



Oulipo Laboratory

Raymond Queneau (contributor) , Italo Calvino (contributor) , Paul Fournel (contributor) , Claude Berge (contributor) , Jacques Jouet (contributor) , François Le Lionnais (contributor) , Harry Mathews (contributor, Translator) , Warren Motte (Translator) , more... Iain White (Translator) , Alastair Brotchie (Introduction) ...less

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A literary group founded in 1960 by leading French writers and mathematicians, the Oulipo's original aim was to inquire into the possibilities of combining literature and mathematics, and later expanded to include all writing using self-imposed restrictive systems. Contributors include Queneau, Calvino, Fournel, Mathews, etc.

Oulipo Laboratory Details

Date : Published April 1st 1996 by Serpent's Tail (first published January 1st 1981)

ISBN : 9780947757892

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Format : Paperback 1 page

Genre : Poetry, Nonfiction, Anthologies, Cultural, France, Reference

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From Reader Review Oulipo Laboratory for online ebook

Tosh says

A system based obsession that becomes writing. It deals with formula, and a great deal of wit. Oulipo is both extremely silly and serious in how works are processed and thought out on the page.

When I was writing poetry on a regular basis I would often use techniques of the Oulipo as well as standard Surrealist/Burroughs cut-ups, etc. But what I did afterwards was cut out the experimental aspect so the reader wouldn't notice the technique. In 'Oulipo' works the means and ways of getting to the text is as important as reading the final work.

Oriana says

Ok so I admit that I haven't read this entire thing, but I will say that if you look at Calvino's insanely complex mathematical formula by which he wrote *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller* (one of my most favorite books of ever), it will blow your goddamn mind. These guys are unreal-ly brilliant.

Martijn Wallage says

In another book on or by the Oulipo - I think it was the *Oulipo Compendium* - it is related that Georges Perec came up with some kind of scale to measure the difficulty of writing a lipogram (a text in which a particular letter or group of letters is missing). Perec's own *La Disparition*, by his measure, was relatively easy since the only constraint he put on himself was to not use the letter 'e'. In *Suburbia*, his fellow Oulipian Paul Fournel does not use any letters at all: clearly the hardest possible lipogram. It is here presented with footnotes such as '1. Is the violent eroticism of this scene gratuitous?' and '2. Motorcycle'. I think it's a great addition to the world of semi-existing, or subsisting novels (rather heavily populated by the ones which Borges imagined). Other entries in this volume are also fascinating to anyone who likes the Oulipo, for instance Calvino's formulas that he apparently used to write *If on a winter's night a traveller...*, and Queneau's translation to literature of Hilbert's axioms for geometry. Here is the second axiom, with Queneau's commentary:

'No more than one sentence exists containing two given words.

Comment: This, on the other hand, may occasion surprise. Nevertheless, if one considers the words "years" and "early", once the following sentence containing them has been written, namely, "For years I went to bed early," clearly all other sentences such as "For years I went to bed right after supper" or "For years I did not go to bed late" are merely pseudo-sentences that should be rejected by virtue of the above axiom.'

Adam says

This is a great volume for anyone interested in the goings-on of the Oulipo. There are Francois Le Lionnais'

obligatory manifestoes, followed by a number of works published by the group over the years, originally as small pamphlets to be distributed among friends and colleagues.

While this kind of work can be hit or miss (some of the pieces in the much larger Oulipo Compendium, for example, could have used a few more monkeys on a few more typewriters), this collection has some strong examples of successful Oulipian literature.

In no particular order, here are some comments:

1. I heartily recommend reading the eye-rhymes in Harry Mathews' *The Poet's Eye* aloud, while drinking. That's probably the only way to salvage these poems.

2. I bought the book for Italo Calvino's 'essay' *How I Wrote One of My Books*, in which he lays out the method he used to structure his celebrated novel *If on a winter's night a traveler*, showing how he adapted Greimas' semiotic square to generate the novel's complex system of narrative oppositions and interactions. I'll be rereading it with this essay in hand.

3. Raymond Queneau's *The Foundations of Literature* is actually text taken from David Hilbert's famed axiomatization of Euclidean geometry, *The Foundations of Geometry*, that has been subjected to various replacement procedures, such as swapping every instance of the words 'point', 'line' and 'plane' with 'word', 'sentence' and 'paragraph' respectively. Toward the end we get this remarkable sentence: "Every sentence contains an infinity of words; only an extremely limited number of them is perceptible; the rest are infinitesimal or imaginary." Queneau's arbitrary procedure succeeded in generating an interesting and prosodic statement about the ultimately infinitely regressive ground of meaning and language.

Otherwise Queneau's piece reads like a parody of a formal system: many of the axioms as reconstituted by his method entail absurd, trivial, or impossible consequences; it occasionally degenerates into incomprehensible jargon; and the formal rigor and exactitude of Hilbert's writing evaporates into a kind of amusing and sterile sophistry.

4. Paul Fournel's *Suburbia* contains all of the paraphernalia of a novel, but without the narrative. Introduction, preface, copious footnotes, endnotes and errata give an oblique picture of the content of this missing novel.

5. Jacques Jouet's *The Great-Ape Love-Song* is a Borgesian discussion of an imaginary literature: the language of the great apes invented by Edgar Rice Burroughs for Tarzan. This vocabulary is restricted to 300 words, which Jouet puts to good use in a series of love poems and their translations. I think the piece would have been more interesting if the analysis accompanying the poems was governed by a similar constraint, but none was apparent.

6. Claude Berge's *Who Killed the Duke of Dunsmore* features a solution to the mystery based on some theorems from graph theory. While the solution is interesting, I wouldn't say this piece rises to the level of literature. The use of the constraint was a bit heavy handed.

Andrew says

head scratching fun

Linda says

Huh.

Will says

Oulipo laboratory is a short book, just over 150 pages set in fairly large type, with one piece each by Lionnais, Queneau, Fournel, Jouet, Berge, Calvino, and Matthews (the translator). With the exception of Matthews' poetry, the pieces are all interesting reading, and the introductory manifesto frames the collection well, but the book doesn't have enough depth to give a clear picture of the Oulipo group's work. Oulipo booklets have been published regularly since the mid 70s, so assembling a collection with more depth definitely seems possible.

Robert says

A friend recommended this for "Suburbia" by Paul Fournel. It's nice, funny, formally inventive. Unfortunately it is a mostly erased text with footnotes, foreword, afterword, study guide, etc.. Which is all very funny but leaves me wishing he'd actually made the thing rather than made all of the bits talking about the thing. That's probably the point, but not so satisfying. The other pieces in this book seem big on play with the forms of texts as well. I guess Oulipo were about that.

Anyway, I look forward to looking in more detail at the other pieces in the book.
