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Eve, Martin Paul (2016) Martin Eve on William Gaddis's JR. Birkbeck Department of English and Humanities Blog ,

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I am currently re-reading William Gaddis's monstrous 1975 novel, *JR*.

While this is a book that defies easy plot summary, one of the central strands of the text concerns the eponymous eleven-year-old schoolboy, J. R. Vansant, and his adept manipulation of American financial markets via a payphone that he has installed in his school. From its famous opening line – “Money...? In a voice that rustled” – this is a text that still feels relevant to contemporary capital in the United States.

The novel is written and structured through a sprawling form of dialogue in which it is never clearly signposted who is speaking at any given moment and into which background radio and television shows frequently intrude. We shift from character to character by physical proximity, in the same way that one might zone in on conversations nearby when walking down the street. Despite attempts, then, by critical introductions to downplay the novel's “difficulty”, *JR* is a pretty hard book to read until you find its rhythm.

That said, *JR* really is funny. The opening pages, for example, contain a scene where the lawyer, “Coen, without the h” (as he calls himself) is then consistently addressed by Julia and Ann as “Mister Cohen”. Of course, the joke here is one that only works in the textual form of a novel; the reader can see that Coen's plaintive introduction has been totally ignored by the sisters (and in fact they remember it the wrong way around and insist, later in the book, that he had wanted the “h”). However, the pronunciation of “Coen” and “Cohen” is identical, so Coen is unaware of the mistake, the sisters are unaware of the mistake, and the reader is the one who can laugh above the novel alongside the writer.

I've never really got on with Gaddis in the way that I have with other American “postmodern” authors – it may be clichéd but Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo remain my favourites of this era – but there is something about his writing that keeps drawing me back, with its “voice that rustled”.