

Saccades Project

Proposal

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1. OVERVIEW

Saccades: fast movement of an eye, head or other part of an animal's body or device. It can also be a fast shift in frequency of an emitted signal or other quick change. Humans and other animals do not look at a scene in a steady way. Instead, the eyes move around, locating interesting parts of the scene and building up a mental "map" corresponding to the scene. —*dictionary.com*

Saccades is the story of a fifteen-year-old girl named Thea Denny, who lives in an unnamed town in upstate New York, about three hours north of New York City. She's in tenth grade, a high school sophomore who lives with her mother in a small two-bedroom apartment, and though their relationship is often strained by financial difficulties, most of their problems are due to the fact that Thea is fifteen, and her mother is her mother. As for her father, Thea hasn't spoken to the man in several years, since her parents divorced. He's not in the picture, literally, because Thea cut him out of all their family photos, after he left her mother for another woman. So that's her home and home life, basically.

In describing Thea, well, she's brilliant, for one thing. Not that her grades would show it—no, her grades definitely don't reflect her intelligence. But still, the girl's whip smart, she's got a wicked sense of humor, and she's an incredible artist, who loves high art and street art equally. Goya and **Gerhard Richter; Jessica Hess and Chris Stain:** same difference. Unfortunately, beyond her sixth-period art classes, Thea hates every minute of every day of school. On the bright side, she's madly in love with her boyfriend, Cam, who is the first boyfriend she's ever had.

As for Cam, he's eighteen, a senior who transferred to their school at the beginning of the year, and the passion Thea feels for photography and illustration, Cam

feels for math and computers. Born in 1991, 1992, the idea that it's geeks, not the meek, who shall inherit the earth, is his birthright. Needless to say, Cam is very intelligent, not to mention very handsome. So much so that Thea can't help smiling, simply saying his name out loud, so, of course, she does her best not to speak his name, certainly not in her mother's presence. The thing about Cam is that he is the first person who has ever made Thea feel beautiful, talented, special, funny. He really gets her and no one else ever has, not even close. You don't have to be fifteen to appreciate how that feels.

In any case, by the spring, they know each other well enough to finish each other's sentences. And, like many teenagers, Thea and Cam spend most of their free time online—they live on the Internet, no exaggeration—and they are insatiable downloaders of music, videos, movies and games, pirated or otherwise. Perhaps, from the outside, they appear a couple of small town kids with few options to experience the world at large, and yet, for them, like kids their age, living all over the world, imagery is wealth, a very real currency. In fact, the two like to think of themselves as the Bonnie and Clyde of visual image banks, and together, using their cache of jpegs and a hardcover spiral notebook, they collaborate in creating their own private world of photographs, drawings, writing, screenplay ideas, inside jokes—filling the book with anything that comes to mind. Really, the two share everything, and they're inseparable.

Then, one afternoon in April 2009, leaving Thea's house after school, just as he's about to get in his car, Cam calls after her, and jokingly, teasing Thea about her name, he asks, "What if God was a teenage girl?" And with that, Thea's whole world starts falling apart. For starters, Cam disappears the next day. A local police detective named Knox is assigned to the case, and then, a few days later, the FBI step in, repeatedly pulling Thea

out of class to question her. Which she wouldn't mind in the least, were it not for the fact that she takes an immediate and intense disliking to the FBI agent assigned to Cam's case, a guy named Foley. Thea makes no effort to hide her disliking of the man, for many reasons, not the least of which is because Foley claims that not only is Cam not who she thinks he is, worse, he insists that Cam has been lying to Thea from the day they met.

So, day after day, class after class, Thea's life is turned upside down and inside out. Within a week's time, Thea's medical history is revealed; a sex tape of Thea and Cam appears on the Internet; then, when a graphic video involving a fifteen-year-old minor goes viral, the story becomes national news. Not surprisingly, Thea receives seven-figure offers for life rights from Hollywood studios; publishers and lawyers come calling. In less than a month after Cam's disappearance, Thea's sanity is alternately questioned and pushed to the brink.

In contrast, she finds great comfort—or at least some reassurance in the presence of Detective Knox, who, turns out, has a daughter Thea's age, Melody. Soon enough, the two girls become best friends, even though Thea is the only person in the world who can actually speak to Melody for reasons that are slowly revealed, once Thea gives Melody a spiral notebook. The reason Thea gives Melody this book is so that they can create and share a world of their own, but also because she believes if a picture can speak a thousand words, maybe they can give Melody a voice that others can hear, too.

Visually inspired, but character-driven, *Saccades* is, of course, a love story, but it's also about faith; about a young woman struggling to believe in the person she trusts most in this world, despite a web of evidence to the contrary. Meanwhile, many fantastic events occur in Thea's life, any of which may or may not be explained, like, for instance,

all her digital files begin decaying. But however outlandish, what matters most is that this is a story about a fifteen-year-old girl that will talk about teenagers with real honesty, by talking honestly with real teenagers, as frightening as that might be at times. That said, this novel will appeal to adults and teenagers, equally, inasmuch as movies like *KIDS*, *Thirteen*, *Brick*, *Elephant*, and the novel *Go Ask Alice*. For that matter, Thea's idea of a teenage soap opera is *Twin Peaks*, not *Gossip Girl*.

Naturally, sexuality is a cornerstone of this book, and will be quite explicit at times. How could it be otherwise, given that kids are growing up at the speed of WiFi, pornography has become such a household item that underage girls don't get in trouble for sneaking out at night, they get grounded for staying home, in their bedrooms, taking and sending naked pictures of themselves to boys on their cell phones, and even the twelve-year-olds who made headlines, excuse the pun, for starting after-school "clubs," teaching each other how to perform fellatio, are now old news. Yet, the portrayal of teen sex and sexuality will remain responsible, that is, honest and true to character, true to the constant tension of feeling so confident and so insecure, so young and so old, that Thea acts like she's fifteen going on thirty-six at one moment, and in the next, she's thirty-six going on seven years old, a girl again.

2. THE SACCADES PROJECT

In Japan, mobile phone novels called "keitai shousetus" have become so successful that they accounted for half of the ten best-selling novels in 2007. Here in the Western world several would-be novelists are attempting to use Twitter to create the same phenomenon. Some of the novels tweeted so far have been interesting and engaging, but others, sadly, appear to be abandoned. Will micro-format fiction ever take off here as it did in Japan?
—*readwriteweb.com*

Technology is central to this novel and its entire process. Thea, the character, will exist in the virtual world long before *Saccades*, the book, is published. And although she will not be “born digital” in the strict sense, the Internet will always be her first home, the place where she is most herself.

On the other hand, she loves books; she loves paper; she craves the intimacy of both. Which is to say that Thea is basically a literary hybrid that will be developed online, through the Saccades Project, an umbrella linking a blog with Flickr, Twitter, YouTube, Last.fm and any other appropriate networks. This way, I will, and Thea will—each of us, real and imaginary—will be able to respond, adapt, and interact with readers throughout the writing of this book. In fact, readers will help shape and craft the book’s content.

The print edition, the hardcover book and its paperback, will be quite different than anything available online, but the two sides of this story, the virtual and the real, are extremely complimentary in creating the widest possible range of readers—and reader contributions—far in advance of actual publication date, as well as the widest possible range of tools with which to develop these characters. Beyond distribution, there are many structural and creative reasons why I want Thea to exist digitally, first and foremost.

One reason is that I intend to use technology to enhance the way I write naturally, which, for me, begins with dialogue. Usually, it's nothing more than a sentence or phrase that I don't understand, myself, but if it's compelling enough, I have to follow it, to see where the comment leads. In that respect, I'm very interested to see how Twitter might provide an editing tool to help me craft the book's dialogue and to see if others find those comments equally provocative. And just as websites draw loyalists by posting reader-generated content, I'll weave readers' contributions into the final version of the book.

I want this story, this character to speak to girls by actually speaking to girls. I want to develop the character's voice, a genuine, unmistakable girl's voice through real conversations via text, IM, Skype, even, with young female readers, who are now being taken quite seriously by many others industries in the world. For example, thirteen-year-old blog phenomenon Tavi Williams graced the cover of the September issue of *Pop* magazine. A year ago, the Web was her oyster, and today, this girl who "scatters black petals on Rei Kawakubo's doorsteps and serenades her in rap," appears side-by-side with new artwork by Damien Hirst. For anyone who claims kids no longer know how to write in complete sentences, take note: "'Urban Chic' Really? Still? We're still talking about Urban Chic? The whole shoot is kind of bland and I feel bad that the model had to work with such a boring setting." Now that's a voice for you. And Tavi Williams is exactly the type of role model I'm looking for, because that's a voice that will ring true, whether it's relayed via text messaging or longhand. After all, condensed does not mean canned.

Really, how can you not be inspired by what girls are doing today? This is the most design-savvy, visually sophisticated and technologically advanced generation in history; a generation that has spent almost their entire lives online, discussing film, art,

and music interchangeably. They know **Joanna Newsom** from **Marc Newson**; blend their tongue and cheek humor in the likes of art-celebrity death matches, such as blogger Doom's hilarious Araki versus Araki post (eugeniasemjonova.blogspot.com). What I most admire is that, clearly, this generation demands originality from the world at large, but from themselves most of all. Which is why, at some point in the near future, I want to experiment by handing over *Saccades*' blog to a number of young bloggers, male and female, ask them to play guest editor for a week or so, to see what would happen.

Yet, for all the excitement and the incredible energy that young bloggers generate, in the past year, I have watched several young women retire; deactivate their blogs with little to no warning. Although they never say exactly why, I have to imagine, for all their admirers, they must have a number of detractors and complaints that they do not share publicly. What generation can possibly relate to being a teenager today, receiving praise and criticism on a truly global scale? It was hard enough to survive one's teenage years before the Internet, so I'm curious to see what are the very real long-term consequences of Internet celebrity?

3. AUDIENCE

“I like the idea that private blogs are more and more taking over. The idea that labels will start to send young seventeen-year-old girls in Texas shoes and bags, hoping they would post it, which means that those young women have the power to raise sales. Magazines will change a lot in the future, the younger generations don’t trust advertising anymore, and the Internet will push the publication industry in another direction,” Christiane Bördner, creator and creative director of *I Love You*, a high-gloss, high-quality Berlin-based fashion magazine, which launched its first print issue and blog, simultaneously.
—*iloveyoumagazine.blogspot.com*

How can I create a genuine character without seeking the expert opinions on the subject? Beyond the authenticity of her voice, I truly want to engage teenage girls, to hear how they see, feel, read, experience, and most of all, how they imagine this character. I want to hear it in real time, not three years from now, when it’s too late for me to make the necessary changes. So, the best way of making this character more real, more human, more alive is by making her virtual.

Furthermore, spend any time looking at the blogs of teenage girls, and you’ll see that they love writing; they love books; they love sharing and creating books by printing out images and words that touch them, designing image and text in unique ways in order to make those books their own, and I would like *Saccades* to be included in that process. Of course, in terms of copyright, all the artwork I choose for the blog and site remains the property of the respective artists, and whenever possible, will be identified with links to those artists’ websites. However, anything I write and post on the *Saccades* site and blog are not only fair use, I encourage readers to take my writing and do with it as they see fit.

My attitude is this: Revise it. Rewrite it. Change it. Expand it. Deface up. Pass it on or hand it back. I don't care: because whatever writing I post on the site is there for the taking; and whatever anyone else posts is mine to use. This model exists in open source software: forking, pushing; pulling; patching and cloning; root branches, repositories, all of which Cam knows like the back of his hand. And for the record, Cam is left-handed, and I have known this about him from the start—trust me, I've known some lefties—but I'm preparing a blog post that illustrates exactly why. It might sound like a trivial detail, but it's critical to his characterization and the overall design, equally. However, as for Linux or its descendants, well, as Tavi would say, I feel bad that the model had to work with such a boring setting. Indeed.

As I imagine it now, Saccades Project will share certain properties, but it's also quite different than “fan fiction” (such as you see for shows like *Battlestar Galactica*, *LOST* and *ALIAS*) for the simple reason that I am the author, and there will be thousands of subjective decisions that I will make, alone. Although, one day, who knows, maybe in a year's time, there could be a core team involved in another incarnation of *Saccades*, the book. In fact, I'd love Thea to have a personal blog, to launch a blog within the blog, yes, but more importantly, a blog created entirely by contributors that would be international in scope.

The first draft of *Saccades* is approximately one-hundred-and-ten pages in length, but it's skeletal. It's a frame, and the advantage of posting this now is that I like the idea of young readers, in particular, treating this first draft like a literary coloring book, if you will; dismantling it, rebuilding it; transforming it into a comic book or a zine; scanning, uploading, and posting it on their own websites and blogs. But my dream, of course, is

that the character Thea speaks to some brilliant young girl, out there, somewhere in this world, a real teenage girl who will one day turn *Saccades* into a truly mind-blowing video game of her own design. But, for now, Saccades Project is simply an open studio for a book, and an open invitation to anyone with Internet connection to view the process of writing that book, to contribute and engage in the writing process.

4. FORM

“Nothing is original. Steal from anywhere that resonates with inspiration or fuels your imagination. Devour old films, new films, music, books, paintings, photographs, poems, dreams, random conversations, architecture, bridges, street signs, trees, clouds, bodies of water, light and shadows. Select only things to steal from that speak directly to your soul. If you do this, your work (and theft) will be authentic. Authenticity is invaluable; originality is non-existent. And don’t bother concealing your thievery—celebrate it if you feel like it. In any case, always remember what Jean-Luc Godard said: It’s not where you take things from—it’s where you take them to.”
—*Jim Jarmusch via hrstudioplus.com*

I believe simple is always best, and the novel’s elliptical narrative has its origins in a German-designed plastic chair, of all things, which will be explained on the project blog in the very near future. For now, the narrative framework is this: in keeping with its elliptical structure, the writing process will last three-hundred-and-sixty days, total, and all blog posts will be dated accordingly “1/360;” “2/360,” and so forth. Furthermore, that period of time will be broken down into units of eight—eight days a week, I love you—precisely that. Which will provide a system of organization that integrates music into the design from the start. Besides, it’s only natural, given that I listen to music all day, every day, when I’m working, and I’m extremely influenced by what I listen to.

So, yes, I want to use playlists as another way of soliciting reader input, because everyone makes playlists now—please, my dad sends me playlists, and if should submit one to my project, I will try very hard not to censor him—but here’s the twist. Given that this project deals largely with reinterpretation, with circular rather than linear narratives, every *Saccades*’ playlists must be eight songs in length, and, in keeping with an octave,

must begin with one song and end with a cover of that same song. One other thing: all songs must have been out before June 14, 2009, in keeping with the novel's continuity. Beyond those ground rules, anyone can post a playlist on the *Saccades* blog at anytime, and it's easy enough, using iTunes, for me to program any playlist that's posted. I like the idea that one of the easiest ways for a reader to contribute to the project could have a profound effect on my writing on any given day, and that, in turn, I'll be able to show how much music influences that process.

In terms of how these "octaves" will directly affect my writing process, well, the first draft of the novel is a collection of notes, basically. It's bare bones, but the bones are there. So I will begin the blog in a loose way, much like, say, life drawing, by choosing the most important pull quotes from that first draft—likely sentences no longer than one-hundred-and-forty-characters so that I always have the option of tweeting—and posting one quote per day for those first eight days. At the end of the first four weeks, I will post a new draft of *Saccades* on the website, and by then I'll have a clear picture of what I can accomplish in the remaining eleven months of writing.

Now, while I cannot realistically document every inspiration, influence, and edit, on a day-to-day basis, whether one post or four posts per day, I can document the overall process. Within that, I hope to answer the most basic questions a writer is asked, namely: Where do you get your ideas from? Well, I'll show you. And though it won't necessarily make sense, viewed piece by piece, cumulatively, I hope the method of my madness will be made clear.

To begin, one thing, in particular, that's always intrigued me about blogs is their reverse narrative, how a blog's story is always told in reverse order. In other words, a

blog's original post appears last, and that's the key to how this story will come full circle. If forward is backward, the answer is simple: through repetition. Beyond that, beyond this basic framework, I want the project to evolve organically, albeit virtually.

5. COLLABORATION

“The thing I wanted to do with this, this last record, um, I had this idea where we would cut the record into pieces and then send a different piece, like maybe fifteen to thirty seconds of music, to a different filmmaker, like all over the world, and then have them send it back in without seeing what the other person was making, and then make, like, an album-long movie just kind of like, it’s like *The Wall* for people with attention deficit disorder, you know. Just like changing all the time, like, so that was the idea I had, but like, the record label wasn’t so into it.” –Tunde Adebimpe, actor, illustrator, and lead singer of TV on the Radio, --youtube.com/watch?v=eUhsI-CC4Ac:

Part documentary, part experiment, most of all, The Saccades Project is about exploring the possibilities of online collaborations. Hopefully, the notebook Thea and Cam share, and, later, the notebook Thea shares with Melody, the drawings and writings and thousands of images that they download and print out, open the subject to immediate interpretation. The most practical way I see to encourage that dialogue is by posting some of the imagery I’ve chosen for the characters so far, so readers can see and feel the mood I imagine when working on particular scene—anything to offer a fuller experience of that text. Sometimes I’ll share artists who have already influenced a scene, and sometimes I’ll share the work of artists who I imagine soon will. In order to keep the process as open as possible, I have a Saccades Project Flickr pool, which I’ll moderate, but is now open to anyone who wants to submit imagery for the project.

In the meantime, I will begin approaching a range of writers, artists, designers, bloggers, musicians, DJ’s and/or image bankers, who I hope to get involved in this project. In terms of a concept, something easily explained, I ran the numbers, and it

worked out nicely, so I'm calling it the 45's Series for obvious geometric and musical symbolisms. The idea is that each individual would respond to the story by contributing eight posts, each of which includes an image, text, whether theirs or my own writing, and a song, a playlist of their own, as a means of sharing an angle, their own interpretation of this story and its characters. Then, once a day for eight days, I'll post their contributions on the *Saccades* blog.

I have a list of about twenty people I intend to approach, to begin, and most of whom I discovered online in the past year. As dependent as I am on the Internet, I'm fortunate that there is such a vital, virtual gallery district, growing by the day and night, and that there's been an explosion of online magazines, galleries, and blogs dedicated to exhibiting young talent. I've been extremely inspired by their independence, their vision, and especially the comradery of all these groups, even if, at times, it's exhausting, trying to keep up. But more often than not, I am in awe, because the most exciting part of this process has been research, my own personal discovery of new work; the sheer number of artists in their teens and early twenties, whose whereabouts range from Kansas to South Korea to St. Petersburg. More than once, I've come across a particularly striking image, whether illustration or photograph, and found myself leaning into my monitor; double-checking to make sure I didn't misread the artist's age. Honestly, my mind reels at the possibilities of using their artwork to develop this character and to the fullest.

But still, there is nothing that compares to holding a book in your hands, no matter what your age or generation, and those worries would never cross Thea's mind. Narrative is alive and well, online, and young people are still reading fiction, possibly more than ever, not less. It's simply that the way young people are reading is changing, radically:

they have very different expectations of a reading experience; like it or not, it's multi-media, and teens have reason to believe that they should be involved in the creative process. In which case, why shouldn't a book include music, imagery and text for them to appropriate as they see fit? I'm not looking to reinvent the wheel; I'm simply interested in the possibilities of applying new technology to old-fashioned storytelling, no more, no less.

6. SEQUEL

DIVING BOARD

Screenplay by Greg Pierce

White Draft 7/16/09

*WGA Registered 2009
Ham and Armor Films*

EXT. SWIMMING POOL - NIGHT

A waterless pool surrounded by a motel that looks like hurricane wreckage. On the pool's floor, a plastic, overturned deck chair. THEA and CAM stand there at the bottom, facing each other, about 10 feet between them. THEA looks like she hasn't slept in a month.

ANGLE ON: The diving board, where someone's spray-painted "cunt" and then exed it out.

I have begun writing a sequel, which I'm calling #*Saccades*, because I plan on using the same three-hundred-and-sixty-degree structure and timeframe. Likewise, I also intend to make the sequel's first draft openly available, just as I am doing here, with the first book. However, I'm very interested in exploring different means of distributing the first draft of #*Saccades*, but that will depend upon whatever technologies are available in one year's time. Regardless, the sequel begins where *Saccades* ended, except for the fact that the second book begins on August 30, 2009, the night before Thea starts her junior year of high school.

Clearly, the trial and errors of the first novel and its first year online will inform the second book and second year of The *Saccades* Project, which could take any number

of directions, designs, applications and collaborations. For example, “Diving Board,” excerpted above, is a three-page screenplay that was written by **Greg Pierce**, based on a few images and a sketch of *#Saccades*’s opening scene that I emailed him. I will post the screenplay in its entirety on the project blog in the near future, along with the original images and the sketch I sent, as a preview of the second book. At that time, I will also post a second image gallery, specific to the sequel, on this website.

I expect *#Saccades* will be even more musically and visually inspired, seeing as I have begun writing the book by storyboarding, first; using Flickr and iPhoto to arrange the images I find online, anything that speaks to me; then writing in response to imagery. It wasn’t a conscious decision, taking this approach; it’s simply that collecting imagery for each character, the act of clicking and dragging jpegs into folders, now feels as natural to me as jotting a note on a piece of paper. Creatively speaking, I want to be ambidextrous, to move from image to text in a fluid and responsive manner.

For each book, I have already written a physical description, and I have a clear picture of Thea in my head, and yet, I see her now every day, in the images, in the faces of a thousand different girls, online. Maybe that’s because I believe every girl is made up of a thousand different girls, each and every one of who are constantly questioning, changing, reinventing herself, and that’s the greatest challenge of this project. After all, who in this world is more complex, more full of light and dark, than a teenage girl?