

Material Narratives



The Book That Was

-Matt Schneider-



With each passing year the shadow of the growing ebook industry falls further across the world of print, and the rumblings of print's demise grow in intensity and severity. The proliferation of inexpensive ebook readers and the development of ebook reading apps for cellphones and tablet computers have helped bring ereading into the mainstream, filling subways, buses, and streetcars with readers hunched not over a paperback volume, but rather an electronic device with an LCD or eInk display. Newspapers continue to print articles on the death of print, but these articles are as likely to appear on newspaper websites as in print. It is in this atmosphere that we must seriously consider the future of books as one in which electronic texts are the norm and print is the exception.

In his lecture "The Book to Come," given as an introduction to a discussion with Roger Chartier and Bernard Stiegler in 1997, Jacques Derrida addresses the increasingly serious notion that electronic books might come to supplant print books as the dominant medium. As one would expect from Derrida, he does not accept the simplistic binary of electronic books and print books, but rather chooses to see books as a form in continual motion throughout the years, in which the move to electronic books is—if indeed at all—only moderately more noteworthy than any of the other changes that have shaped books over the centuries.

Derrida reminds us that we can always trust in a conservative, fetishistic impulse that "will reinvest the book threatened by this 'restructuring' of culture and knowledge." The very threat the book to come poses to the book that is is what drives artists to solidify and make stable what we come to know as the book that was. "This fetishism," Derrida

asserts “will sanctify—sanctify once again—the book, the aura of culture or the cult of the book, the body of the book and the body used to the book, the time, the temporality, and the spacing of the book, the habitus of the love of the book that will be revalorized and overvalued exactly according to the possibility of its becoming scarce, not to say commercially secondary or in decline.” In other words, as features of the book become rare and threaten to vanish altogether, artists seize on them, investing in them great importance—possibly more than they originally held.

The books in this exhibition demonstrate the very principle of conservative sanctification Derrida highlights. In the face of increasing technological change, these works revel in the material possibilities of the book that was. The authors have adopted a variety of approaches in their work, but each of them works to exploit the unique opportunities physical books have to offer. It is important to note, too, that these books have all been prepared for a wide, commercial audience. They are not the efforts of small, underground art presses intended only to circulate within a small pool of readers, but rather collaborations between award-winning authors and international publishers made available for sale in major chain bookstores such as Chapters and Barnes & Nobles. From typographical experimentation to structural innovations, the authors in this exhibition do much both to push the print book into heretofore unexplored territory and to assert the value of the threatened physical medium.

When her estranged brother passed away suddenly in 2000, Anne Carson constructed an epitaph for him in the form of a notebook, filled with scraps of paper, torn up letters, and old photos. The resultant work, entitled *Nox*, was then reproduced in photo-facsimile and printed in the form of a long accordion in 2010. Presenting these materials photographically rather than representing them in prose draws these material witnesses to the forefront, allowing Carson to engage in dialogue with these artefacts. Even in facsimile, the letters and photographs preserve a trace of her brother.

The first thing one notices when picking up a copy of Jonathan Safran Foer's 2011 novel *Tree of Codes* for the first time is the weight: the book is simply too light for one its size. This is because at least a third of the enclosed contents are empty space. Foer states that he composed the novel by cutting text away from Bruno Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles*, leaving only *tree of codes*. Foer's cuts are represented on the page by actual gaps in the paper, gaps made through the use of innovative die-cut techniques developed by Belgian printer die Keure. It is worth noting that *Tree of Codes* is the second book released by publisher Visual Editions, whose first book is a modernised redesign of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, and who argue that "books should be as visually interesting as the stories they tell." Visual Editions's catalogue explicitly ties Foer's work to a visually experimental, British publishing tradition of no fewer than 250 years.

While Mark Z Danielewski's has developed a stark, visceral prose style that is unmistakably his own, he is best known for his experimental, rhetorical use of typography, a

technique he deploys frequently in each of his four books. In *House of Leaves*, Danielewski combines the horror trope of the haunted house with the legend of the Minotaur and Daedalus's labyrinth. The typography complements the textual content, twisting on the page as characters move through passages, while numerous, sometimes recursive footnotes mimic the false turns and dead ends of the labyrinth. Danielewski further complicates the way we must approach his narrative by releasing multiple editions of his work that vary significantly, three of which are collected in this exhibition.

Like the other books in the series, Alan Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: Black Dossier* chronicles the exploits of a secret team of fictional characters drawn from the English canon as they thwart threats to the Crown and Country. While the other books are standard comics that simply draw characters and events from the canon, *Black Dossier* is a collection of pastiches written in the style of the authors Moore borrows from. In addition to writing style, Moore also frequently mimics elements of the material conditions of the works he copies: typeface, page design, and paper stock are all used at different points in the comic to simulate the bibliographic codes of the original works.

Joshua Cotter's *Skyscrapers of the Midwest* is a semi-autobiographical comic based on his childhood. As a youth, Cotter frequently turned to popular commercial culture to escape the bullying he faced in school. Cotter acknowledges this intense relationship with the commercial culture of the late-80s by integrating paratextual representations of the culture into his comic: toys, advertisements for videogames, and even pages of comics in the style of

comics in the 1980s all make their way into the pages of his work, underscoring the influence popular culture had on Cotter in his formative years.

Finally, Robert C Binkley's *Manual on Methods of Reproducing Research Materials* demonstrates the degree to which the transformation and evolution of the material substrates of the book has been a historical constant. Published in 1936, the *Manual on Methods* evaluates the technology available to reproduce print material and collects examples of the output of these processes, allowing the reader to see first hand the results of the massive technological advances taking place at the time. It also calculates the cost and availability of the various reproductive techniques, allowing its readers to consider practical, financial factors alongside those of preservational fidelity when reproducing materials. Binkley's work proves just as valuable today as it was at the time, as it gives us great insight into the working process of archivists in the 1930s as well as the economic dimensions that informed the choices made at that time.

**A**lthough print books are rapidly yielding ground to electronic editions, the authors and books included in this exhibition demonstrate that there is no reason to assume that print will be leaving us any time in the near future. In fact, if Derrida is correct in his assessment that there is an impulse that “will reinvest the book threatened by this ‘restructuring’ of culture and knowledge”—an impulse that seems to be in play in the books in this exhibition—print books will become “overvalued exactly according to the possibility of [their] becoming scarce.”

What first appeared to be the death of print could in fact be the dawn of a new era of experimentation in print.

This new era of experimentation will come with its own sets of challenges. Many publishers and printers would be reluctant to take on technologically demanding projects like Foer's *Tree of Codes* or Carson's *Nox*. These books, however, were indeed published, so we have reason to be optimistic. These books may not see the quick and impressive sales numbers of Dan Brown or Tom Clancy's novels, but this has never held back authors in the past. The future of print will be turbulent and fraught with failure, but to assume that its demise is at hand is to subscribe to unfounded pessimism.

I find it appropriate at this point to close with what is perhaps the most important bit of advice Derrida gives in "The Book to Come." "I love every form of the book," Derrida declares, "and I see no reason to give this love up."

## VOLUMES INCLUDED IN THIS EXHIBITION

- Binkley, Robert C. *Manual on Methods of Reproducing Research Methods*. Ann Arbor, MI: Edwards Brothers Inc, 1936.
- Carson, Anne. *Nox*. New York: New Directions, 2010.
- Cotter, Joshua W. *Skyscrapers of the Midwest*. Richmond, VA: Adhouse Books, 2008.
- Danielewski, Mark Z. *House of Leaves*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2000.
- . *House of Leaves: Remastered Full-Colour Edition*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2006.
- . *The Whalestoe Letters*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2000.
- Foer, Jonathan Safran. *Tree of Codes*. London: Visual Editions, 2011.
- Moore, Alan. *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: Black Dossier*. La Jolla, CA: America's Best Comics, 2008.

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