

traverse...” (231) and “Suspicion of neoliberal economics and ideologies (governing the policies of austerity) increasingly overhang Irish cultural life of the post-Tiger period...” (233). This is not just grammatical nit-picking. Under the cover of sloppy language dodgy reasoning can slip by. The sentence just quoted continues: “as an energized and popular feminist and queer activism, both on the streets and online, calls for change, responding both to the harshness of the neoliberal landscapes of austerity and the far-right ideological apparatus that police, control, and minoritize bodies. The intensity of this visibility is evident for example in the well populated marches and vigils organized after Savita Halappanavar’s death...” (233). Wait—what visibility? And what exactly is the connection between neoliberalism and the death of Savita Halappanavar?

There is an air of desperation in some of the weaker chapters—there are another two or three that I do not have space to deal with—as if their authors thought bandying around human rights issues and precarity was necessary to remain relevant. Maybe they are right: the editors admit that after the mid 1990s “academic culture at large relegated Ireland to the aggregate of white Western European cultures that had long had more than their fair share of scholarly attention...” (8) so something must be done to justify all these Irish Studies courses and departments. Perhaps if scholars paid more attention to biopolitics, lived experience, and intersectionality in *Táin Bó Cuailnge* universities would endow more chairs of Old Irish.

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Jessica Pressman, *Bookishness. Loving books in a digital age*. Columbia University Press, 2020. ISBN: 978-0-231-19513-3. E-book.

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The rapid development of new, digital media at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries brought about multiple prophecies of the imminent disappearance of the book and all the values it represented, soon to be replaced by new, hypertextual forms of communication and literary expression. As early

as 1994 Sven Birkerts published *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*, deploring the detrimental effect of the computer on literary culture and deep, focused reading that only books could foster. By 2008 Jeff Gomez boldly argued that the fate of books had been sealed in *The Print is Dead: Books in Our Digital Age*. And yet, just as in the case of Mark Twain, a prolific author and a voracious reader of books, the reports of their death have been greatly exaggerated. They are far from gone, though admittedly their position and function are changing. Jessica Pressman's monograph is a timely, lucid and thought-provoking investigation of the diverse ways in which contemporary culture engages with the book, understood as both a vehicle for a verbal message and an artifact in its own right.

Introduced in the very title of the book, the key concept of bookishness denotes "a complex constellation of technological, social, aesthetic, and affective forces that converge to present the book as aesthetic artifact par excellence for our digital culture." To put it in simpler terms, Pressman's aim is to investigate "how and why we continue to love books in a digital age." She does so by exploring an impressive array of examples, which range from book-themed bed covers and flamboyant *Pride and Prejudice* leggings through stop-motion YouTube films and books for children to avant-garde literary texts and book-centred artistic objects, felicitously named by Garrett Stewart bookworks. In closing the gap between popular culture and high art, analyses of individual texts and general observations, Pressman offers a much-needed broad perspective, in which close reading, book history, comparative media studies and sociology of literature are skillfully and convincingly combined to shed light on the ubiquity of bookishness in our digital era. This comprehensiveness sets her monograph apart from earlier, more specialised enquiries into semiotics of book as object/content/idea/interface, multimodality of typographically innovative contemporary fiction, the interplay between print literature and digitalisation or the impact of the new media on the production, distribution and consumption of literature, conducted respectively by Amaranth Borsuk, Alison Gibbons, Alexander Starre and Simone Murray.

Even more significant is the fact that Pressman transcends the book-screen binary and goes beyond the deceptively simple linear logic of progression. As she cogently demonstrates, books have not been so much replaced as supplemented by digital media and the values and functions currently attributed to them reflect the central role they have played for centuries. Not only do new media remediate and reference books in multiple ways, from the bookshelf interface of the iBooks application to the codex-like design of stand-alone

e-readers, but both the semiotics and the economy of contemporary book culture incorporate elements of digital textuality. Suffice it to mention hypertextual composition of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* or brick-and-mortar bookstores displaying books with their covers rather than spines in their windows. Such complex loops of recursive influence, Pressman argues, indicate that the book should not be regarded in isolation as just a simple vehicle for a verbal meaning but rather as a node in a complex network of relations between print culture and digital media, personal identity and consumer capitalism, avant-garde experimentalism and popular fiction. Contrary to the belief still held by many journalists and educators alike, books and screens are not so much natural enemies as symbionts, completing each other in multiple ways. Some of the most fascinating sections of *Bookishness* are devoted to transmedial, augmented-reality projects which make this symbiosis a central element of their artistic strategy: *Between Page and Screen* by Amaranth Borsuk and Brad Bous and *The Ice-Bound Concordance* by Aaron Reed and Jacob Garbe, both of which require the simultaneous use of a book and a computer.

As Pressman rightly points out in the chapter opening her monograph, modern anxiety over the presumed decline of books and reading in general stems from the deeply-rooted connection between the book and power, social class and identity, which is undergoing a far-reaching modification in a digital age. On the one hand, books remain potent means of self-fashioning, as attested by the popularity of "shelfies," digital self-portraits in front of one's bookshelves. On the other, the proliferation of digital media and non-fictional reading materials requires a new understanding of full-fledged literacy, which can no longer be associated with reading print novels, a class-bound leisurely activity.

Well-argued and informative as Pressman's dismantling of a complex net of associations, stereotypes and judgments underlying the 21st-century emergence of bookishness as a response to the rhetoric about the death of the book and the threat of the digital is, it would be even more convincing if it had been situated in a broader historical perspective, going beyond merely occasional references to history of (our evolving attitude to) the book. It could well be argued that bookishness as an aesthetic category is transhistorical and its applicability cannot be reduced to the tendency observable in the current, digital era. Ever since the creation of the first, ancient Greek shaped poems, foregrounding of textual materiality has constituted one of many strands within literary history, with Renaissance *incunabula* matching contemporary bookish novels in sheer typographic inventiveness, which indicates that the emergence of a new medium is, understandably, as conducive to feats of inventiveness as its (presumed) demise.

Much more recently, such postmodern writers as B. S. Johnson and Raymond Federman exploited the technological fact of the book for artistic purposes to demonstrate its uniqueness *vis-à-vis* the audiovisual storytelling media of cinema and television. Not only does Pressman omit them in her genealogy of bookishness but she also, following Kathleen Fitzpatrick, somewhat perfunctorily rejects postmodern experimentation in the subsequent chapter as an expression of white writers' fear of multiculturalism and feminism transformed into technophobia. This dismissive gesture does not really do justice to postmodern contribution to the development of book-centred aesthetics. Construed in diachronic terms, it paved the way for 21st-century bookishness, which intensifies earlier print traditions in response to the preponderance of digital media, as noted by N. Katherine Hayles in her discussion of the relationship between the print novel and electronic literature (Hayles 162).

In her predominantly synchronic approach Pressman devotes the bulk of her monograph to five figures pinpointing the major ways in which books are perceived in contemporary culture—shelter, thing, fake, weapon and memorial—and discusses each of them in a separate chapter. The concept of book as shelter grows out of the fears she has exposed in the preceding section. To demonstrate its significance for our understanding of books, Pressman adduces a number of novels which share the central trope of a book as an allegorical haven from the digital world, despite representing such divergent genres and conventions as a mystery novel (*The Keep* by Jennifer Egan), a 9/11 novel (*Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer) and children's picture book (*The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore* by William Joyce). Apart from Foer's book, all the works discussed in this section are fairly traditional in form and represent the book as a site for recovery on the thematic and/or figurative level, which gesture Pressman relates to the association between the possession/consumption of books and the privileged position in the society.

Much more inventive and varied are examples she explores in the subsequent chapter within a theoretical framework deftly combining multifaceted conceptions of fetishism with recent developments in new materialism. A remedy to the presumed immateriality of the digital, the book as thing acquires a special value in the modern world of floating signifiers. Pressman traces engagement with the irreducible thingness of book in a contemporary incarnation of it-narrative, Carlos María Domínguez's novel *The House of Paper*, in which the book becomes the central character; Borsuk and Bous's above-mentioned transmedial project, in which the book as object, personified on the diegetic level, must be placed by the reader in a digital circuit for a literary performance to be produced; the

stop-motion YouTube film *The Joy of Books*, apparently giving life to inanimate books, and Leanne Shapton's novel in the form of an auction catalogue *Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion, and Jewelry*, which figures the book as a souvenir of emotional and cultural value. Taken together, these carefully selected instances of object-oriented bookishness on the one hand disclose the ways in which the book can enter a symbiotic relation with electronic media and become the hub of social network and on the other demonstrate attachment and intimacy its tactility induces and channels.

Much as our current digital condition throws into sharp relief the uniqueness of the book as object, it also fosters simulated bookishness. It is therefore only logical that Pressman devotes the next chapter to bookish fakes, "understanding 'fake' to designate both the digitized image of a book and the physical artifact of the codex released from its readerly functions." With book-related metaphors permeating the graphic interface and the modes of data organisation of electronic devices, bookishness as a familiar point of reference has, Pressman suggests, enabled the digital in the first place. The popularity of blook, objects imitating the material books—be they a condiment set in the shape of a book rack, a stack of dummy books to be used as home décor or a pair of *Pride and Prejudice* leggings—reflects in turn the ongoing attachment to books as markers of a social status or a personal identity. Pressman recognizes their kitschy quality but cogently demonstrates that they can be read as tongue-in-cheek proclamations of love for books, generating affective associations and a sense of community. These highly pertinent reflections on "blookishness" in contemporary consumer culture are juxtaposed in the final part of this chapter with two artistic projects that have a fake book at their core: *S.* by J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst and the above-mentioned *The Ice-Bound Concordance* by Reed and Garbe. The former simulates an old, battered library book with all the appropriate trappings, including not only stamps but also margin notes in two different handwritings. An epitome of nostalgia for the times when the physicality of the book turned reading into an embodied, tactile and even olfactory experience, *S.* self-consciously explores and exploits multiple modes of fakery and imitation. Pressman judiciously notices that most reviewers praise its affective materiality while disregarding its textual content, which in her reading becomes yet another fake element, "an imitation of a novel with complex ideas," *S.* ultimately falling into the aesthetic category of "interesting." By situating Abrams and Dorst's project within the context of distinctly modern response to novelty, she reveals the degree to which the contemporary literary sphere

has been subjected to mechanisms of media frenzy, favouring form over substance. Not incidentally, *The Ice-Bound Concordance*, the transmedial project Pressman reads alongside *S.*, pairs a highly bookish fake scrapbook with a digital application, supposedly housing Artificial Intelligence designed to finish a science-fiction novel by a dead human author, and thus throws into sharp relief the interpenetration and interdependence of the bookish and the digital.

In order to counterbalance the impression the reader might get that bookishness predominantly ties in with kitschy commodities and merely “interesting” artifacts, Pressman turns in the subsequent chapter to close reading of two avant-garde novels that construe their unique material form as a weapon against supposedly disembodied digital data: Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* and Steven Hall’s *The Raw Shark Texts*. Her interpretation of the former, which has already earned its place in the twenty-first-century literary canon, updates her original reading of the novel as a cutting-edge transmedial, networked project by foregrounding the ways in which it “allegorises fears of the digital and the power of paper-filled books to safeguard against changing times.” *The Raw Shark Texts*, in turn, employs its own material form to denounce the central myth of transcendental digital data and to celebrate the power of book-bound literature to present information in complex, figurative ways that resist algorithmic reading. Formally and conceptually innovative, these two works play a crucial role in Pressman’s line of argumentation, for they demonstrate the unique semiotic potential of the book, including its ability to mimic other media and its resistance to remediation into electronic formats. By establishing aesthetics of bookishness at the beginning of the twenty-first century they challenged the idea that digitality could simply supersede print.

While both Danielewski and Hall seek to forge the place for the book in the digital future, Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Tree of Codes*, the central subject of Pressman’s final chapter, looks to the past and thus embodies in literal and figurative senses the memorializing potential of bookishness. A unique sculptural object with each recto page combining fragments of text with individually arranged rectangular die-cuts, the book is Foer’s homage to Bruno Schulz’s collection of stories, *The Street of Crocodiles*. Its perforated pages become for Pressman a material representation of loss, a memorial not only to Schulz and the Holocaust but also to the 20th-century book culture, bearing a striking similarity to three-dimensional artistic objects using books as their material. Far from blindly celebratory, her astute analysis discloses ambiguities and blind spots in Foer’s (self-)fashioning of its bookish status. His description of the creative process as carving out the text from the original in a highly intimate,

analogue manner does not reflect the actual process of production, which involved the use of die-cutting machines, controlled by digital technology. Furthermore, the text he was working on with the help of these machines was not any existing edition of Schulz's original text, which for one thing was in Polish and for another was printed on both sides of the page, as happens in practically all books. As Pressman points out, Foer and his design-team worked on the English translation (so the credit for the beautiful language of *Street of Crocodiles* he so much admires should at least to some extent go to the translator), which they adjusted to a single-sided display. Ultimately, *Tree of Codes* paradoxically came into being as a unique bookish fetish artifact thanks to digital technology, which enabled the extensive use of die cutting.

Throughout her book Pressman attends with a keen eye to material actualities, social contexts and semiotic complexities of manifold manifestations of bookishness in contemporary culture, moving with ease and grace between broad strokes and detailed analyses, literary avant-garde and popular culture, the political and the personal. The incisiveness and critical insight with which she disentangles these complex networks of relations are models of academic rigour, though one cannot but notice that her discussion of relation between fakery and the digital suffers at points from over-generalisation. New media theorists and practitioners alike would probably flinch at her Platonic description of the link between the preponderance of literary fakes and the digital: "One reason that the contemporary literary abounds with fakes is because the digital operates through fakery—through imitation of a real and originary." This is naturally but a minor quibble. An engaging critical intervention into the present, Pressman's study offers a lucid overview of the state of the book as an object and of book-bound literature in contemporary culture.

What makes her monograph even more compelling is her effortless merging of the academic discourse with the account of her own academic and personal engagement with books and fellow book-lovers. Having identified attachment as the most important affective facet of bookishness, her own book practises what it preaches. Pressman clearly loves all things bookish and her passion for the subject shows through and through. So does her passion for sharing this passion. She writes in a vivid and accessible style, free from over-theoretical jargon. Consequently, her book achieves a rare feat in that it will appeal in equal measure to scholars and lay readers interested in finding out why the book still matters in our digital age.

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