

Personal and Collective Choice as Choose-Your-Own-Adventure® Narrative

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This first week is about introductions, getting to know one another, presenting a picture of yourself. And how do we do this? In short form, something like this: “Hi, I’m [insert name here], and I’m from [insert location], and I’m into [insert interest]. How about you?”

In long form, we do this through stories about our experiences and actions. Freshmen, I bet you told some stories this week. What you choose to tell one another about yourselves is an act of self-formation. Though you use the term “I” or “insert name here,” there is a multiplicity of individuals contained in each one of you. Your personal narratives, even what you tell yourself about yourself, help channel this sense of selfhood. Quick takeaway: Make sure the narratives you run in your head are empowering.

In this sense, we are characters in the stories we tell about ourselves. But that is looking backwards. Jorge Luis Borges, one of my favorite authors, wrote in his short story “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan” (don’t worry; here’s the quote in English): “I reflected that everything happens to a man precisely now. Centuries of centuries and only in the present do things happen.”¹ In the present, we make decisions. We are authors (or at least characters with free will).

A genre that attempts to capture this idea of choice and direction setting is the gamebook or Choose-Your-Own-Adventure story—like *House of Danger*—trademark Bantam Books 1979.² The premise of these branching-path narratives is this: Readers are introduced to a situation told entirely in the second person. Readers must then put themselves in the place of the character and—in response to questions at key junctures—decide what to do.

Do you . . . jump over the castle wall or drink the potion? Do you . . . follow the footprints or board the spaceship? You get it.

So, let’s try one out. Remember, dear Choose-Your-Own-Adventure audience member, put yourself in the place of the character of this scenario: in this case, me.

You’ve been asked to give the Convocation address. Public speaking is not your strong suit, but it’s better never to mention that. You wish to talk about a number of topics without falling into clichés such as:

“Buck up under pressure. Grit is the key to success,” or “Raise your hand and voice your opinion for the sake of us all,” or “Make sure the narratives you run in your head are empowering.”

You also wish to impress upon the members of the audience the significance of their actions and their role in creating a community that lives the ideals of compassion, advocacy, activism, sustainability, hard work, and integrity, both every-day and academic. With so many choices before you, you opt to present an allegory of action and choice by engaging them as decision makers in a “Choose Your Own Adventure” speech. Members of your audience begin to fidget . . . [Cue the audience to fidget.] Some have not been paying attention and are being elbowed, right now, by their neighbors.

Perhaps without knowing it, audience members are in possession of symbolic choice cards with which they will vote to decide the direction of your speech. They will vote by showing either the “blue” or “gold” card—colors representative of this College, a lovely liberal arts institution selected by the entire Class of 2021 in a previous volume in this series. I think you read it, right? You will then take an eyeball tally to determine the winning choice. Audience members will not contest your eyeball tally. . . .That’s very important.

You say the following to the audience: “Choose-Your-Own-Adventure audience members, you must now put yourselves in the place of the Convocation Address speaker and make several key decisions for her. Get your cards ready.

Please show BLUE to indicate readiness. Ah, that makes me feel good.

Now, GOLD. If you don’t have a card, look at somebody who does and ask them to rip theirs in half. Right? Easy solution. Okay? Okay. Cards down.

Audience members, you will now be presented with two options for your character. Please, hold your votes until you have been presented with both options.

- **[BLUE:]** If, in keeping with the ceremony of the situation, you opt to remain in academic regalia, show BLUE. Hold your votes.
- **[GOLD:]** If, in celebration of college identity, you opt to don a poorly crafted eagle costume, and I emphasize poorly crafted, please show GOLD.

Raise your hand and voice your opinion for the sake of us all!”



Figure 1. The students of the Class of 2021 vote during the 2017 Juniata College Opening Convocation. (Photo credit: Candice Hersh)

- **[BLUE (not chosen):]** Okay, BLUE it is. Thank you, kind souls. *Your robes in addition to the felt eagle costume you wore underneath (just in case) cause you to overheat. You take a drink (drinks), remain at the lectern, and look out at the Class of 2021.*
- **[GOLD (chosen):]** Okay, GOLD it is. I had a feeling it might go like this today. *You now begin to awkwardly change into your costume. Yes, awkwardly.* It's a little tricky, with some buttons. Okay, I'll be right back. [Removes academic robe, revealing a homemade eagle costume, and hangs the robe on the nearby coat rack³] Thank you. Not done yet! [Reaches under the lectern to retrieve an eagle hat.] *You return to the lectern, looking out at the Class of 2021, avoiding eye contact with your faculty colleagues.* (See Figure 2.)



Figure 2. Having been given the GOLD option by the audience, Amy Frazier-Yoder continues her address in her Juniata Eagle costume. (Photo credit: Candice Hersh)

You now share the following testimonial about your own experience with “Choose Your Own Adventure” books:

I loved these books as a kid . . . and now I read them to my kids. (See Figure 3.) The introduction always said, “Remember—you cannot go back! Think carefully before you make a move! One mistake can be your last . . . or it *may* lead you to fame and fortune!” (See Figure 4.) The truth is I often flipped back when it came to a bad end, or even when I saw that I was coming to a bad end. We don’t

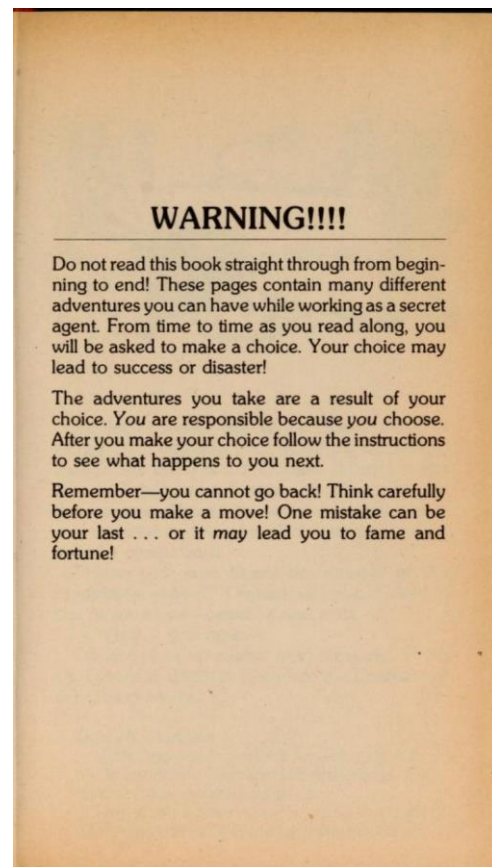
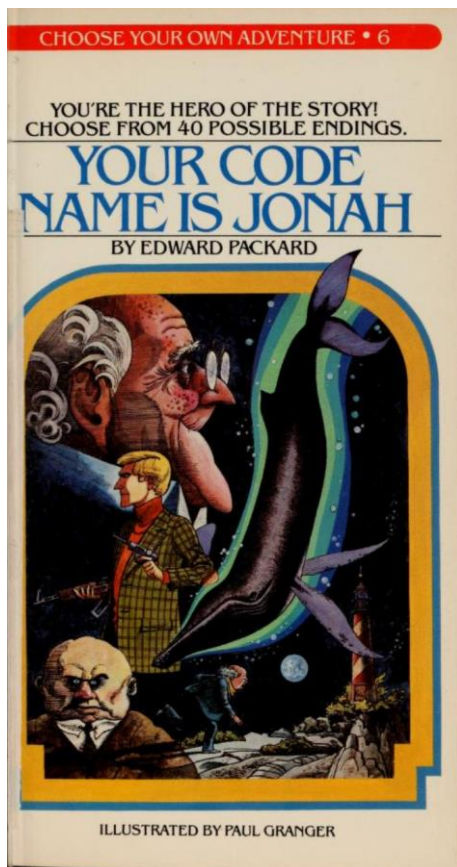


Figure 3. Book cover: *Your Code Name Is Jonah*.⁴ Figure 4. Warning page: *Your Code Name Is Jonah*.⁵

always have that option. For good or bad, many aspects of our stories are not up to us, but what we do within the framework of choice is what defines our character.

Having said that, don’t underestimate your ability to choose what happens on page three even when you are on page forty-five. Here at Juniata, you get to re-read and critically analyze your own pages. As you come to understand your own cultural norms, you can rethink and revise. Self-formation takes place when you reassess attitudes and patterns of behavior that previously went unquestioned. (Think about who you are.)

Unlike the story-altering choices of gamebooks, self-formation is often the product of a series of choices. It's the act of creating patterns of choice—choosing to engage in healthy self-expression, to open channels of communication, to practice selfcare, to advocate for others, to seek positive solutions, and to buck up under pressure because grit is the key to success. (*It's too true not to say it*).

You pause and look at the audience to assess their interest level. You feel you might be losing their attention. Students in rows E and J are visibly beginning to fidget. You need to act quickly.

Now, hold your vote.

- **[BLUE:]** If you choose to give the next twenty seconds of your speech in a foreign language, please show your BLUE card.
- **[GOLD:]** If you choose to invite a randomly selected, mystery-guest speaker to give the next twenty seconds of the speech, please show your GOLD card.

Okay, I think . . . I think that's a GOLD victory.

- **[AZUL (BLUE) (not chosen) :]** Te felicito si me entiendes. Si no, hay tiempo y oportunidad. Típicamente, más de cuatro de cada diez estudiantes de Juniata estudian en el extranjero, muchos para capacitarse en otro idioma. Los idiomas son estructuras a través de las cuales personas y sociedades forman un concepto de quiénes son y cómo es el mundo. Y así, hablando otra lengua, puedes contar quién eres de muchas formas distintas. (*Sorry, no translation provided for the live audience*).
- **[GOLD (chosen):]** Well, this speech is really for you, Class of 2021, about your choices and your voices. *You now pull out the roster for the incoming class of 2021 and scroll through the names.* Hey, YOU chose GOLD. Yeah, it's coming. It might be you. *Your audience is really beginning to fidget as you prepare to randomly select a speaker from among them.* It is my pleasure to introduce our mystery speaker—can you give me a minute? Let's see here. Okay, got it. I am partial to "F's": Frazier-Yoder, so I'm going to go with, I hope you're out there, Zoe Fisher, Fishter . . . Zoe Fishter, are you out there? Zoe, would you do me a favor? Come on up. Whoo! Yes, give her some props! Thank you, thank you for doing this. Okay, the lectern is yours for, say, twenty seconds.

Zoe Fishter takes the lectern and says, "Awesome. Well, this is a surprise, to say the least. Dr. Frazier-Yoder wasn't going to tell you this, so I'm glad you all brought me to the stage. You see, you didn't hear the full Borges quote she shared earlier. In fact, it was just a fragment. The quote is from "The Garden of Forking Paths," one of the inspirations for gamebooks. Here's the full quote (Zoe pulls a folded piece of paper from her hip pocket). "Centuries of centuries, and only in the present do things happen; countless men in the air, on the face of the earth and the sea, and all that really is happening is happening to me. . . ." You see, the narrator-protagonist doesn't

recognize the universal community that makes up our world. Instead, in error, he sees only from his own perspective, believing that all of humanity's story points back to him, to his unique experience. Okay, now back to our speaker.

You return to the lectern and thank the speaker. Thank you, Zoe, thank you so much. That was amazing. You know, she handed it to me there, with correcting me on the quote, so next time I'm going to pick, uh, David Fasano or maybe, you know, Mizuki Hashimoto next time, but thank you, Zoe.

She's right. If you think it all points back to you, to your story, you might miss your role in a larger story or in someone else's story:

- Do you reach out to someone in need? Blue or gold? (*Rhetorical*)
- Do you step up and intervene when you see that situation at a party? Blue or gold?
- Do you reach out to the kid across the hall going further into his shell? Blue or gold?
- When it matters, do you speak up? Blue or gold?

At some junctures, it's easy to become so focused on a one-character perspective. It's easy to neglect to see how crucial the individual can be in moving the collective.

Choose-Your-Own-Adventure audience, I urge you to both contemplate and cultivate your role in pushing collective choices in the right direction. I invite you to flip back and review some of humanity's collective choices. A look at consumerism and climate change—inaction and denial despite overwhelming scientific consensus—or a look at systemic racial and gender bias—such as the sort of bigotry and hatred put on naked display in Charlottesville—makes it clear that revisions are needed. So, raise your hand and voice your opinion for the sake of all of us. Remember that your choices and your voices are part of, and can move, the collective. That's especially important right now, Class of 2021, as you join and create this community. Okay, final choice coming up.

- **[BLUE:]** To begin the final sequence of this speech, please show BLUE.
- **[GOLD:]** To flip back to the beginning of this speech to begin again, please show GOLD.

Faculty, of course, have a lot more gold. Jokesters! I see a sea of blue. *You now begin the final sequence of your speech.*

If you look, you will find good choices at every turn and a community willing to give you respect, responsibility, and voice. But it's not up to them alone. As you make choices, you benefit from and continue to re-create this community.

I wish you the best as you make these reflective choices, and welcome to Juniata. You have already made a marvelous choice.

NOTES

1. Jorge Luis Borges, “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan,” *Labyrinths: Selected stories & other writings*, Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, eds. (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 19.
2. Edward Packard, series creator, *Choose Your Own Adventure*® (Bantam Books, 1979).
3. I thank Joanne Krugh, Administrative Manager in the Provost’s Office, for providing the coat rack!
4. Edward Packard and Paul Granger. *Your Code Name Is Jonah* (New York: Bantam Books, 1979). Cover.
5. *Ibid.*, the warning page occurs just before page 1.