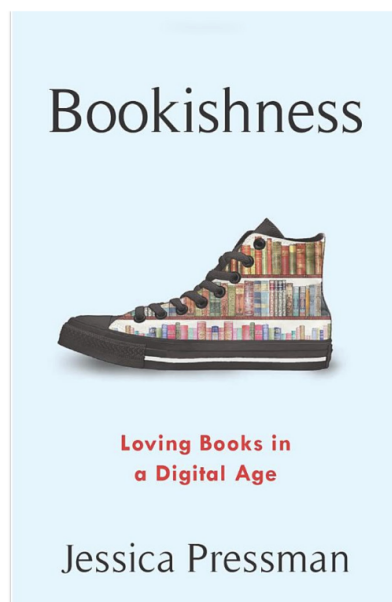


## Bookishness: Loving Books in a Digital Age

by Jessica Pressman

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Reviewed by Peter O'Brien



**THIS BOOK HAS ENOUGH** bookish meandering to be both insightful and frustrating. To begin with, I'm not really sure what Jessica Pressman, a professor of English at San Diego State University, means by the words "loving," "books," and "digital" in her subtitle.

She is, at least, clear about what "bookishness" means to her. She calls it a "twenty-first century phenomenon" which involves "creative acts that engage the physicality of the book within a digital culture, in modes that may be sentimental, fetishistic, radical." That word "fetish" is woven throughout this book, from the first page to the last. Now I'm as fetishistic as the next person, but I couldn't dissociate the word "atavistic" (my word) from her invocation of "fetishistic." Although Pressman does take a brief look at a few pathways of the digital, her observations border on the confectionary, as in: If people put all their books on a Kindle, then how can we judge and form snap opinions of them?; and are "shelfies" (self-portraits with bookshelves) really just about posturing and yet more judging? Pressman doesn't really explore the digital in any significant way, and this book borders on the nostalgic, on longing; or, to use a word beloved by Pressman, this book is a 216-page "memorial."

Meant for an educated and inquisitive general audience, *Bookishness* explores a wide range of aesthetic and linguistic efforts, including wallpaper, sticky notes, and cell-phone covers, as well as more arcane and intellectual efforts, including a detailed discussion of *Tree of Codes* by Jonathan Safran Foer (a reconstruction, reconfiguring, and reimagining of *The Street of Crocodiles* by Bruno Schulz) and of *Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion, and Jewelry* by Leanne Shapton (a bittersweet auction catalog / graphic novel that connects relationships with consumption and loss).

I found some of Pressman's commentary pointed and compelling. Talking about her personal library, she says she feels "that realness deep in my bones, underneath the point of criticism." She talks about how "the thingness of books" allows "a display of a person's learning, aspirations, and attachments—and so books are also a source of anxiety. . . . As a professional reader, books can be nasty things. They tease, taunt, and fester."

At other points, I found her observations facile:

Bookishness turns our attention to the materiality of books so that we can appreciate the book as a thing whose thingness and thereness matter. . . . Bookishness illuminates the book to be a thing whose materiality matters in newfound ways.

Toward the end of the book, Pressman writes that bookishness "turns the book into an art of the present that archives and memorializes the past." I was surprised that she does not reference the future, which is, I think, what most books either do or attempt to do. I found myself wandering toward Laurence Sterne (surely his *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, from the mid-1700s, is one of the most bookish books ever written),

*Peter O'Brien is an independent writer and artist. In the last few months he published a novel, The Meister Effect, set in Chicago 2057 (exploring the electrical power generated by the brains of people with ADHD, PTSD, and OCD) and France 1327 (in the final days of the German mystic Meister Eckhart), and Love & Let Go: Reflections, Confessions, Encouragements and a Few Cautionary Forewarnings from a Father to a Daughter.*

James Joyce (*Finnegans Wake* redefines the whole idea of the book, while being simultaneously steeped in how books are imagined and constructed), and Margaret Atwood (specifically her new fire-resistant, censorship-proof, single-book edition of *The Handmaid's Tale*). Each of these authors confronts the bookishness of their books (through words, stories, and in the case of the first two, graphic elements), and they each also capture the past, present, and future within their writerly travels.

I am always intrigued when writers and thinkers create a distinction between the analog and the digital. These days I read as much on a screen as I do on paper, and my 25-year-old daughter does the same. We both effortlessly move back and forth between these two technologies. (I reread *Moby Dick* on a small screen just because, and she is always surrounded by both paper-books and screen-books.) I believe that the digital mimics and invokes the way our brains and minds work much more than we are sometimes comfortable admitting.

It's accurate to say that our brains are simultaneously digital and analog. We depend upon individual synapses to spark, or spike, or turn on and off, which is the foundation of a digital appreciation of the world around us. And this specific on-off action has the potential to instantaneously occur, give or take, a quadrillion times in the average brain—here it's fair to compare this to an analog way of connecting with the multitudinous chimerical associations that the world presents us. We are both analog and digital, constantly sorting our way through the tangible and the intangible, the real and the artificial, the one and the many.

And if our contemporaneous (past, present, and future) technologies sometimes lead us toward sex, gossip, the frivolous, and the manipulative, well, those are perennial fascinations—Juvenal, Horace, and Martial, as well as George Eliot, Jane Austen, and Margaret Atwood, would agree.

*Bookishness* helped focus my attentions and sympathies on these and related wanderings. Brains and books, the analog and the digital, flourish because of forgeries, artifice, and imaginings. Unlike some others, I do not see us swallowed up by AI, NFTs, and URLs. I still like eating, sleeping, copulating. I go for walks, smell coffee, scratch my butt, floss my teeth, hug my daughter. Books, in whatever form they come to me, will continue to inform and delight. Without digital culture, I'd never really be able to fully explore medieval marginalia and the *Book of Kells*. I think my understanding of "bookishness" is different, and not quite so pining as Pressman's. ■