



Interview with Amaranth Borsuk

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KENNEALLY: Considered from the perspective of technology, a book is an interface, a device for communication. A book is a form factor, too, a physical and metaphorical container, suitable for holding any imaginable human expression.

Welcome Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series, I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book.

What is a book? For centuries, books have existed in a form that has come to be universally recognized. Few of us ever bothered to give the book, either as object or idea, very much thought, any more than we might ask what is a chair? The answer just seems so obvious. Poet, scholar, and book artist Amaranth Borsuk has taken up the challenge and begun a thoughtful interrogation of the book as object and idea. Her work focuses on what she calls textual materiality, the surface of the page as well as the surface of language. Her latest book, *The Book* from MIT Press, raises the question, what is the book? What is a book?

An Assistant Professor in the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences at the University of Washington Bothell, Amaranth Borsuk joins me now. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Amaranth.

BORSUK: Hi, Chris, thanks so much for having me.

KENNEALLY: We're delighted to speak with you because this is a fascinating subject and one very appropriate to our own time when the notion of the book is really undertaking scrutiny. You illuminate for us the book as object, the book as content, the book as idea, and the book as interface. I want to go through those individually because they really are important to the argument you're making here. So take up, then, this notion of the book as object and how we have come to think of the book almost in a way that we take for granted.

BORSUK: Yeah, I think that's absolutely the right way to put it, that we have taken for granted the fact that the book is an object, so that when we hear the word book, the object that we are all picturing, we imagine it to be universal. It's a stack of pages



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that has been bound along one edge and enclosed between covers. We can picture that on our bookshelves, we can picture it on bookstore shelves when we go into physical brick and mortar bookstore, those of us who still do. We have this object that has been so much a part of our lives that it seems to be the only thing that could answer to the name of book.

But if you look at the history of how information has been distributed in different portable forms, there have been myriad other shapes the book has taken over time, and our weddedness to that one form is actually a form that arises after about 2000 of text proliferating in other media. So that shape, which is known as the codex to book artists and scholars of book history, is only one of many.

I wanted to use the opening chapter of the book to acquaint readers with a deeper history of different material shapes books have taken over time. That shape is so influenced by the different cultures and regions in which it arises, not just because different cultures have different languages or different needs, but because they have access to different materials and proficiency with different materials which then dictate the form that takes. So if we don't think of them as books, we're losing out on a way of considering what a book can be and can do in the 21st century as it continues to shape shift for us.

KENNEALLY: One of the things I really appreciated in your book, there in that section on the book as object, was that you made us realize that this is about much more than Gutenberg and the press because of the evolution from the clay tablets in Mesopotamia, you go on to papyrus, you include the way that text evolved in the Islamic world when the rest of Europe would have been in what they now no longer call the Dark Ages. It's been a global history, and of course, paper, as technology, was invented in China. So that's really fascinating to me that it's a multicultural, multisocial object, as well.

BORSUK: Yeah, that's very true. The book, as we know it, required the confluence of a number of different technologies, each of them arising in a different and for different reasons. That question of the book's changing material form, really the reason that I wanted to address it was that we're living in a moment right now where people are constantly bemoaning the potential death of the book because of e-books and electronic literature. It seemed important to me to recognize that the book has been perpetually dying, but the sense that the book is something that's going to disappear is a concern that people have had since the beginning of recorded language.



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If we allow ourselves to look at, say, a clay tablet, to use one of the examples that you brought up, and think of that as a kind of a book, we can see that there is always going to always be this shape shifting that happens within the book, and multiple formats of the book can coexist side by side happily for millennia. So you get clay tablets in ancient Mesopotamia right around 2000 BCE, let's say, and they are made from clay that's scooped from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. There's a confluence of these rivers giving Mesopotamia its name and giving the people who live there access to this rich, renewable resource that they used in all of their crafts, they used it in architecture.

Since clay was the material they knew so well, it makes perfect sense that that would be the material they choose to record their first text, as they need more records and the administrative bookkeeping kind of recording. A handful of clay gets scooped up by a scribe and pressed into the palm so that it's slightly convex on one side and flatter on the other. Then a reed, also plucked from the same shore, can be used to create impressions in that clay for the earliest recorded language, cuneiform. Cuneiform gets its name from cuneus, or the act of impressing the corner of that stylus into the clay. That clay tablet – we might imagine clay tablets as Moses carry these giant Charlton Heston clay tablets, but actual cuneiform tablets are quite small, more like the size of a cell phone these days. Their affordances, so to speak, are that because they're so portable and because they're so stable – they're made out of clay, they're quite solid – they had good lasting power which means that people who were saving those alongside, say, scrolls, around the same time, many of the scrolls are in far worse shape than the clay tablets we have from that period. So they're forms that were being used simultaneously, and yet they have such different material qualities.

KENNEALLY: What's interesting is the way that the form of the book, as it has changed over time, has also led to changes in reading and in writing. That's an important point. You mentioned this fear of the book, that it may die or that new forms may lead to some kind of corruption of thinking. This goes back to Socrates who was not a fan of writing, as it turns out.

BORSUK: That's right. Socrates feared that the written word would destroy the art of rhetoric, which involved dialogue and debates and involved a thinker being able to represent their ideas to others. The rhetorical process was what he believed made ideas strong, polished them to a sheen through back and forth. He felt that if a text were allowed to circulate without its author, it would be misinterpreted, and it would be basically subject to destruction by others. It wouldn't have that great back and forth.



But, in fact, it turns out the opposite is true. When you let texts circulate in written form, we have the Islamic world to thank for the replenishment of our stores of ancient texts which were translated. When you let texts circulate, that's actually how ideas flourish because people in vastly distant places from one another can begin to have a dialogue via writing. I appreciate the fact that it almost seemed at that moment that one technology was going to give way to another, but, in fact, the rhetorical arts themselves flourished, in part of because of the possibility of writing them down.

KENNEALLY: And another moment in history when communication really stepped up to a new level was, of course, the invention of the printing press. One of the things about that was that it changed the size of the book. You mentioned this parallel between the clay tablet in one's hand and the cell phone we carry today. But what is interesting is that the printed books, over time, grew smaller, grew more intimate. The language changed, too. It moved from Latin to vernacular in the European context. Talk about that change, as well, how books have become something very personal for us.

BORSUK: Yeah, that's really true. I should say that there's a kind of intermediate stage – obviously there are many intermediate steps between the cuneiform tablet and the codex paperback book that we all know and cherish. They include a lot of different sizes of books. The size is very much dependent upon the needs of the reader of that book.

So an important in-between stage between the printed book, say, Gutenberg, like you mentioned, and the clay tablet would be just manuscript culture and medieval monks copying out manuscripts of religious texts and songs using these beautiful large volumes that were large because they were intended to be consulted in a performative fashion, performing church services, needing to have a very large and showy beautiful text that was visible from the altar, so to speak. In those times readership was small. The number of literate people was rather small, and the number of people who could afford to purchase a manuscript book was also exceedingly small. Because they were these hand-produced artifacts that required scores of monks in a monastery working in the scriptorium, some actually doing the calligraphy, some illuminating the text by painting illustrations, some working on the binding, that became a costly endeavor. So only a few people could afford to own and read books at that time, and they largely stayed within the monasteries that produced them.

But as both readership increases with the rise of universities, and as the technology for producing books, as you mentioned, facilitates creating larger numbers and



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smaller books, you get a kind of intimate readership arising that needs books in a different way than that performative way, that needs books that you can take with you when you're traveling or that you can consult and cross reference if you're a scholar who wants to be able to critique another scholar's argument. So the book gets smaller, both because of the needs of readers and because of the technologies that makes books possible.

KENNEALLY: The point where your book takes a fascinating turn is when you look at the book as idea, you go from a history that you're just enumerated some of the high points for us to looking at the book as an artist, the way that an artist does, and showing us what artists have to teach us about the future direction of books. It's working with the book, working against it, too.

BORSUK: That's right, yeah. So that's the third section of the book where we talk about the book as an idea. It's an important moment when the printing press arises and it's possible to reproduce books en masse, but one of the downsides to that process is that the body of the book, that physical artifact no longer carries much weight for readers. Paper gets cheaper and cheaper in the Victorian period, and books actually get sold with advertisements, whatever they can do to make the book as cheap a commodity as possible. The body of the codex stops being important to people, and it's just the content that becomes important. That becomes the copyrightable aspect of the book and the valued and cherished part of the book. In fact, the process of writing and the process of making a book are separated from one another.

So in the 20th century you get a number of artists all over the world, basically, in a number of different fields who become interested in making books and the process of making a book as a reaction against its turning into content, so to speak. They want to think about what even is a book, anymore, when we have these cheap paperbacks that are being mass produced? How do we conceptualize what a book can be?

It was a really fun chapter to write, looking at people from as early as William Blake, who you mentioned, an artist who pioneered printing image and text simultaneously to mid-20th century artists who did experiments like creating a book that you can walk through and books that function in ways that feel much more like interactive and nonlinear experimental approaches to the text, a book that's, say, cut into pieces and you can turn each page one fragment of a page at a time. All of those experiments are limit cases for what a book might be, and they allow us to think about what a book's various functions are.



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The book actually has a number of functions that are highly digital. The book as a nonlinear space – we think about nonlinear narrative as something that electronic media offers us, the ability to go anywhere within a text. The Internet as one big text where you click a hyperlink and it takes you somewhere new. But that capacity for nonlinear reading is inherent in the codex form, too. A work like Raymond Queneau's *A Hundred Thousand Million (sic) Poems*, where he's written 10 sonnets and sliced between every line, allowing us to read a hundred thousand million (sic) sonnets just by turning one line at a time shows us another model for digital qualities within the print format.

So I had a lot of fun in that chapter looking at interactive approaches to the book, and experimental approaches to the physical book.

KENNEALLY: And your concluding section is the book is interfaced, that interface where we encounter all of these ideas and you ask about making that interface visible or invisible to readers. But you conclude, I think, that the advantage of the book and why it likely has a future is that it's a slippery term. It's a very malleable notion, and this is its great strength.

BORSUK: Yeah, it's funny when we talk about a book, we can be talking about an object or content at the same time. That slipperiness – if I say have you read *Middlemarch*, you're not necessarily picturing a physical artifact, you're picturing the content of *Middlemarch*, the idea of *Middlemarch* – that very slipperiness is actually a positive thing because it then lets us think about e-books as another form of book. It lets us imagine potential futures for the book that involve different physical formats than the one that we're so used to and so acclimated to.

Also I think if we start to see the codex book again, and we start to recognize it on our bookshelves and not take it for granted, we can appreciate that it is one of many potential forms for the book, and it's necessary for it to take a shape that brings it into our hands and into contact with our bodies. How those bodies traverse space and what those bodies need is obviously going to change over time, too.

KENNEALLY: So where we end, then, Amaranth Borsuk, is this notion that what is beyond the book is still the book. As not only a historian but a poet and a book artist, yourself, what does that mean? Where do you want to take the book next yourself? ~~Where do you want to take the book next yourself?~~

BORSUK: Oh, those are two, actually – I feel like there are two important questions there. I do agree with Edmond Jabès, who has the last quotation in the book, which is filled with different definitions of the book from thinkers, writers, and artists. I



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do agree that what is beyond the book is still the book, meaning that the book is something that exists in perpetuity and that our relationship to it will continue to change and shape shift as the book itself changes and shape shifts.

In my own creative practice, I'm interested in exploring embodied interaction with book forms and what kind of reading experiences can be created that remind the reader of their own body, that in fact the book as a body that is scaled to the human body, and that different bodies encounter books in different ways, based on their ability, based upon their wreaths, (sp?) based upon however they're situated in the world.

So I've, as an artist, created a number of collaborative projects that are experimental books using technologies like augmented reality, where the reader has a book of poems they can't actually read until they open it up in front of a webcam, and then the poems appear in 3D space, or books that are created for iPad that are remixable and that are changing and mutating on their own as soon as the reader opens up the text. I'm interested in experiments like that that allow us to revisit books through the lens of our own body and see that any book fundamentally takes shape in the hands and in the mind of a reader, that books are not created by authors. In fact they're this interesting performative experience that happens when the reader steps into the picture. That's what I'll be exploring or continuing to explore in my body of work

KENNEALLY: We look forward to following you in that exploration, and indeed, anyone who says they love books and loves reading really should love, as well, this book, *The Book*, for its way of showing us how the book has become so important to everyone's lives. We've been speaking today with Amaranth Borsuk, author of *The Book* from MIT Press. Amaranth Borsuk, thank you so much for joining us on *Beyond the Book*.

BORSUK: Chris, thanks so much me on, it's been a pleasure.

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