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Building a Better Book: Book Report

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*“The book is co-created by writer and reader. The reader fills in the white spaces between the author’s words with their imagination.”* —Kate Durbin

Kate Durbin is a Los Angeles-based artist and author. She creates art with many different media, including live performance art, and one of the common themes throughout her work is popular culture. She collaborated with Amaranth Borsuk to create an experiential artist book called *ABRA: A Living Text* that’s part artist’s book, part digital media experienced through an iOS device. This work of hers perfectly captures the essence of what she’s defining a book as.

Durbin’s definition of a book requires that there be some kind of formative interaction between the writer and the reader that impacts the meaning of the book. This interaction is meant to occur so that the reader experiences the book in a way that the writer cannot necessarily control. They have the ability to point the reader in a certain direction, but the journey the reader takes is their own and is ultimately left up to chance. Since she views the book as a co-creation, that even suggests that a book isn’t a book unless it has a reader. The “white spaces” being referred to in the quote are most certainly figurative, representing the space the author leaves to the reader to find their own meaning and interpretation from what the author has left them. Durbin is tasking the reader with the job of envisioning and experiencing the world the author is creating through text for their reader, almost separating the author from the full experience of their creation if they’re not a reader as well. In a lot of Durbin’s performance art work, she’s engaging directly with an audience and receiving real-time participation from her audience, who could be called the “readers” of that performance art. Especially in *ABRA: A Living Text,* where the reader can modify the author’s poems by tapping, writing words, and using other features to completely alter the original message and create a new one, Durbin’s idea of the author and reader creating the book together is fully apparent.

In what may be the most literal possible reading of this quote, a perfect example of Durbin’s definition of a book would be Mad Libs, first published in 1958. Interestingly enough, it’s creators had a difficult time finding a publisher as the publishers “didn’t think it was a book but honestly believed it might appeal to a game manufacturer. The game manufacturer in turn thought it was a book and sent us to another book publisher, which didn’t think it was a book!” It certainly occupies space in both categories. Each Mad Libs is a story with certain words removed by the author, and the reader is tasked with blindly coming up with nouns, verbs, and adjectives to take their place. The collaboration between writer and reader is clear here. It’s worth noting that the author couldn’t be the reader of the same story in this case, due to the fact that they know the unaltered story; knowing the story and the context makes them unable to blindly participate in generating words, which would violate the rules of Mad Libs. Looking at the second part of the definition, in the case of Mad Libs the reader is literally filling in the white spaces between the author’s words with their imagination, and there’s nothing figurative about it. Because of this, Durbin would define Mad Libs as a book.

A book that would not fall under Durbin’s definition is the World Almanac. Firstly, there is no collaboration between author and reader. The World Almanac is a reference work, published yearly since 1868 except during the years 1876-1886; each year the publishers accrue all the relevant information for each subject included in the almanac, update the antiquated information when they see fit, and release that year’s World Almanac. The experience of reading a given almanac will remain constant. This would not be the case if the readers were polled for what information they would have liked to have included in the book for example, which I could then describe as collaborative. For this to be plausible, most likely the almanac would have to be more localized, for example a small town instead of the entire world. This book also does not fit the second part of Durbin’s definition. The author does not leave the reader any space for interpretation or imagination. There is nothing for the reader to interpret. The book is filled with facts that do not need to be read for a second meaning. There is nothing that the reader needs to imagine; the author is not creating some fantasy world or using any kind of imagery or literary devices to inspire imagination in the reader, they’re simply presenting history as it is. Given this, it’s safe to say that the World Almanac wouldn’t meet Durbin’s definition of a book.

I would argue that most works of fiction fall under Durbin’s definition of a book. Knowing that she was speaking figuratively and applying the second part of the definition figuratively, the reader’s job is to experience the book in the space of everything the author doesn’t or can’t say. Fiction, unlike nonfiction, does not have to be based from reality, meaning that readers almost certainly need to use their imagination, and therefore fictional books would meet Durbin’s definition. Even though there exists escape fiction, whose purpose is to entertain readers and not necessarily make them interpret any greater truths, the reader still must use their imagination to experience and fully enjoy the world the author has created, which is included in the book definition. In nonfiction, memory and rationalization are more readily employed than imagination; in a text about changing a car tire, you don’t need to imagine it, you can just do it. On top of that, what the author is saying is meant to be taken literally, and not treated like a figure of speech for the reader to interpret. An excellent example of a fictional novel that captures Durbin’s definition is called *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr. He writes in 3rd person about a blind girl named Marie-Laure in Paris during WWII, describing the town she’s grown up in as well as all of her surrounding through touch, hearing, smell, and taste. Given this, the reader has to imagine what Marie-Laure’s world looks like in the same way she does. This work of fiction, as well as any other works absent of strictly literal thoughts would fit Durbin’s definition of a book.

If an author is being precise and unambiguous, that leaves little room for interpretation or imagination. A book like this that does not meet Durbin’s definition of a book is *The Art of Home Candy Making.* This book, written and published by The Home Candy Makers, is a recipe book describing precisely how to make various candy recipes with the exact degree measurements they must be cooked to. Strictly reading the book, there are two issues with it as it pertains to the book definition. First, there is no collaborative creation between reader and writer. The writer has written recipe’s steps, and the reader is simply reading them. Second, the steps to follow are exact and explicit. There is no room for interpreting between the author’s words as they are strict. Deviating from the author’s recipe is not something that the author intended, and not something that would lead to the ideal outcome. However, I propose that by cooking a recipe alongside the recipe book, that collaborative experience between the reader of the text and the author would mean that it would fall under Durbin’s definition of a book. In this case, there is a co-creation aspect and the “white space” being filled with imagination is physical space where the recipe is being made in reality, executing on the author’s vision.

Another example of a book that does fit in Durbin’s definition is the I Ching. The I Ching is an ancient Chinese divination text consisting of 64 hexagrams created during the late 9th century BC. Divination was used to first produce numbers corresponding to symbols in the I Ching, which were then read and interpreted. This means that each reading of this book could produce a different interpretation. The reader is literally reading between the lines. The “white space” in this case is the room for the reader’s interpretation of the book; the author left it up to the reader to determine whether or not their reading means anything to them. The reader could decide it’s circumstantial and arbitrary like a daily horoscope, or choose to interpret immense meaning such as divine intervention. The author is not telling the reader what to think, what to read, or what to take with them from reading the I Ching; instead, the reader is coming up with meaning independently yet based on the initial material the author provided through semi-random encounters. For these reasons, the I Ching is an excellent example of Durbin’s definition of a book.

In film, the director could be considered the writer while the audience viewing the film could be considered the readers. Documentaries are a part of this category. According to Durbin’s book definition, a documentary would not be considered a book. Firstly, I consider documentaries to be like nonfiction books; they’re focused on facts, truth, reality, and their goal is to document it at the current moment in time. One such example of a documentary that would not be a book under this definition is the film *Paris is Burning (1990)*, which paints a fierce portrait of ballroom culture in New York during the 80’s as well as the lives of the film subjects. The author (director) of this documentary had only the film’s subjects talking, about their culture and their lives outside ballroom; thus, his thoughts and words were not the ones leading the documentary. He was there to capture the words and thoughts of his subjects, to steer the overall direction of the film but not the individuals. I wouldn’t say that this book was created with author and reader, but rather author and film subjects; it was their conversations that created this book, and we, the readers, are spectators. Therefore, there is a lack of co-creation between reader and writer. The reader also doesn’t have to imagine what the author was trying to say with the space between words. The film subjects are portraying their authentic selves, not some character in a book that the author has created to drive the plot. The viewers of the film simply have to absorb what they see and take it in at face value, which is why *Paris is Burning* would not be considered a book using Durbin’s definition of a book.

Through studying Kate Durbin’s quote and analyzing it to find books that both support and reject her definition, it’s become clear that her definition can’t possibly encapsulate everything that a book can be. She places an emphasis on the interactive nature of books and the relationship between author and reader, even though some books are static and the intimacy between author and reader is nonexistent. It captures the modern and abstract, much like her art style, while failing to account for certain kinds of legacy books. Looking through other artist’s definitions, I chose a quote that not only captured the parts that were important to Durbin, but tried to capture books that her definition left out. The quote I’ve gravitated towards after completing this research is by Gita Manaktala:

“A book is a place for ideas that need to survive and thrive, a mansion of the mind. It makes room for the stories, arguments, and images that deserve to change the world, now and in the future. The publication of a book marks the birth of something utterly original and distinct, but with deep connections to existing knowledge. Books often begin with thanks to those who have sacrificed on their behalf. Books ask a lot of their readers, too. They require our sustained time and attention. In return, the book communicates, entertains, generates, teaches, preserves, and advances knowledge. It focuses the mind. It changes the world by changing what we know.” —Gita Manaktala

The first thing I noticed about Manaktala’s quote was that it puts an emphasis on knowledge, which Durbin’s quote didn’t do. Rather than the reader simply using imagination while reading and interpreting a book, in exchange for paying close attention to it a book “entertains, generates, teaches, preserves, and advances knowledge” for the reader. A book absolutely should be able to do this, and it encompasses a lot more than having a reader paint their own picture of what the author is saying. Immediately we can see that the counterexamples we used before would be considered books under this new definition. Another thing Durbin’s definition fails to adequately do is separate reader from writer. Instead they’re treated as two halves of a puzzle, one needing the other to be complete, whereas Manaktala recognizes the book upon its publication independent of a reader. Manaktala’s quote also recognizes that a book is unique but derived from existing knowledge, thus building upon everything that has come before it. Now when a reader makes inferences or uses their imagination, Manaktala would say that inference and imagination comes from previous knowledge and experience.

Looking at both quotes and all of the different examples of books I found during the course of this research, it’s clear that books are both a conversation between writer and reader as well as a vessel for knowledge to be recorded and build upon. A book can be interactive and though provoking but it should also be able to stand on its own, saying everything it intended to say if that’s what the author intended. The quote that I’ve arrived at after this process is:

“A book is a conversation between author and reader, with the author occasionally leaving the reader to answer their own questions. A book should capture reality or imagination or both. Reading a book transfers its essence into the mind of the reader, a flower whose seeds are carried off and sprout through the ideas that the reader has.”

The idea that a book is a conversation captures the concept of interaction between reader and writer. There could be actual back and forth, but just as well the reader could interact with the book on their own as the author intended. This interaction could be physical or mental, as long as it’s in response to the source material. Since imagination is often separate from realism and reality, I included the second sentence in my definition to account for books that leave no room for interpretation. While the majority of books invite the reader to form their own thoughts and opinions about the content, there are those that are strict and absolute in terms of what they say. The last part of my quote deals with the passing on of knowledge and ideas and how all books share ancestry in some sense. For the author, their book must be influenced by the culmination of knowledge they have, and that knowledge was most likely obtained by a lifetime of experiences and learning from books. The reader then possesses that knowledge which influences their thoughts. All of the examples and counterexamples noted above would be validated as books by my definition as well. I chose my definition to focus on the effect of a book and the content it contains, rather than its form. Through this exploration, I’ve learned that a book can be interpreted in many different ways, sometimes those interpretations conflict with each other under the context of someone’s definition of a book. Ultimately, a book is a tool of infinite configurations, with authors choosing the form that resonates most with them to share information.

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