

‘Oh Look, a Ferry’; Or The Smell of Paper Books

TXT 5: The Book Issue (September 2018)

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Abstract

One of the ways in which people express bookishness is through a declaration of love for ‘the smell of books’, a phrase that evokes nostalgic attachment to print. Rather than accepting, critiquing, or deconstructing this familiar rhetoric, our research proposes a non-traditional response. As researchers, when people have brought up the smell of books, we have redirected the conversation by gesturing towards ferries. The diplomatic non-sequitur ‘Oh look, a ferry’ has become a catchphrase that we have extended metaphorically and literally. In this paper, we report on a range of arts-informed experiments, including a YouTube channel, pyjamas, and a manifesto. These creative, playful experiments suggest ways of expanding discussions about print and e-books amongst academia, industry and members of the public. Our research suggests that arts-informed experiments can produce tools for thinking about the materiality of books, thereby contributing towards the development of book culture epistemologies.

Keywords: *bibliosma; book culture; bookishness; materiality; print books*

‘I’ll drown my book’

The Tempest, William Shakespeare

PART A: Salt Spring Island

Crossing the strait between Vancouver Island and Salt Spring Island in June 2017 following the annual Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing (SHARP) conference, the two authors of this article, both researchers in contemporary publishing studies, fell into a conversation with a stranger.

‘What I really love,’ the woman said, ‘is the smell of books.’

‘Oh look, a ferry,’ one of us replied.

This diplomatic non-sequitur has since become something of a catchphrase in our research.

PART B: The Smell of Books


The smell of books, or bibliosmia, is a cipher. It is a popular shorthand for a nostalgic attachment to print books that invokes a (possibly imagined) olfactory memory. As with all forms of nostalgia, an expression of love for the smell of books usually involves looking backwards to how things used to be, and a desire to return to that state. It’s a bittersweet longing to preserve an older way; in this case, an older way of interacting with books. The idea of the smell of books comes up quite often in media articles about the rise/decline of print books/e-books. A thoughtful example is a 2016 article in the *Huffington Post*, titled ‘Why I Still Love Printed Books’.¹ The author, Lev Raphael, lists a number of reasons for his preference for print over e-books, concluding with the immersive sensory experience offered by print objects: ‘I love the smell and weight and feel of a book.’

Googling ‘the smell of books’, though, doesn’t take you straight to such pieces of cultural journalism. The smell of books has become its own commodifiable property—a trope that can be invoked to badge oneself as a book lover. There are

¹ L. Raphael, ‘Why I Still Love Printed Books’, *Huffington Post*, 4 September 2016, <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/lev-raphael/surprise-readers-still-lo_b_11844626.html> (24 February 2018).

discussion boards about the smell of books on Goodreads and LibraryThing, human interest pieces about the science of book smell on websites, and reams of merchandise, mostly perfumed, including candles, eau de toilette, and an aerosol with which to spray an e-reader.² Such merchandise represents a commitment to the objectness of the book and its status as quirky, personal and material rather than digital. Expressing fondness for the smell of books, either in words or through purchasing decisions, is a performance of bookishness.³

PART C: Anecdotes

Rather than accepting, critiquing, or deconstructing this mode of engagement with book culture, our research proposes a non-traditional, arts-informed response. Following experimentations with a series of book festival card and board games in our article ‘Serious Fun: Gaming the Book Festival’, we are pursuing creative, playful and material forms of exploring and re-directing discussions about print books amongst academia, industry and members of the public.⁴ For this investigation, our series of experiments begins with this question: is the comment ‘Oh look, a ferry’ really unrelated to the smell of books? No. Because ferries turn out to be linked to print books in all sorts of ways. Ferries can, we argue, be seen as metaphors. We have explored this idea through a YouTube channel, featuring two short films of things getting on and off of ferries.⁵ 

Are the things getting on and off ferries—lorries laden with logs, cars carrying commuters—metaphors for books, which are also material objects that do the work of conveying? At a meta level, our contemplative, meditative videos are acts of

² For examples, see <<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/smell-of-books>>, <<http://smellofbooks.com/>>, <<https://www.scienceabc.com/nature/why-do-books-smell-so-good.html>> and <<https://ebookfriendly.com/book-smell-perfumes-candles/>> (24 February 2018).

³ J. Pressman, ‘The aesthetic of bookishness in twenty-first-century literature’, *Michigan Quarterly Review* XLVIII: 4 (2009) <<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.act2080.0048.402>>

⁴ B. Driscoll & C. Squires, ‘Serious Fun: Gaming the Book Festival’, *Memoires du Livre/Studies in Book Culture*, 9: 2 (2018) <<https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/memoires/2018-v9-n2-memoires03728/1046988ar/>>

⁵ B. Driscoll and C. Squires, ‘Ullapoolism: Things Getting On and Off of Ferries’, <<https://ullapoolism.wordpress.com/2017/10/26/things-getting-on-and-off-of-ferries/>> (24 February 2018).

digital communication that reference practical tasks, logistics and material challenges. The thoughts prompted by a metaphorical consideration of ferries and books lead to more extended engagements, in which we also explore how ferries are literally relevant to book objects; ferries and books are both inside and outside each other. Books may be transported or read on ferries, and other aquatic vessels. Books are also published about boats. Books meet watery deaths.

i) Books Afloat

Charles Darwin and Captain Fitzroy had a library on the Beagle during their round-the-world voyage.⁶ Cruise liners would have ship's libraries, in times of old. The QE2, for example, had over 6000 volumes on board, as commemorated by an Isle of Man postage stamp.⁷ We have ourselves pleasingly arranged books along the shelf of a tightly packed canal boat; or turned to an e-reader when baggage weight was a concern. But when things go bad at sea, reading on the waves takes a turn. Raging storms, an overbearing ship's captain, even a mutiny. In our childhood reading, the Lost Boys are threatened by Captain Hook with walking the plank while Wendy watches aghast, lashed to the mast; Billy Bones tells 'dreadful stories' of plank walking and storms at sea in *Treasure Island*; and the Swallows and Amazons make their 'Captain Flint' walk the plank, in piratical homage.

Books fall in the water. Pages swim in the sea. An electric charge bolts through the ocean. The tide waxes and wanes with the moon.

ii) 21st Century Seamanship

Some visiting speakers come to talk to students learning about publishing. They work for the nation's oldest publisher, producing guides for the marine industry. They don't have the glamour of trade publishers with their stories of launch

⁶ Darwin Day, 'The Books on the Beagle' <<http://darwinday.org/event/the-books-on-the-beagle/>> (21 February 2018).

⁷ *The Telegraph*, '50 Facts about the QE2', <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/cruises/articles/50-facts-about-the-qe2/>> (21 February 2018).

parties and canapés. Instead they speak of precision and regulation, the importance of editorial control and house style, literally a life-and-death matter at sea. Their titles use laminate pages, fold flat with spiral binding, have maps which open out across the ship's bridge. They show us a manual which details berthing for commercial ports around the world (how to park your boat, for the non-specialist). It's also available as an e-book. (This is definitely not a stupid product.)⁸ They tell us about unauthorised copies of their content circulating on the web, and take-down notices served to an amenable Russian pirate.

At the end of the session they give out branded pens and mints. One of us gets the cardboard box in which the goodies were stored. It advertises a new title, *21st Century Seamanship*.

Later, the box turns into a boat, with a whisky bottle box for its funnel. The cat gets into the box. She dreams of mince and slices of quince.

iii) It's Like Drowning Kittens

We're on a trip. The life cycle of book production. First, we're at a printers. Books roll off the presses: school textbooks, novels, political biographies, picture books. Gilted covers, special effects. Digital presses, the smell of glue and the guillotine. Hope and aspiration in the hundreds of thousands.

Goods in. Despatch.

Next we go to the book distribution warehouse. Carefully stacked and stocked, metres high, forklift trucks finding the right pallet, moving and shipping it out to bookshops around the country. Slow-moving books, gathering dust. Overstock.

⁸ H. Gill. "The Ebook Is a Stupid Product: No Creativity, No Enhancement," Says the Hachette Group CEO.' *Scroll.in* <<https://scroll.in/article/868871/the-ebook-is-a-stupid-product-no-creativity-no-enhancement-says-the-hachette-group-ceo>> (21 February 2018).

Out the back in the yard, we're shown a container of books, surplus to requirements. 'What will happen to them?' someone asks.

The warehouse manager shakes his head. 'Pulping,' he says.

'Oh no!' she replies. 'It's like drowning kittens.'

*A publisher liquidates. Its books are pulped. Dead books, dead Kindles.*⁹

PART D: Ferry Pyjamas

In happier times, everyone likes curling up with a good book. Or lying with it on the beach, sun tan cream and sand smearing its pages. Or maybe in the bath, steam rising, curling the pages. This intimacy is precious. But also potentially dangerous. To reader and to book.¹⁰

For our research, we have built upon these thoughts, experiences and reflections to develop some experiments with Bookish Boats, and Boat(ish) Books. In our first extended attempt to consider 'Oh Look, a Ferry' and its relationship to books and reading, we wondered: what might it be like to curl up in bed with a good book and some ferry pyjamas? So we took the following steps:

1. An internet search for ferry fabric.
2. We were not satisfied with the results.
3. Next, realising we could get custom-digital printed fabric, we decided to self-publish.
4. Using our favourite ferry picture—the Stornoway boat coming into Ullapool—we manipulated it using a web picture editor.
5. We uploaded some of the images to a digital fabric printer.

⁹ N. Onwuemezi, 'Freight Books' Creditors Owed Nearly £160k', *The Bookseller*, 19 January 2018, <<https://www.thebookseller.com/news/freights-debt-amounts-160k-711921>> (23 February 2018). Freight Books was the publisher of, among other titles, *101 Uses of a Dead Kindle* (Adrian Searle and Judith Hastie, 2012).

¹⁰ S. Bollman, *Women Who Read Are Dangerous* (London: Merrell, 2008).

6. We waited for the samples.
7. The samples came through the post.
8. We elicited opinion face-to-face and via social media about the best design.
9. Members of our focus groups requested ferry pyjamas.
10. We ordered some more samples.
11. The new samples came through the post.
12. We ordered fabric.
13. To be continued.

This experiment is, as yet, only partially actualised. The sewing machine awaits.

PART E: Do Books Float?

Our most thorough experiment on books, boats and materiality had two aims: to expand material experiences of the book (beyond holding or smelling it), and to investigate how it feels to destroy a book in a playful and aesthetically pleasing way. We developed the following method:

1. Rip pages from book.
2. Fold a page (into origami shapes if desired) and place in water (first tub of water, then nearby fishpond). Assess if page floats or sinks.
3. Place an unfolded page from book in water. Assess if page floats or sinks.
4. Place the rest of the book itself in water. Assess if book floats or sinks.

Before this method could be followed, materials needed to be assembled. The most important step was choosing a book. A large number of books that we own were eliminated from consideration, because they were needed for other purposes (for example, reading). We roamed the corridors of our workplaces and asked our colleagues for discarded books. However, many of these were contemporary novels and poetry. We decided not to publicly destroy a living author's work. A colleague suggested we might also want to stay away from any holy book.

As a last resort, we examined our own office shelves. One of us had an old copy of *Moby Dick*, which instantly felt like the right book object for the experiment. It is an old edition (circa late 1990s) and the print is tiny, blurry and nearly unreadable. In fact—confession—this particular book is unread. One of us prefers e-books for long, classic books that are unwieldy to hold and usually aren't nicely typeset. (Note that neither of us was prepared to sacrifice a Kindle for this experiment). Besides these practical considerations, the experiment was about water, and *Moby Dick* is about whales and boats and unrealistic expectations. Having chosen the book, the steps outlined in the method were carried out [insert image 2]

The experiment yielded several key findings. First was our experience of shock on destroying a book. This, we imagine, is how the woman on the ferry might have felt if she tore a page out of a classic novel. There is a reverence surrounding the book object, particularly for those (like ourselves) who were brought up in the aspirational middle-class.¹¹ As academics in publishing studies, we can critique this reverence, but it is still part of us. Desecrating books for the purposes of art and scholarship—drowning them, even just annotating them—requires confidence born from the possession of significant cultural capital. Acceptable middlebrow ways of handling the material object of the book sit within defined limits (holding, smelling, collecting, arranging, alphabeticising) and extending this set of physical practices challenges deeply-felt cultural norms.

A second finding concerned the effect on the fish. As a bystander observed, fish are very sensitive to changes in their environment, including the addition of chemicals. This produced a moment of anxiety about research ethics. As it transpired, the fish were fine. However we were prompted to consider unexpected dimensions of the materiality of books—the chemicals in paper and glue.

¹¹ See P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993); B. Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); J. Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste and Middle Class Desire*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

Finally, we were struck by the prettiness of this experiment. Cutting up and folding book pages creates beautiful physical objects. Flicking through pages underwater feels lovely, especially when surrounded by the warm scented air of an Australian summer. The cover of the book stood up like a sail as the book slowly sank. The wet book was satisfyingly heavy. Handling the book object in this way was meditative and rewarding. As a result of this experiment, we are resolved anew not to dismiss lovers of the print book, but rather to continue exploring different aspects of the book's materiality.

PART F: Concluding Reflections Towards a Manifesto for Book Cultures Research

We have an abiding interest in the epistemology of book culture—how best to understand and gain knowledge about the circulation of books in contemporary society, in ways that move beyond case studies and empirical data. Our make-and-do experiments are not designed to produce merchandise for Etsy stores or the Literary Gift Company; rather, we aim to create opportunities and prompts for thinking about the materiality of books.

Our research manifesto, which is still in development, is a way for us to set out some guiding principles.¹² Two of its eleven principles are 'Materiality' and 'Oh Look, A Ferry'. In this article, we've explained how those ideas intersect to generate new ways of looking at, touching, and perhaps even smelling books. Bon voyage.

¹² B. Driscoll and C. Squires, 'Ullapoolism Manifesto', <<https://ullapoolism.wordpress.com/manifesto/>> (24 February 2018).

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