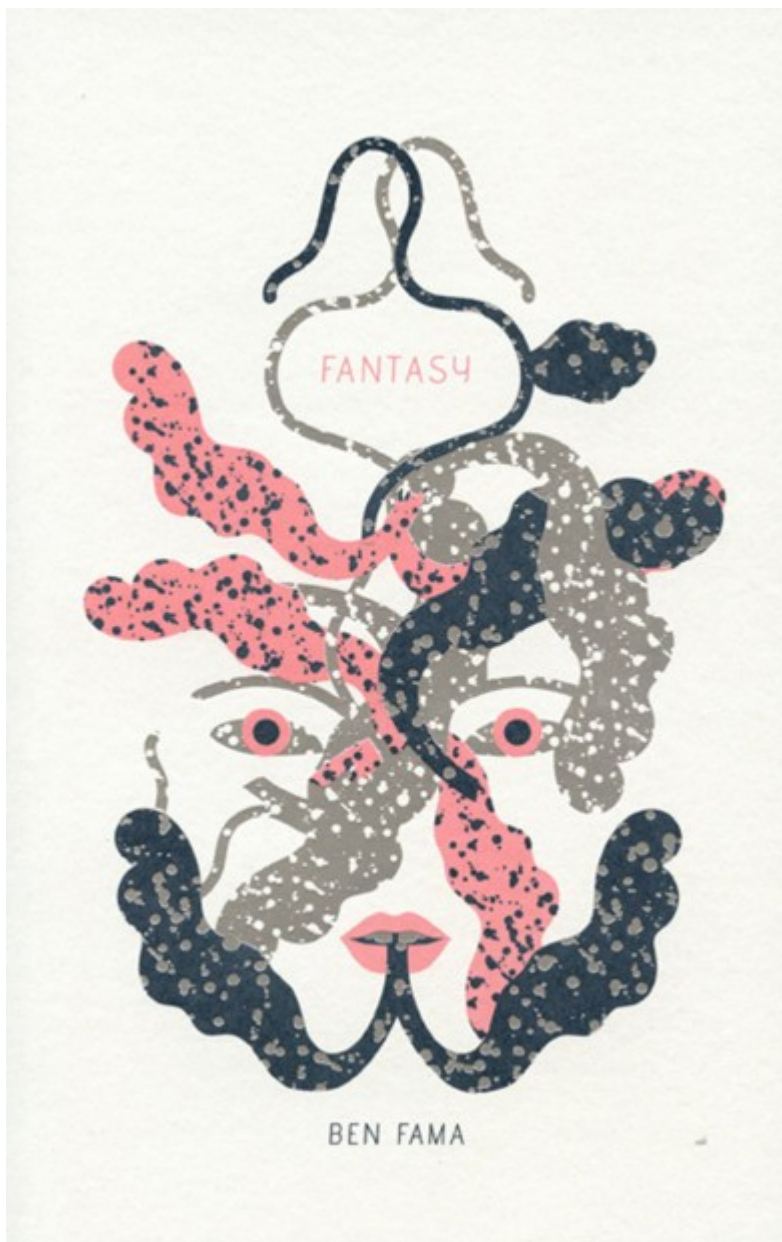
writes Ben Fama in his wildly engaging forthcoming poetry collection,
[*Fantasy*](#),

And the dark woods

And the times our real lives

Mimic the currents of *Twin Peaks*

– From “Pearl Lakes”



As in most of my favorite recent books, I sense in Fama's *Fantasy* the desire for present-ness, for lingering in the here and now, for soaking in – rather than resisting – our highly technological age of commodity fetishism.

Indeed, Fama's book pulses with pop culture: a love poem circling around Dev Hynes (AKA [Blood Orange](#)), a love story slash homage to the resolution of a flatscreen TV, a love ode to Frank O'Hara. Now that I think about it, there's a lot of love in *Fantasy*.

Recently, Kanye West spoke to [The Breakfast Club](#) about his futuristic mentality. He explained that he thinks futuristically rather than presently or retrogressively. Since this has gotten him in trouble in the past, he says he now tries to slow down and think in the present, however he admits he finds it difficult. At one point in the interview he actually criticizes creative people who think in the present or the past. Seems like a thematic thing with Kanye: the future.

Now I'm thinking about the idea of theme.

The idea of theme as a requirement.

Can an essay – or any narrative, for that matter – resist theme?

Currently, I'm teaching a course for both graduate and undergraduate literature students focused on exploring the possibilities and limitations evoked by John Hawkes's famous dictum regarding the true enemies of fiction: plot, character, setting, and theme. More often than not, it's easy to conceive of a book that troubles conventional notions of plot, character, and setting; but theme is much more difficult.

I tend to think of theme as reductive, as a shortcut to thinking, as a force of false stability, a totalizing tendency that zaps all the magic away from a text. The mystery, the not knowing, the confusion, the unanswerable, these are what I find appealing about art in general. Thus, I find the act of identifying a theme in a work of literature unappealing. But nevertheless, I ask myself: won't a theme emerge, despite the author's attempt to minimize its presence, or despite the reader's desire to allow the text ambiguity? Can a text rid itself of theme? Can a reader read without perceiving theme? If so, what would that look like?

At present I am listening to Aidan Baker & Tim Hecker's *Fantasma Parastasio* (2008):

Something like ambient noise metal? Some type of soundtrack for some type of movie or television show? Does it have a theme? I don't think so. (Maybe this speaks to what Adorno said about all art aspiring to music: aspiring to the field where theme can be abolished.)

Thinking back to that *Twin Peaks* line from the Fama book, sometimes I feel like I am Laura Palmer, like somehow I am writing in my diary the way she wrote in her diary, when I am writing on the internet; the way she presumed an audience, I presume an audience. I suppose.

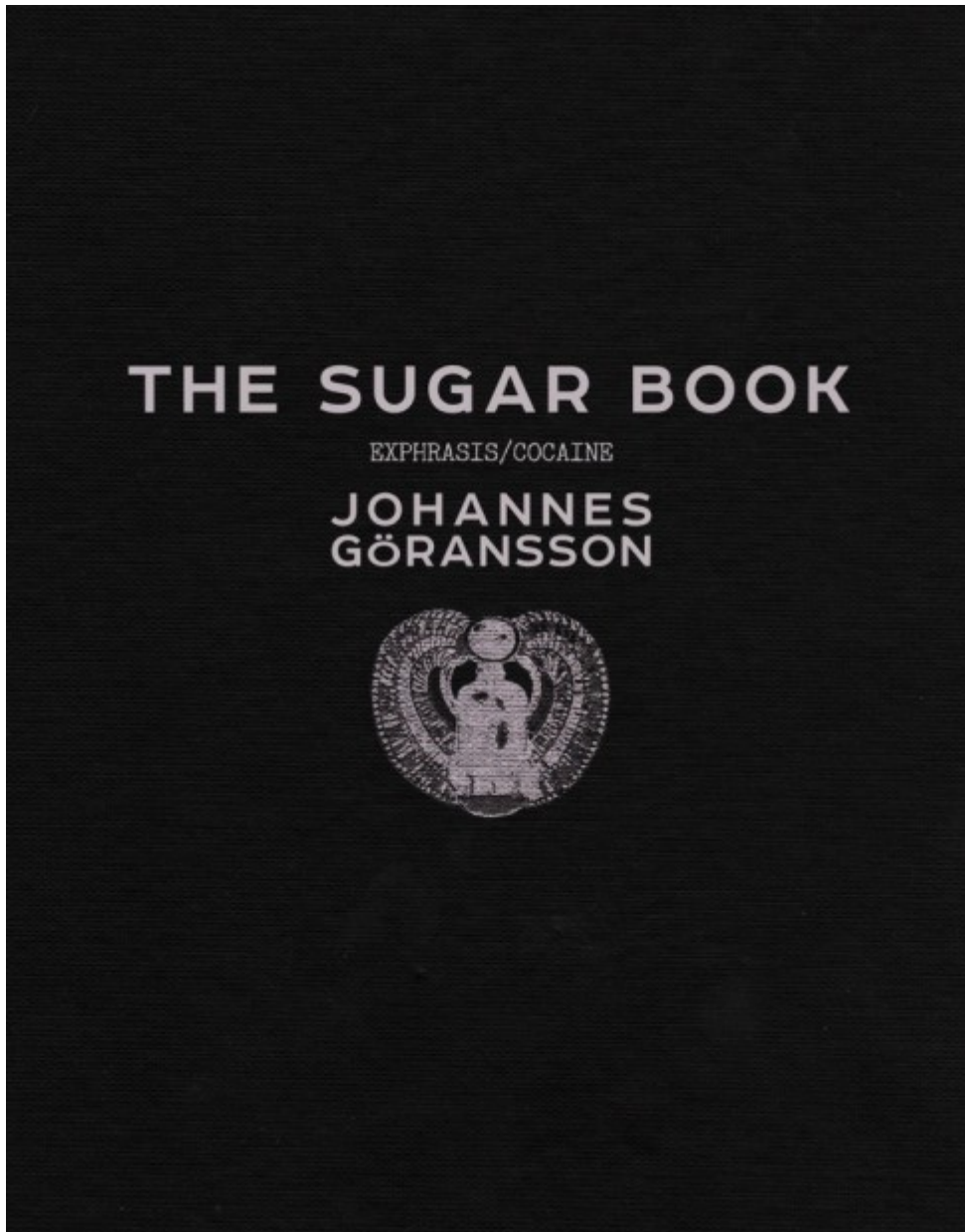
But do we really ever know our audience? Rhetoricians would argue that we should always consider our audience. But with the internet, how could we possibly know our audience? Further, what if our audience hasn't even been born yet? What if we, like Kanye, are speaking to the future?

Audience.

Makes me think of a laugh track inserted into a sitcom.

Makes me think of Hollywood.

"Dear Los Angeles," writes Johannes Göransson in his forthcoming [*The Sugar Book*](#), "stop cutting yourself, I'm not you."



Earlier in the book, Göransson declares, "I invented my son to destroy Los Angeles...Poetry has to destroy Los Angeles. Poetry has to be Los Angeles."

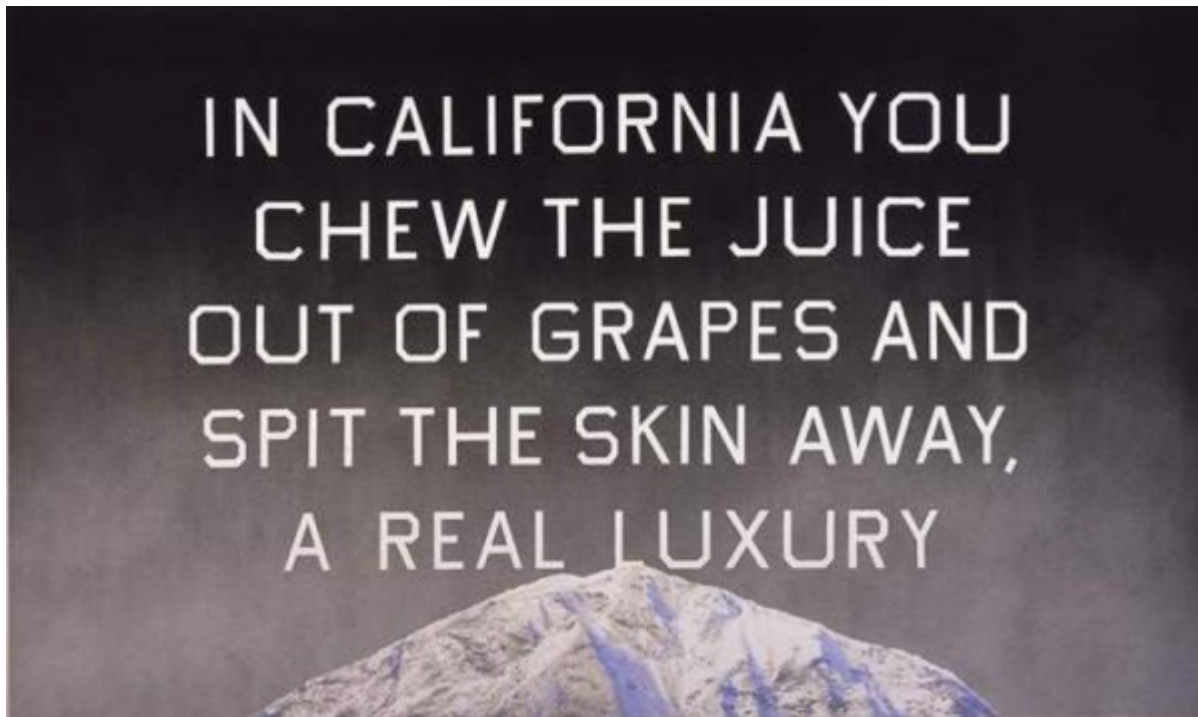
I was surprised – pleasantly surprised – to see that Los Angeles plays such a leading role in Göransson's newest book. Like other of his electrifying recent work, *The Sugar Book* demonstrates a transformation of text and concept: fatherhood, lover, master, villain, celebrity. It's as if we're being invited to witness the process of social reconfiguration: reforming gender, reforming aesthetic and ethical values. And so much degradation, filth, pig meat, blood, whores...

Brings to mind the work of mothmeister. Are you familiar with [mothmeister](#)? Here's an image of theirs that resonates with Göransson's *Sugar Book*:



A few years ago I wrote about another Los Angeles book, Matthew Stokoe's [High Life](#), which also seems to share affinities with Göransson's *Sugar Book*.

Are you familiar with [Ed Ruscha's artwork](#)? It takes place at the intersection of image and language. He was born in Omaha, but he's become an L.A. artist. His stuff also seems to share affinities with Göransson's *Sugar Book*:



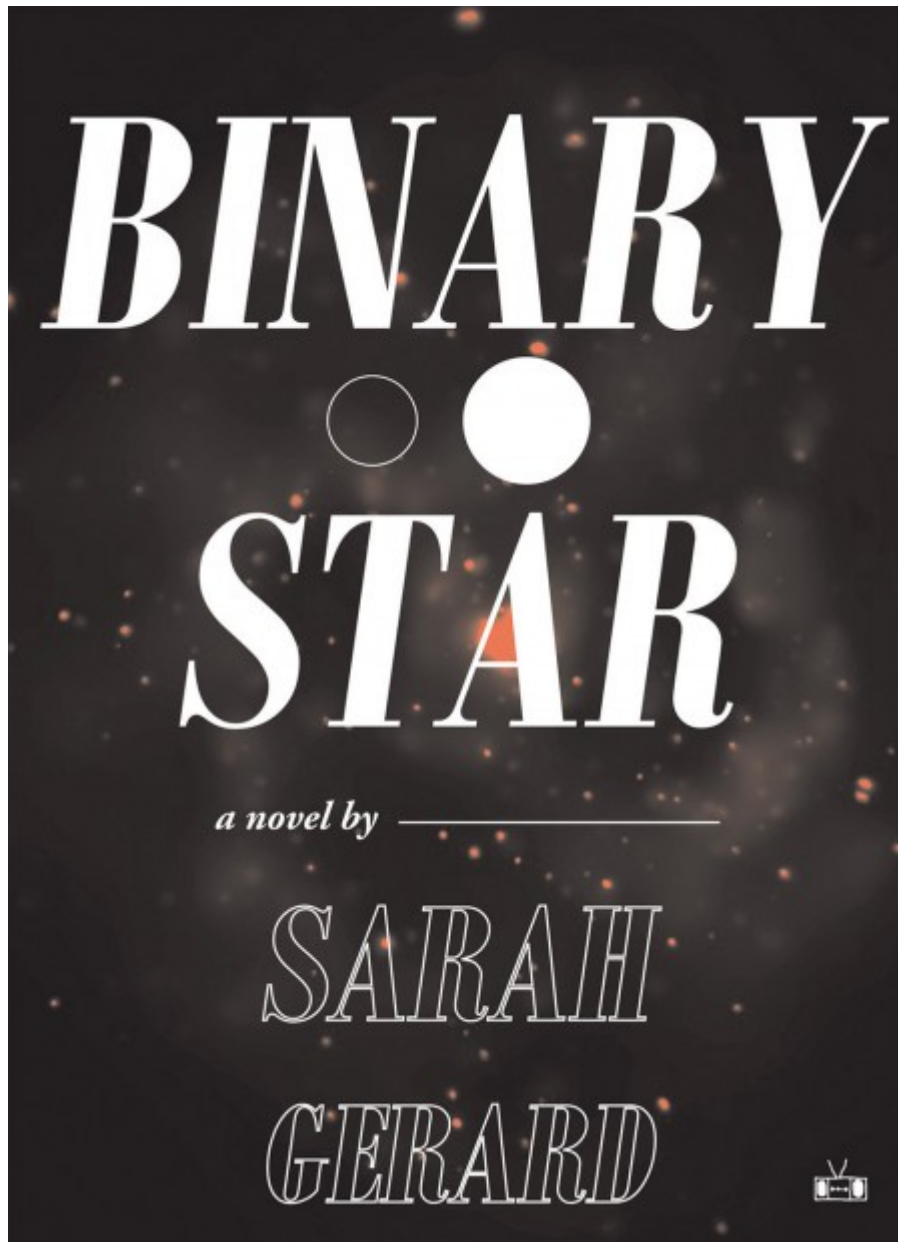
California Grapeskins, 2009 by Ed Ruscha

In about four months I'm moving to Los Angeles with my wife and son and cat. Fifteen years ago I lived there. Now I'm going back. I'm very excited. It's my favorite city on earth.

"Los Angeles is where the relation between reality and representation gets muddled."

—Thom Andersen [*Los Angeles Plays Itself*](#)

Mark Z. Danielewski is an L.A. writer. I met him a few years ago in Columbus, Ohio, when he came to Ohio State for a reading and discussion of his work for [Project Narrative](#). A few of us went to dinner after his reading and I remember Danielewski ordering steak tartare. I have an ARC of his forthcoming book *The Familiar*, but I'm not going to talk about it right now. Right now I want to say a word or two about Sarah Gerard's strange and captivating [Binary Star](#) (2015).



The obvious connection arises from a play on the word “star.” Star, as in celebrity; or, star as in a fixed luminous point in the night sky that is a large, remote incandescent body. Or, I suppose a star as in a stylized representation of a star, such as the one behind Robert Mapplethorpe in this self-portrait:



Robert Mapplethorpe "Self-Portrait" (1983)

"John and I follow our paths into the center but we never reach the center," writes Gerard. For me it's impossible to dismiss the connection between a desire for the center and [Derrida's critique of structuralism](#) "...the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself...nevertheless...the center is not the center." Where is the center of a relationship?

"A binary star," writes Gerard, "is a system containing two stars that orbit their common center of mass." Perhaps there is a common center of mass?

Danielewski has a book called [Only Revolutions](#), which seems like an appropriate comparison for Gerard's *Binary Star*. Both provide versions of the 21st century love story. Come to think of it, love infects Fama's *Fantasy* and Göransson's *Sugar Book*, too.

Makes me think of that passage from Hardt and Negri's [Multitude](#) about recuperating the public and political conception of love:

We need to recover today this material and political sense of love, a love as strong as death. This does not mean you cannot love your spouse, your mother, your child. It only means that your love does not end there, that love serves as the basis for our political projects in common and the construction of a new society. Without this love, we are nothing.

All three books (Fama's, Göransson's, and Gerard's) contain the apparition of poetry while concurrently resisting that genre categorization. In one of the blurbs for *Binary Star* Justin Taylor refers to Gerard's book as a "brutal poem of obliteration." The same could be said of Göransson's book, I think. And Juliana Spahr blurbs *Fantasy* by calling it "a book about an end. An end of our economic empire."

All three are hybrids, mutants, interstitial examples of what I imagine Kanye would see in his crystal ball if he focused his attention on literature rather than music and fashion.

All three are very much timely, relevant, and compelling. But they're also something else. Something like Aidan Baker & Tim Hecker's musical collaborations, which is to say unnameable. Strange. Simultaneously familiar and unrecognizable. Both of the now and of the other.

For what it's worth, I did not intend to connect or compare these books. My process, in the beginning, was to grab three books off the top of my ARCs-to-be-reviewed pile and begin typing. I look forward to doing more of these...what are they...improvisational essays? Something tells me I can think of a better term. I'll think about it. Next time, hopefully, I'll have something more catchy to call whatever it is I'm doing here. But for now, I'm worried I've contributed to the creation of a theme across these titles. I'm sorry for that. Sincerely, I am. If anything, I should have worked to establish the discontinuities between these three books, to highlight their differences. Part of me wants to destroy this entire post and start over, but I won't. I'll leave it as an example of my own failure to overcome the looming specter of theme. Next time I'll try harder and hopefully fail better.