

**Stony Brook University
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Doctoral Defense Announcement

Abstract

Labyrinthine Passages: The Reader through the Text

By

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This dissertation argues that pre- and postmodern authors employ the labyrinth to represent epistemological struggles. The five examined books—St. Augustine of Hippo’s *De doctrina christiana* and *Confessions*, Geoffrey Chaucer’s *House of Fame*, Michael Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, and Paul Auster’s *The City of Glass*—use labyrinthine imagery to represent mystery, to characterize the search for truth, and to implicate readers in that process. The selected authors represent the hope of finding one’s way through the labyrinth, but they also affirm that wandering passages lacking any map-like order may be rewarding. In fact, the selected authors immerse readers in a process that obstructs interpretive resolution so as to esteem human finitude and mystery.

The first chapter contends that St. Augustine of Hippo utilizes the labyrinth in his treatise on exegesis, *De doctrina christiana*, to treat both our use of signs and our living in the world. Augustine suggests that our reading and living do not extricate us from mystery, so much as enable us to enter into a maze that resists full understanding. The second chapter argues that Augustine composes the *Confessions* to engage his audience in a labyrinthine search for God. He represents that quest as loaded with spiritual consequence, but also suggests that no overview permits us to map the divine order. In chapter three, I turn to Geoffrey Chaucer’s *House of Fame* that features maze imagery in a depiction of the author struggling to interpret and recount a dream. Chaucer appeals to mazes to discourage efforts to fix the poem’s meaning and indicate that the truth does not furnish a fixed position but sets us in motion. The fourth chapter takes up Michael Ondaatje’s *Collected Works* in which the readers find a labyrinthine structure. In relation to the maze, Ondaatje links both encounters with mystery and claims to epistemic mastery to violence and eroticism. Finally, in chapter five I argue that the graphic adaptation of Paul Auster’s novel suggests that both mastery and disregard of the truth lead to our entrapment. The story’s graphic rendering sets readers before a maze-like text and challenges them to find ways through the book that avoid these hazards.

By drawing together these works, it is possible in conclusion to note points of intersection and divergence between pre- and postmodern uses of the maze to characterize our epistemic position vis-à-vis mysteries.

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