

THE
SECRET
LIFE
OF
BOOKS

WHY THEY MEAN MORE
THAN WORDS

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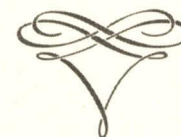
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*'O tempora! O lectores!'*¹

CHARLES LAMB



ILLUSTRATIONS

- 1 Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *St Jerome* (1605) . . . 47
- 2 Vincent van Gogh, *Still Life with Bible* (1885) 109
- 3 Jan van Belcamp (attrib.), *Great Picture* (1646) 157

I

BOOK/BOOK

*The things we do to books and
the things they do to us*

When I was a student, one of my professors was almost driven out of his office by his books. He had a large room on the ground floor of the English department, with bookcases around the walls. Slowly but surely these bookcases had filled over the years, and other shelves had been squeezed into every available space in the office. The bookcases had started to sprout out from the walls into the room, creating book booths, book niches and book nooks. But these, in turn, proved insufficient for his ever-growing collection of books. Soon he started to pile books on top of the bookcases, and to stack them double on the shelves, so that he had to move the books in front in order

to reveal the ones behind. Before long, the books had spilled onto the floor, where the piles encroached further and further into the room with each passing month.

Every time I visited the professor's office, it seemed a little harder than before to navigate a route across the room on the decreasing area of visible carpet. Attempting to keep the books in some kind of order seemed like a full-time job. I'd knock on the professor's door and hear a muffled shout telling me to come in. But when I opened the door there was no professor to be seen – the room was full of books, but apparently empty of its occupant. For a moment, I would think perhaps the professor had been crushed under a toppling pile of hardbacks. Then his head would appear from behind a ziggurat of volumes on a bewildering variety of topics. 'Just doing a bit of sorting out,' he'd say, as though he could ever hope to bring order to the ever-growing library that seemed, like the universe itself, to be continually expanding at an accelerating rate in every possible direction.

My professor was doing a number of things to his books. He was acquiring them – choosing to buy these books rather than others. He was classifying them – putting them onto shelves and into piles with other books. These categories might be based on some quality such as their subject matter (history on one shelf, biography on another), or their size (larger books on the floor, smaller ones on the shelves), or

their place in the cycle of his reading (as-yet-unread ones over here; the ones he was currently reading over there; the ones he had finished reading but not yet shelved somewhere else). He was reading them, taking notes from them, referring back to them, citing them in the articles he was writing, using them to prepare his lectures, lending them to his students, and so on in an endless process of erudition and amusement.

But his books were also doing things to him. As well as pushing him out of his own office, they were shaping the spaces and the ways in which he worked. The books formed a complex ecosystem that he, too, inhabited. Sometimes, they made his work easier and better. Writing scholarly articles amid such a large private library allowed him to keep reference works, books by other scholars and the literature he was writing about within easy reach. All scholarship depends to some extent on other scholarship – even when it reaches different conclusions – and so the thousands of books he kept to hand assisted his work. Sometimes, on the other hand, the sheer number of books and their disorganised state must have made things more difficult. It must often have been tricky or impossible to find the book he wanted.

Eventually the department secretary decided enough was enough and sent in a structural engineer to test whether the building could take the weight of so many books. Armed with the engineer's report, she persuaded the professor to give some books away. (He gave one to me.) But it was hard

to convince him to downsize his library. His professional life, indeed his understanding of himself, was ranged around the shelves for all to see. Giving up some of his books felt like giving up part of his mind. There were benefits and difficulties in having such a large collection of books. But, for better or worse, his books were not just his passive tools; they were also exerting forces of their own on his life.



Sometimes, we think of books as tools for reading, but there's more to them than that. In this book – the one you're reading now – I'm not all that interested in books as things to read. Instead, I want to talk about all the other things that we do to books – and that books do to us. Our books are leading a double life. As well as being containers of words, they are things imbued with their own significance. Their importance – as my professor understood – goes far beyond the words or images they contain.

Books are part of how we understand ourselves. They shape our identities, even before we can read them. They accompany us throughout our lives – at home, at school, at college and (for some of us, at least) at work. And books are also part of how we relate to other people, from those closest to us to those only distantly connected. They get tangled up in our relationships with parents, siblings, classmates, teachers,

friends, lovers and children. They are part of how groups of people, and even whole nations, imagine and represent themselves. Books become meaningful objects in all sorts of ways: treasured possessions, talismans, bearers of significance. This book is about how that happens.

For readers, books are familiar objects. Maybe we're too familiar with them to pay them much attention. We take them to bed with us. They weigh down our suitcases when we go on holiday. We display them on our bookshelves or store them in our attics. We give them as gifts. We write our names in them. We hoard them or discard them. We take them for granted. Over the last five hundred years, printed books have become a common sight – so common that they are almost invisible. It requires an effort, a shift of perspective, to bring them into focus.

Today, we can make that effort because it has become possible to imagine the end of the book as we know it. We can perceive the book as an object because we think that object might be going away. When historians of the future look back to the early twenty-first century, they will describe it as a moment of media change as significant as the Western invention of printing with movable type in the second half of the fifteenth century. But as the epoch of print ends, printed books are not simply vanishing; instead, their significance is being transformed. We're historically well placed to understand this transformation.

And yet we often fail to understand it. If we think of books as just media – just a way of conveying text and images – then we'll expect them to give way to new media that do the job faster, more cheaply, more efficiently or more profitably. The strange tenacity of the paper book will seem puzzling. But once we understand the life of books as objects, and the many functions they serve in our lives, then we'll be better equipped to understand what's happening to them now.



Think about one of your favourite books. What springs to mind? You probably remember nuggets of content: episodes in the story, favourite characters or choice quotations. You might also recollect where and when you read the book – on a pleasant holiday, a long plane ride, a commuter train, a lazy Sunday. You might associate the book with a particular time of your life and recall how it made you feel or what it made you think. Or you might remember where you bought it, or who recommended it or gave it to you.

Perhaps you also recall something about the book as a physical object. Your memories might include some recollection of the picture on the cover, some scarcely formed awareness of what the typeface was like to read, or some muscle memory of how the book felt in your hands. These physical features often seem less important, because we've

learned to think of them as incidental to the business of books and reading. What's important, we think, is what the book says, not what it looks like, what it smells like or what it feels like to hold.

We've been taught to think this way from an early age. Learning to read means learning to stop looking at the book in front of us and to start looking through it. As we come to think of books as simply strings of signs to decipher so that we can get at the stories, the ideas or the information they convey, we learn to ignore their physical features. We're told not to judge a book by its cover. We think that only children's books have pictures (which until quite recently was certainly not the case), and we're keen to move on to reading grown-up books, with only words. As a result, we start to treat the book simply as a container of information, a device for delivering narratives. The book itself starts to vanish, to seem as though it's hardly a thing at all. As we gain the ability to lose ourselves in a book, the book as an object begins to get lost.



This relationship between the ignorable material form of a book and its valuable content might remind us of another familiar relationship: that between body and soul. The words in the book are to its material form as the immortal soul is

to the mortal body. Words can leave behind their material existence in the book, and migrate to new forms, just as souls can leave behind their worldly incarnations and take on new, heavenly bodies. And while the book (like the body) is subject to various infirmities and imperfections – misprints, cracked spines, torn pages, dog-eared corners – the work (like the soul) transcends it. The American founding father Benjamin Franklin played with this idea when he composed his own jokey epitaph. Franklin, who was a printer in Philadelphia, likened his dead body to ‘the Cover of an old Book, / Its Contents torn out, / And stript of its Lettering and Gilding’. And he likened his soul to the book’s contents. ‘But the Work shall not be wholly lost,’ he wrote, ‘For it will, as he believ’d, appear once more, / In a new & more perfect Edition, / Corrected and Amended / By the Author.’

In order to resist this tendency to look down on the book as an object and look up at its content, we need to make a conscious effort to focus on the ‘thingness’ of the book. You can start making that effort now, using this book as a starting point. As you turn over this page, feel the paper between your fingers, notice the look of the type, the smell the book gives off, the heft of the volume in your hand. Or, if you’re reading on a digital device, notice how that experience differs from reading a paper book. Look at the options for changing the font or the size of the text, feel the size and shape of the device. Take a moment to do it now.



Making that effort allows us to see how our books shape the ways in which we read them. As objects, books are constantly sending us messages about how we should approach the texts they contain. Weighty hardbacks printed on thick paper with sober covers tell us to take them seriously. They are designed to last, allowing their text to be read many times. Detective stories printed on cheap paper with flimsy bindings and garish covers shout at us to buy them, read them fast and throw them away. If you try to reread them more than a couple of times they will literally fall to pieces. Poetry volumes surround a well-turned sonnet with acres of white margin, like a piece of polished jet displayed on an ample white cushion. The page layout entreats us to bring to the poem a mind cleared of distractions, like the page, and focused tightly on the words islanded in a sea of white space. When you read a book, you’re always reading a material object as well as a string of text. Reading matter always takes the form of, well, matter.

Paying this kind of attention to the book as an object also reveals the purposes books serve in society. We use books for a lot of things besides reading. They serve as badges of allegiance, identifying the bearer as part of a group of readers who are devoted to a particular kind of book. They can be insignia of class, indicating the social position of their owners

in complex ways. They can become the focus of rituals and celebrations. Literary festivals take place across the world, bringing together authors, readers and booksellers around the object of the book. Some books even have celebrations specifically focused on them, like the midnight launch events for Harry Potter books that attracted queues of costumed readers eager for the next instalment. Books can function as tokens shaping interpersonal relationships, for example when they are given as gifts or prizes. They can be a link between parents and children, for example when reading aloud at bedtime. They can bring people together in book clubs and reading groups. Considered in this light, the book starts to appear as a lively object, with its own vibrant social life.

Books are a great example of how objects of all kinds take on meanings.¹ Coats, cars, hamburgers, shoes – these things all carry meanings that extend well beyond their purpose as clothing, transport, food or footwear. The safe, dependable Volvo, the flashy Mercedes and the second-hand Toyota all tell us things about their owners that have nothing to do with their desire to get from A to B. These meanings vary from one time and place to another. In one society a second-hand Toyota might be rather *déclassé*; in a less-privileged one it might be the zenith of luxury. And the meanings of things take shape in relation to the meanings of other things. A Mercedes would not be a sign of status if it were the only kind of car you could buy.²

Books are no different – in fact they are a particularly good example of how things become bearers of meanings. Imagine three copies of *Jane Eyre*. One is a cheap paperback, bought from a cardboard box on the pavement outside a second-hand bookstore (this is the rusty Toyota of the bookshelf). The other is a hefty new hardback, bought from a large well-lit bookshop (this is the Volvo, solid and reliable). The third is a leather-bound copy of the first edition signed by its author, and bought from a major auction house (this is a very smart Mercedes, or maybe a Ferrari). All three contain Charlotte Brontë's novel. But all three offer drastically different reading experiences (if, that is, they are read at all). They represent different kinds of investment on the part of their owners – in terms of money, time and emotional energy – and so they are treated in different ways, and come to mean different things.



Shelves of antiquarian volumes in leather bindings signify one thing, a stack of second-hand paperbacks on a bedside table another. And the same volume can take on different connotations when used in different settings, at different times and in different ways. A textbook from the eighteenth century – carried to class by a student who scribbled notes to his classmate in the margins when the teacher bored him, or

tried out his pen on the endpapers to see if the nib wrote well – might become the centrepiece of a twenty-first-century collector's library. A paperback novel thrown aside by a businessman after a long-haul flight might make its way to a charity shop and become the treasured possession of a child with a thirst for reading but little money for books.

We haven't grasped the meanings of books if we think of them only as things to read. The Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle coined the term 'thick description'.³ Think about how we might describe a coat. The coat keeps its wearer warm. That's an accurate description, but it's a 'thin' one. To offer a 'thick' description, we need to pay attention to a much fuller range of meanings. The coat might signal things about its wearer's job (a doctor's white coat), her wealth and social status (a cashmere overcoat), his membership of a group (a biker's leather jacket) and so on. So, to say that books are containers of words or tools for reading is an accurate description, but Ryle would say it's a 'thin' one. A thick description of the book would include a much wider set of meanings.

But books don't just *mean* things to us. They also *do* things to us. The doctor's training and expertise give her the authority to wear the white coat, but the coat doesn't just reflect authority; it also confers it. The doctor without the white coat looks like anyone else. With it, she commands a certain respect; people treat her differently. When she's wearing the coat, perhaps she carries herself differently or speaks more

confidently too. So, the white coat is doing something, both to the doctor and to those around her.

Books, too, are doing things to those who encounter them.



In its long history, the book has taken a variety of forms and employed a wide array of materials. There are books in cuneiform writing from the ancient Sumerian empire, made by pushing a stylus into clay tablets. Others were written on papyrus made from reeds growing along the Nile in ancient Egypt, or inscribed on bamboo strips in China. Books were printed from carved wooden blocks in China by 868 CE and possibly much earlier, as well as in Korea and Japan. In medieval Europe, books were written on parchment made from animal skins and decorated with coloured inks and gold leaf. Printing with metal type developed, apparently independently, in both Asia and Europe. As early as the thirteenth century, artisans at the Korean court were experimenting with copper moveable type. By the end of the fifteenth century, books were being printed in Europe using lead type to transfer ink onto paper made from linen rags.

Printing spread across Europe from Germany to Italy, France, Spain, Poland, England, Belgium, Sweden and Turkey (all before 1500). It was exported to South America in the early 1500s and North America by the beginning of the

following century. Printing in the Middle East dates from the early 1600s in Lebanon, although the Quran was printed in Arabic type in Venice as early as 1514. Colonists and missionaries carried printing presses and moveable type to India, Africa, Australia and New Zealand in the eighteenth century. Printing developed along slightly different lines in East Asia. Because the printers were working with written languages consisting of thousands of characters, rather than the limited Western alphabet, they tended to prefer wooden type (xylography), which was cheaper to produce and easier to alter. Using these methods, Chinese, Japanese and Korean printers sustained a great expansion in publishing long before Europe experienced a similar phenomenon.

Over time, printing slowly became industrialised, until in nineteenth-century Europe steam-driven presses were producing hundreds of pages an hour, on paper made by machines from esparto grass and wood pulp. These developments made books cheaper and more widely available, and increasing literacy levels allowed books to reach across the social spectrum. The invention of the paperback in the twentieth century made the book more affordable, more portable and – often – more disposable. Books have come in many shapes and sizes, been produced for many purposes, and employed many different kinds of material.⁴



In what follows, I'll look back to that history to see what it can tell us about how books function as objects. But this book is written with both eyes on the present. For that reason, it's largely about the kind of book that's most familiar to us today: the printed codex. The codex form emerged long before print, in the first centuries of the Common Era. It consists of a series of leaves stacked on top of one another and gathered together along one edge. In other words, it's the book as we know it now. The book in your hands – if you're reading the paper version rather than the e-book – is a codex, just like (I'm fairly sure) more or less all the paper books you will have encountered.

Early readers of the codex praised it for being portable and easy to handle compared with the scroll. It allows a reader to flick through the pages and dip in and out, in a way that isn't so easy to do with a scroll that has to be unrolled and rolled up again. Despite these advantages, however, the codex took a long time to catch on. The evidence of surviving books suggests that it slowly gained ground over the scroll between about 100 and 500 CE. It's not a coincidence that these were the years when Christianity was also gaining converts. Christians were early adopters of the codex. They helped to refine the techniques required to make codices (the plural of codex), and they particularly favoured the codex form for their scriptures. As Christianity became more widespread, so the Christians' preferred form of the book also took off.

Printing is the other key element of the book as we know it. In Europe, its story begins with the prodigiously bearded goldsmith and entrepreneur Johannes Gutenberg, who invented movable type and the printing press around 1439. (Movable type had been invented independently in Asia long before this date, but Gutenberg almost certainly didn't know this.) Gutenberg developed his printing press from earlier presses used for producing olive oil or wine. He used the skills he had developed as a goldsmith to create little pieces of lead with individual letters formed in relief on the top. The letters were reversed, so that they appeared the right way round when printed. Gutenberg arranged his pieces of type to spell out words, and then applied ink to the raised parts of the letters. (This was done with a dabber, and a skilled printer who could apply the ink evenly became known as a 'dab hand'.) A sheet of paper was laid on top of the inked type. The press applied pressure, pushing the paper down and causing ink to transfer onto the paper. The combination of movable type and the printing press was the breakthrough that allowed numerous copies of a text to be produced much faster than copying by hand. Printing wasn't used just for books. From the beginning a range of other things were printed, including forms, receipts, broadsides and posters.

The book as we know it today is the product of a marriage between the form of the codex and the technology of print. People are still producing manuscript books (think of diaries,

notebooks or handwritten collections of recipes), and there are still some books that aren't codices (think of concertina books for children, or the Torah scroll used in synagogues). But for several hundred years the printed codex has been the default form for circulating and storing text.



For a long time, books and their users – whether those users are readers or writers, buyers or sellers, borrowers or lenders – have shared a bookish ecosystem that has proved to be extraordinarily robust, enduring times of turbulence such as wars, famines and plagues. Sometimes, in fact, the book thrives in these conditions – the annual output of printed books and pamphlets in English actually went up during the English Civil War, as controversial pamphlets on current affairs streamed from the press, waging war in print as well as on the battlefield. As I'll suggest later, this ecosystem has accommodated new media (such as photography) with ease and learned to operate alongside other media such as radio, cinema and television.

But now the printed codex is being displaced from the position of cultural centrality that it has held in the West for the last five hundred years. Digital technologies are challenging the role of print as our default medium for text. Meanwhile, new media are changing the habits of attention that the printed book fostered. Today, many of us read more

on the screen than we do on the page, using a variety of devices: some designed for reading books (e-readers) and some designed primarily for other purposes (phones, tablets, laptops). It's a brave new world that has such books in it. Reports of the death of the book are probably not just premature but also simplistic and overstated. But that doesn't mean we should underestimate the challenge of the digital. If digital technologies are changing the book beyond recognition, now is the time to consider what we might lose as we embrace them.

It may be a mistake to generalise about the paper book, drawing up battle lines with all the paper books on one side and all the e-books on the other. Books are too various, too different from one another, and they serve too many different purposes to be corralled into convenient oppositions in this way. Looking along my shelves, I can see reference books for looking up facts, detective novels for entertainment, academic monographs I use in my work as a researcher, textbooks and anthologies I use as a teacher (or that I used as a student), art books more for looking at than for reading, children's books I read aloud to my daughter, slim volumes of poetry, a Bible in a slip case, and many more. The printed codex has been so successful in part because it's flexible enough to be used for a variety of different kinds of book.



People acquire 'bookish' tastes in response to particular constellations of circumstances. There weren't many books in my house when I was growing up. We had a Bible and a complete works of Shakespeare, items as familiar in English houses as a teapot and tea strainer (but not used so often). There was a textbook belonging to my dad called *Advanced Air Conditioning and Refrigeration*, which was kept in a cupboard because it didn't seem the kind of book anyone wanted to display on a shelf. There were one or two cookbooks. There was a mawkish volume of poetry called *Poems of Love and Reflection*; no one seemed to know how this had got into the house. That was about it. My parents owned few books of their own. But they associated books with education, and education with advancement of all kinds – social, professional and financial. All of which, apparently, we could do with. I also had the good fortune to live in an area that was well provided with public libraries and to attend a state school with a well-appointed library. My interest in books stems at least in part from this particular context, and the aspirations it fostered.

As a schoolboy studying English, it didn't occur to me to want to own the books I was reading in class. Sometimes we had to buy books, but for the most part the teacher gave books out at the beginning of term and collected them in at the end. And nor did it seem remarkable that the school would buy so many copies of the same book. Sometimes these books were new, when the budget allowed or the

curriculum changed, but often they bore the marks of previous pupils' engagement with the text – or their disengagement from it, as they doodled in the margins while bored in class. We worked through these books carefully and slowly, and I can still remember many details from them. I probably still know *Macbeth*, which I studied as a sixteen-year-old, better than any other Shakespeare play. I can remember the edition we used, which had a photograph from a recent production of the play on the cover. But I gave that book back at the end of term without a second thought.

It wasn't until I became a postgraduate student that I needed more than one small bookcase to hold my books. By then, books were becoming an important part of how I spent my time and money. Slowly, my aspirations took shape – I hoped to get a PhD, and perhaps to become an academic. One day, I hoped to write a book of my own. Books were now my business. I spent my working days surrounded by them in the library. But I also bought books and kept them at home. This was in the early days of shopping for second-hand books on the internet, and I was able to buy cheaply some of the academic monographs I was reading for my doctorate. Even if my ambitions to become an academic came to nothing, I figured I'd at least have a shelf of books to remind me of the time I'd spent immersed in my thesis. One afternoon, passing by an office building that was being renovated, I spotted two cheap white bookcases that looked

as if they were being thrown out. They were chipped and a little wonky. The workmen decorating the offices said I could have them for free, and a friend with a van helped me get them back to my flat. As the bookcases filled, so my doctoral thesis took shape. Eventually, a bound copy of my thesis and later still the book that I wrote based on it took their places on the shelves.

Since then, I've continued to buy and read books, as well as to write them. And my work has taken me to libraries where I've been lucky enough to handle some real treasures. Buying books, reading them, organising them and referring back to them – all these things seem to me distinct and different kinds of pleasure. I'm not a collector so much as an accumulator of books. I have a few modest antiquarian volumes, but most of my books are paperbacks I bought new and then hung on to. I doubt I would have kept so many books if they hadn't served some ulterior purposes that aren't apparent even to me. I was the first in my immediate family to go to university, and I suspect the books on my shelves reassure me that I really have learned something along the way. Like the certificates on the wall in a doctor's surgery or a lawyer's office, they offer a kind of proof that I'm more or less qualified to teach and write about literature and book history. Perhaps by writing this book about books I'm hoping to convince myself once and for all.

BOOK/THING

*How books function as objects
circulating among other objects*

Sometimes, the moment when you can see the book most clearly as an object is the moment when it stops working as it's supposed to. When I was an undergraduate, trying to finish George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* for class the following day, I turned a page partway through the book to discover that I'd gone back in time. I was rereading sentences that I distinctly remembered reading earlier that morning. No longer absorbed in the story, I looked more closely at another aspect of the book – its page numbers – and discovered that instead of page 140 being followed by page 141, it was actually followed by a second copy of page 109. (I hadn't got all that far in.) As I flipped through

a few more pages, it became clear that a whole chunk of the text had been duplicated, and that a corresponding chunk was missing. The time of the story was out of joint, its characters stranded in limbo, compelled to repeat their actions of thirty pages earlier. I wasn't going to be able to read the novel in time for class unless I found another copy. These days, I could simply have gone online to find the text but back then I had to go out to a library or bookshop to find a replacement.

As a vehicle for delivering the text of *Middlemarch*, my book had broken down. But in that moment it was also revealed to me in a new light. I was no longer able to ignore the physical form of the book, to treat it as just a window to the words. Instead, the book reappeared as a thing. I thought – really for the first time – about how it had been made in a factory by machines. I noticed that it was the product of technologies and processes about which I knew very little. I became aware that fallible individuals had manufactured it. I realised that the book had been assembled from several different parts, and that in this case some of those parts had got mixed up. Quite suddenly, I perceived the book in my hands as an object, in a way that hadn't previously occurred to me.

And it was also clear, in that moment, that this copy of *Middlemarch* was unlike others that purported to be the same. Different editions of the same novel, and even other copies of the same edition, didn't have the same problem as this copy. Although they all seemed to offer the same experience – the

experience of reading Eliot's novel – that experience differed according to the particular book the reader encountered the novel in. As a communications technology, my book had crashed. But other books contained bugs and glitches that we put up with quite happily: misprints or misnumbered pages, and, as their lives went on, pages stained, dog-eared, ripped or torn out altogether. Although I'd read plenty of books, these were things I'd scarcely given any thought to before. Only when my book broke down did it become impossible to take it for granted.

Quite a long time after that, I discovered that this experience, in which an object becomes visible as such when it stops working as it's intended to, was one that I apparently shared with the philosopher Martin Heidegger.¹ His example is a hammer. When you're using a hammer and everything is going well, you don't think about the hammer, only the business of hammering. Stop to think about the hammer, and the chances are you'll hit your own thumb. It's only when the hammer breaks, Heidegger suggests, that the carpenter's relationship to it changes. In that moment, the hammer loses its 'equipmentality' (the unlovely term coined to translate Heidegger's word *Zeugsein*), and it becomes visible to the carpenter as a thing.

The same is true of books. They tend to disappear when in use. In that moment when we're fully absorbed in a book, we experience a kind of direct access to the author's words, the author's imagined world, even the author's thoughts, that

can seem almost mystical in nature. The medium does its job most effectively when it becomes most transparent. We stop noticing the book and become immersed in the work it contains. This is a sort of ecstasy, in the distinctive historical sense of going outside of oneself, into a kind of swoon, or trance, or heightened state of consciousness. As we enter the author's world, we lose sight of the book as an object.



Marcel Proust, in his essay 'On Reading', provides a wonderful description of this kind of submersion in a book. Proust recounts how, as a child, he retreated in the morning to the dining room, where he planned to read in a chair by the fire until lunchtime. But the cook came in to lay the table for lunch and disturbed him:

[S]he thought she had to say, 'You're not comfortable like that; what if I brought you a table?' And just to answer: 'No, thank you' you had to stop short and bring back from afar your voice which from within your lips was repeating noiselessly, hurriedly, all the words your eyes had read; you had to stop it, make it be heard, and, in order to say properly, 'No, thank you', give it an appearance of ordinary life, the intonation of an answer, which it had lost.²

Proust celebrates the book's ability to transport its reader to another place, as the reader's body is colonised by the author and his voice is no longer his own. The passage is a favourite among readers who celebrate the slightly uncanny pleasure of being absorbed in a story. Perhaps the experience is especially intense for children; I know I sometimes have to say my daughter's name several times in order to bring her out of storyland and back to the real world. But Proust has little to say about the book he's reading – is it large or small, heavy or light, new or old, thick or thin, colourful or plain, tattered or pristine? His prose – usually so profligate with details – has nothing to say about these matters.

The cook – whose labours leave her no time for reading that morning – sees things differently. While the young Marcel is lost in the book's contents, the cook responds to it as an object. It must be heavy. Perhaps it's too large for the small boy to handle comfortably. Wouldn't a table make things easier? Her concerns are resolutely practical. It is precisely because she's excluded from reading the book by her class, her gender and her job that the cook sees it as an object. In this sense, she's better attuned to my topic than the young Proust, for whom the book has entirely disappeared in the experience of its reading. I enjoy that experience of immersion as much as any reader. But I also think we might try to take a step back from it to allow the book to become the object of our attention in a different way, as it is for

the Proust family's cook, and as it became for me that day reading *Middlemarch*. When books stop serving us as tools or interfaces, they also start to come into view as things.



My experience with *Middlemarch* that day stayed with me for a long time, and changed the way I looked at books for ever. Once I started really to pay attention to books, rather than just looking at the words they contained, I realised how much my books had been marked by how I used them. The wrinkles along the spine of my copy of *Middlemarch* showed how far I'd read before the book broke down. A poetry anthology fell open at a favourite poem. Cookbooks showed fingerprints on favourite recipes. Cake recipes had acquired cocoa-coloured smudges, while curry recipes were redolent of spices stuck between the pages. Like clothes or shoes that start off as identical copies and mould to their owners' bodies over time, books get worn in. Once I started to pay attention to books as objects, I began to see traces of how those objects had been used. Or not used – some books that I really should have read still look suspiciously pristine on the shelf.

Books don't reveal how they've been used only by their current owners; they sometimes carry scars from past encounters as well. In *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), Thomas Hardy describes a family Bible whose pages have been quite

worn away in popular passages by 'unpractised readers in former days' dragging their fingers along under the words as they read.³ Taking up the Bible reveals the semi-literate state of its earlier readers, as well as the passages that most interested them. To the careful observer, the book can be excavated like an archaeological dig, revealing layer upon layer of information about its previous users from the material traces they left behind them.



Different people handle their books in different ways, and so leave different kinds of traces. The more I looked at books, the more I learned to recognise these traces. The editor and essayist Anne Fadiman distinguishes between two kinds of book-lover: the 'courtly' and the 'carnal'.⁴ When I read her description, I remembered two university friends who exemplified the two types. They even looked like opposites: the courtly book-lover was tall, slender and blonde; the carnal book-lover was short, full-figured and dark-haired.

The courtly book-lover bought nice editions and did her best to preserve them in pristine condition. She had a little ritual that I've never known anyone else perform. When she got a new paperback, she stood it on its spine on the table in front of her, and then, taking a small gathering of the first and last pages between each thumb and forefinger, she eased

them down towards the table. Then she took two gatherings nearer the centre of the book and did the same, and so on, fanning the pages out gently as she worked her way towards the mid-point of the volume. In this way, she softened and flexed the spine before she started reading the book. The spine stayed smooth and firm as a result, instead of cracking or creasing where it had been recklessly bent backwards somewhere midway through the book at a particularly exciting moment in the plot. Her books stood resplendent on her shelves, looking almost as clean and bright as they had in the shop. Needless to say, she never wrote in them.

The carnal book-lover, on the other hand, could never have brought herself to perform the spine-softening ritual. It would have meant deferring the pleasure of reading the book. She pounced on a new book and devoured it. Dog-eared corners held no fear for her. Cracked spines, biro marks in the margins and on the endpapers, coffee stains on the cover – these were all simply marks of affection, signs of the intensity of her love for the book. If she left a book open face down on her bedside table, it just meant that she could pick it up more easily and start reading where she had left off. Her favourite books were her tattiest, because she had read them to death. She had no interest in preserving her books in pristine condition: she wanted them to look as if they'd been read.

When these two book-lovers saw each other's bookshelves, they recoiled in dismay. 'How can you possibly treat

your books like that?' asked the courtly lover, surveying the cracked and creased spines of her carnal counterpart's books. 'Don't you have any respect for them?' The carnal lover, facing the bookcase of her courtly opposite number, said, 'Have you actually read any of these books? It certainly doesn't look like it.' And so they would part company, each shaking her head at the other's misguided approach to books.



The more I looked at books for traces of how they'd been read, the more evidence I found of their past adventures with other owners and readers. I started to love old books for their accumulated signs of use as much as I loved new books for their pristine sense of potential. I also realised that reading isn't the only thing we do with books, or the only thing that leaves traces on them.⁵ The travel writer and Second World War hero Patrick Leigh Fermor, for example, liked to paste envelopes into the back covers of his books, which he would fill with letters from friends, notes, newspaper clippings and other relevant scraps. He described his habit in a 1982 letter like this:

My system is to cut the flap off an envelope, then stick it with UHU [glue] inside the backboard of the book, with the now un-flapped opening facing *upwards*, but

inwards, so that the contents can't fall out. It makes the book much more interesting later on, is great fun to do and fills one with a feeling of achievement; and it is hard to imagine a more insidious and time-wasting excuse for postponing what you really ought to be doing. Start today.⁶

In this way, Leigh Fermor added interest and value to his books. Returning to the same volumes and adding more snippets to their envelopes over a number of years, he developed long-term relationships with his books that made them into a swelling archive of scraps and slips. Reading his books was only the beginning.

He wasn't the only one to turn his books into a kind of filing system, or to use them as a set of safety deposit boxes. Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, the aristocratic Sicilian author of *The Leopard* (1958), wrote a letter to his adopted son in which he identified the real-life people on whom he'd based the characters in the novel. This was in the spring of 1957, when the novel was still unpublished, and he was about to leave for Rome to be treated for the tumour on his lung that would kill him a few weeks later. His wife had picked up Lampedusa's own habit of putting important documents into books in their extensive library for safekeeping. She put his letter into a volume of *The Voyages of Captain Cook* and forgot all about it. It remained undisturbed between the pages

of the book for forty-seven years, until it was rediscovered in 2000.⁷

In both these examples, books serve purposes besides reading, even for keen readers. In other cases, reading the book may simply be beside the point. The important thing about a book might be its rarity, or the beauty of its binding, or the quality of its craftsmanship, or the identity of a former owner. The text it contains is almost irrelevant. Some people give, display, examine or appreciate books without ever reading them. I once met a rich New Yorker who collected books with fore-edge paintings – decorations along the front edges of the pages, visible only when the book is closed. She didn't even open her expensive books, let alone read them. She was quite happy to spend huge sums of money on books written in languages she couldn't understand, or on subjects she had no interest in. For her, the text on the pages was neither here nor there; the object of the book was everything.



I soon realised that, if I wanted to understand the secret life of books as things, I needed to pay attention to how books appeared in public as well as how they were used in private. Books aren't just personal possessions; they are also focal points for a number of social rituals. Holy books are the

most obvious example. In public worship, the veneration due to the scripture often overflows onto the object that contains it. Jewish tradition prescribes that the Torah used in synagogues should be a scroll, not a codex. The scroll is handled with great respect, and kept in the Ark of the synagogue. In many Christian churches, the Bible is ritually brought in and out of the church, and ceremonially read from during the service. Some Muslims believe that they should undertake a ritual cleansing before touching a copy of the Quran. The respect that believers give to the scripture is not limited to the words but extends to the books as objects, which get invested with a certain dignity of their own.

This dignity extends beyond houses of worship into other contexts. In many countries, law courts ask witnesses to swear on the Bible or some other holy book (despite occasional misgivings by Christians who recall Jesus's words in the Gospel of Matthew (5:34), 'Do not take an oath at all'). The courts invest the object of the book with a quasi-magical power to make people tell the truth: when a barrister reminds a witness that they are 'under oath', she is not just warning them that they may be guilty of perjury if they lie, but also invoking the power of a certain form of words, spoken over a book, to make them tell the truth in the first place. Notice, again, how little this has to do with actually reading the book. Every day, people who have read little or none of the Bible swear oaths on it in court.

In some ways, perhaps, these oaths would be as effective if they involved only a suitably solemn form of words. But the courts continue to bolster the words spoken by bringing out a book. If you open the book and try reading it in this situation the judge is likely to get rather grumpy. He will observe that you've missed the point. Although the oath wouldn't have quite the same gravitas if sworn on a copy of the latest John Grisham thriller, it's not the text of the book that makes the oath powerful so much as the cultural power ascribed to the book as an object. Barack Obama chose to say the oath of office at both of his inaugurations on a Bible that had belonged to Abraham Lincoln. The power of this book is twofold: the authority of the text it contains is bolstered by the volume's provenance. The US House of Representatives allows newly elected members to choose the book used to swear them in. It doesn't have to be a religious text. But there has to be a book: you can't be sworn in without one. The power of the book to signify the seriousness of the oath is more important than the contents of the book chosen.



Book signings are another important event in the social life of books. There's a long history of authors inscribing copies of their books for friends. But the modern book signing, where authors sign books for a queue of fans, is a recent

invention. Bestselling authors now sign thousands of copies, either at signing events or in advance. (I heard that Ian Rankin signed 30,000 copies of his latest novel.) I think this reveals something interesting about the life of books.

In order to grasp what's going on at a book signing, it might help to think about how looking at a painting in a gallery is different from looking at a novel in a library. When you're standing in front of a painting, you're looking at the actual object that the artist worked on — he had the same canvas in front of him in the studio, and he actually reached out his brush and made the very marks you see in the gallery. In certain circumstances, we might be happy enough to look at a reproduction, but we don't think it's interchangeable with the painting itself. The painting is the thing. The philosopher of aesthetics Nelson Goodman, whose ideas I'm borrowing here, calls painting an 'autographic' art, because the work of art is identical with the material object the artist worked on.⁸

The arts of writing don't exist in the same way. When you pick up a novel in a library — or a poem or play — you're not holding in your hand something that its creator actually touched. Where a painting is made from paint and canvas, a work of literature is made from words, which don't have a material existence of their own in the way that paint does. Our only access to a literary work is through paper and ink, but the work isn't made from those things. When you're thinking about a novel, you can draw a line between the

object (paper, ink) and the artwork (words, ideas). It doesn't make sense to do that when you're thinking about a painting. Writing has a different mode of existence from painting. Goodman calls this kind of art, which has no physical substrate, 'allographic'.

When we queue up to get our copy signed at a book-signing, I think that — on some subconscious level — we've grasped something about the ontology of the book that Goodman's distinction illuminates. The author's signature acts as a kind of guarantee that this book is his or her work. It's not that we doubt that the author wrote the words. But, when the author signs the title page, the signature, like the signature on a painting, shows that this individual claims this object as their own production. This is why authors quite often cross out the printed version of their name when they sign. Their action negates the book's existence as a product of industry or commerce and reclaims it as the product of their own artistic effort. I've come to see book signings as rituals that attempt to convert allographic artworks into autographic ones. In the process, they make buying the book feel less like buying a machine-made product and more like buying a work of art.

This feeling is intensified when the book is not just inscribed by its author but actually inscribed *to you* as an individual. Bookshops often ask authors to sign a few extra copies that they can sell after the author has gone onto the

next stop on his or her tour. But these never seem as satisfying as having the author write your name in the book as well as their own. Having a book inscribed to you – even if it's by an author that you've encountered only for a few minutes at a book-signing event – offers the comforting sense that this particular book is unlike any other copy of the same title. The book may be a mass-produced commodity, but the inscription allows you to imagine that this particular copy has been destined for you alone. You're more likely to read it attentively and keep it carefully as a result. The inscription allows us to turn a blind eye to the many other people besides the author who were involved in the production, marketing and selling of the book, as well as the many other purchasers and readers besides us who will consume it. Just for a moment, it seems less like a product and more like a gift, less like a public statement and more like a personal message. Signing the book is a way of adding value to it as an object.



Once I started to pay attention to books as objects in private and in public, I soon began to notice how many other objects we use alongside books. Books sit at the centre of a constellation of other objects, which orbit around the book like planets around the sun. Before long, I had a whole list of other items that are more or less related to books and

reading: bookmarks, bookplates, book bags, reading spectacles, reading lights, reading chairs, and many more. Many of these things exist only because of books: they've been specially designed and manufactured to be used alongside books. Others are versions of everyday objects modified or repurposed to serve readers. Think of all the things that get used as bookmarks: postcards, business cards, train tickets, boarding passes, takeaway menus. Charity-shop workers always have stories of the strange things they've found inside donated books, from antique cigarette cards to ten-pound notes. Thinking about the book as an object opens the door to a wider material culture of bookishness.

When I pick up a book to read, I find I often pick up something else as well – a bookmark, a pencil, a notepad, a cup of tea. The way that I use books is accompanied and supported by the ways in which I use other objects. There's a long history of this kind of connection between books and other things. For much of the history of the codex, its manufacturing process left the page edges on the front and top of the book as folds of paper (what bibliographers call the fore-edge and top-edge). In modern books these edges are trimmed with a mechanical guillotine to leave them smooth. In earlier ages, they might have been trimmed by bookbinders, but purchasers who wanted to read their books in wrappers, before they were bound, had to cut their way through them with knives, opening the leaves of the book

as they went. Some probably cut one fold at a time and read the pages they had exposed before cutting the next leaf. A few might have cut open all the leaves of the book before they started reading. But most probably cut a few folds, read those pages, and then cut a few more. As a result, we can see whether these readers made it all the way through the book or not. For these readers, picking up a book often meant picking up a knife too.

Most well-off readers had special paper knives for opening books, which they might also have used for letters. In some cases, however, any knife that came to hand might be pressed into service. The nineteenth-century essayist Thomas De Quincey recounts how William Wordsworth took up a volume of Edmund Burke's writings while he was having tea with De Quincey and, finding the leaves unopened, grabbed a buttery knife from the tea table and used that to cut his way into his friend's book. De Quincey claimed not to mind, but he did mention that the knife 'left its greasy honours behind it upon every page' where they were visible 'to this day'.⁹ A few years ago I bought a set of Benjamin Disraeli's novels that had obviously never been read. Although they were over seventy-five years old, the pages were unopened. I had to cut my way through them with a paper knife. In the process, I experienced a physical relationship with the book that was rather different from what I was used to, and must have been closer to that of readers in earlier centuries. When reading the

books in bed, however, I did have an unfortunate tendency to leave the knife on top of the sheets when I turned out the light. Ever since, I've associated Disraeli's novels with unpleasant nocturnal surprises.



The objects that get drawn into the book's orbit help reveal how people use books and make them part of their lives. Women readers in the past often interspersed their reading with needlework. Both were socially acceptable activities that you could do sitting down at home, and both required good light, so they were often done in the same room, and even the same chair. Women who picked up their work basket full of scraps, needles and thread with one hand must often have picked up a book with the other. And sometimes the activities of reading and sewing got stitched together. Scripture reading might supply texts to be embroidered into a sampler. And the work basket might provide tools for reading too. I recently looked at an eighteenth-century volume from the library of a Scottish country house: tucked between the pages was a pin, probably borrowed for a makeshift bookmark and forgotten. It had almost certainly been there for over two centuries, slowly rusting and leaving greenish stains on the adjacent leaves. In another volume from the same library the title page had started to fall out, and someone

had pinned it back into the book, as though it were a patch on a pair of trousers.

Using books sometimes means not only patching them up, but also pulling them apart. Although modern librarians frown on this kind of thing, scholars in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries often read with scissors or knives in hand, cutting up both manuscript and printed sources into scraps or slips and filing these slips according to categories in elaborate systems.¹⁰ Readers of all kinds used pens and ink to write in their books. Before the invention of the modern pencil and the ballpoint pen, this was a much more involved practice than it is today, requiring a bottle of ink to dip your quill in and a penknife to 'mend' the nib.¹¹ Some readers even painted marginal illustrations into their books.¹² All these examples suggest how using books is often nothing like the disembodied communion between a reader's mind and an author's that Proust described. Instead, it's a thoroughly material business, involving a variety of tools and objects.



Books have their own furniture too. Eighteenth-century gentlemen furnishing their libraries needed not only bookcases but also specially designed library chairs, tables and ladders. Lecterns made books available for reading aloud in public, for example in a lecture theatre, a church or a

monastery (where books were often read aloud during meals), and also in families where scripture reading and family prayers might be routine events. Lecterns also make it possible to read books hands-free, while doing something else. With the help of a lectern, you can read and eat at the same time, for example, or consult a cookbook while making a recipe from it. In his sixties, the poet Philip Larkin put a lectern in his bedroom with a Bible on it; he reportedly read the book while shaving, which sounds like a dangerous habit. I'm not sure whether this mode of reading influenced his conclusion that the Bible was 'absolute balls'.¹³

Some people needed more specialised equipment. The book wheel was an early modern machine that allowed its user to mount several books onto trays on a large wheel. When the wheel was turned, the trays stayed upright, like the cars on a Ferris wheel. This allowed Renaissance scholars to consult several books one after another, comparing them against each other. Like toggling between windows on a computer desktop, spinning the book wheel was designed to let readers who needed to examine several texts at once move between them with minimum fuss.

As that analogy suggests, we have our own versions of these bookish objects today. The noise-cancelling headphones worn by a twenty-first-century worker on a commuter train serve the same purpose as the wing-backed armchair sitting in a Victorian parlour. Both create a semi-permeable zone

of privacy in the middle of a space that has to be shared with other people. Both provide a kind of screen between the individual and those around them. And both, therefore, can be used to facilitate reading. Like the Victorian with his head in a book, shielded from sociability by the furniture, the modern commuter in her headphones, squinting at a novel on her phone, is making an environment that's inhospitable to reading more reader-friendly. The headphones clamped to her ears allow her to carve out time and space for reading in a busy, overstimulating environment.



My faulty copy of *Middlemarch* may not have let me finish George Eliot's novel, but it did get me thinking about books in a new way. They started to come into focus for me – as I hope they're now starting to come into focus for you – as objects in their own right, not only as containers of words. Once I started to pay attention to books as things, I realised that you couldn't talk about the book as an object without also talking about the different things that people did with books. Reading was one of those things, of course, and people's readings left their own traces on books. But reading was only one of the things that people did with books, and not always the most important. Reading is often thought of as something done in private, but books also had a public life,

and they demanded to be understood in relation to the wider world. And people used books alongside other objects, so they couldn't be understood in isolation from the rest of the material culture of bookishness. I had been taught to ignore the book itself in favour of the text it contained, but once I stopped looking through it and started looking at it, its secret life was revealed.

NOTES

- I. *The Letters of Charles Lamb*, edited by Thomas Noon Talfourd, 2 vols (London: Edward Moxon, 1837), vol. 1, p. 115.

I Book/Book

- I. The French theorist Roland Barthes called these meanings 'mythologies'; Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* [1957], translated by Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 2000).
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3. Gilbert Ryle, *Collected Essays: 1929–1968* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. xvii–xviii and 479–510.
4. There are a number of good introductions to the history of the book. See, for example, Michelle Levy and Tom Mole, *The Broadview Introduction to Book History* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2017); James Raven, *What is the History of the Book?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018) (which I have drawn on for information given here about the global spread of printing); Amaranth Borsuk, *The Book* (Boston, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2018); Keith Houston, *The Book: A Cover-to-Cover Exploration of the Most Powerful Object of Our Time* (New York: Norton, 2016); Michael F. Suarez, S. J. and H. R. Woudhuysen (eds.), *The Book: A Global History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

2 Book/Thing

- I. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), especially pp. 102–7.

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8. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 1976), especially pp. 112–26.
9. Thomas De Quincey, 'Lake Reminiscences, No. IV: William Wordsworth and Robert Southey' in Julian North (ed.), *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, vol. 11: *Articles from Tait's Magazine and Blackwood's Magazine, 1838–41* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2003), pp. 110–31 (pp. 117–18).
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12. See, for example, the one discussed by Stephen Orgel, *The Reader in the Book: A Study of Spaces and Traces* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 44.

13. Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), pp. 485–6.

3 Book/Self

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5. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated by David Constantine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 7.
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