
The Power of 342 Words

There is a scene in an upcoming S. Bobby novel that runs 342 words.

It takes place in a convenience store. A man walks in. Tries to buy a bottle of water. Leaves.

Nothing happens. Everything happens.

The Literary-Fusion form is built on a single governing principle: recognition without instruction.

The reader is not told what to feel. The reader is not guided toward the correct interpretation. The text creates conditions. The reader completes the experience from their own interior—their own history, their own unfinished business, their own version of a day that wouldn't cooperate.

This is not a stylistic preference. It is a structural commitment.

And 342 words is enough to prove it.

The following is an excerpt from Nobody Is Born a Lemming by S. Bobby Alexander, forthcoming.

Ari pulled into a convenience store a few blocks away and parked without straightening the car.

Inside, everything came at him at once.

Color. Noise. Screens flashing numbers and jackpots. Music playing too loudly for the size of the room. Cardboard displays crowded the floor with chips stacked at angles that felt intentional.

He stopped just past the door, then kept moving so he wouldn't be in the way.

The cooler doors ran the length of one wall, each section shouting something different. Two-for-one. Limited time. New flavor. He stood there longer than necessary, trying to decide between identical bottles that promised different things.

A woman reached in beside him without asking. Her sleeve brushed his arm.

“Sorry,” she said, already gone.

“It’s fine,” Ari said, quick and loud enough that it sounded wrong.

She glanced back, then nodded and turned away.

At the counter, the register beeped in short, sharp bursts. The clerk finished with the customer ahead of him, sliding change across without looking up.

Ari set the bottle down.

“That’s two for five,” the clerk said.

“I just want one,” Ari said.

The clerk paused, fingers still on the screen. “It’s cheaper if you get two.”

“I don’t need two.”

The clerk looked at him then. Not annoyed. Just checking.

Behind Ari, someone shifted. A display rattled slightly as a shoulder bumped it.

“Okay,” the clerk said, tapping the screen. “Three ninety-nine.”

Ari handed over a bill. The clerk counted the change back slowly, deliberately, each coin placed flat on the counter.

Ari picked them up too fast. One slipped and rolled toward the edge. He caught it with his palm and closed his hand around it until it stopped moving.

Outside, he leaned against the car and twisted the cap off the bottle. Took a sip that didn’t help.

He set it on the roof, got in, then reached back out to grab it again when he heard it slide.

As he pulled away, the bottle tipped onto its side against the passenger door.

He left it there.

Inside that scene there are no fewer than thirty discrete interpretation variables. Each one carries multiple possible readings. A gesture that reads as patience to one reader reads as condescension to another. A refusal that reads as stubbornness reads as the only completed decision a man has made all day. A coin that slips and gets caught—held until it stops moving—reads as control, or fear, or the body finishing what the mind no longer can.

No reading is wrong. No reading is instructed.

When you apply the actual combinatorics—thirty variables, multiple readings each, sequentially dependent, multiplied against the distorted perception every human reader brings to the page—the number of unique impact paths through 342 words exceeds 200 trillion.

That number is not a marketing claim. It is what the math produces when you take the form seriously.

And it does not account for the re-read. The same reader, returning after the last page, resolves every variable differently. The scene they read the first time no longer exists. A new one has taken its place.

Finite text. Infinite effect.

This is what Literary-Fusion is built to do—not at the level of theme or arc or intention, but at the level of the sentence. The word. The coin placed flat on the counter.

The reader who finds that scene in the published work will know exactly what this essay was about.

That was always the point.

S. Bobby Alexander is the author of the Literary-Fusion Series—novels built on the principle that the reader completes the story. Nobody Is Born a Lemming is forthcoming.

S. Bobby Alexander

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Artist Note

In Literary-Fusion, the math is not here to prove anything. Proof is not the point. It is one more variable in the passage through the art, another way the reader enters it and carries it forward through thought, memory, and feeling. That is how the form lives. That is how it moves.

And if every reading changes the reader, what is the story completing?

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