

2024 Serpieri Lecture

A conversation with
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and Emanuel Stelzer (Verona University)

Emma Smith *Portable Magic*

23 May 2024



Emma Smith Portable Magic A History of Books and their Readers



'Witty and ingenious ...
A wise, funny, endearingly personal book'
Peter Conrad, *Observer*

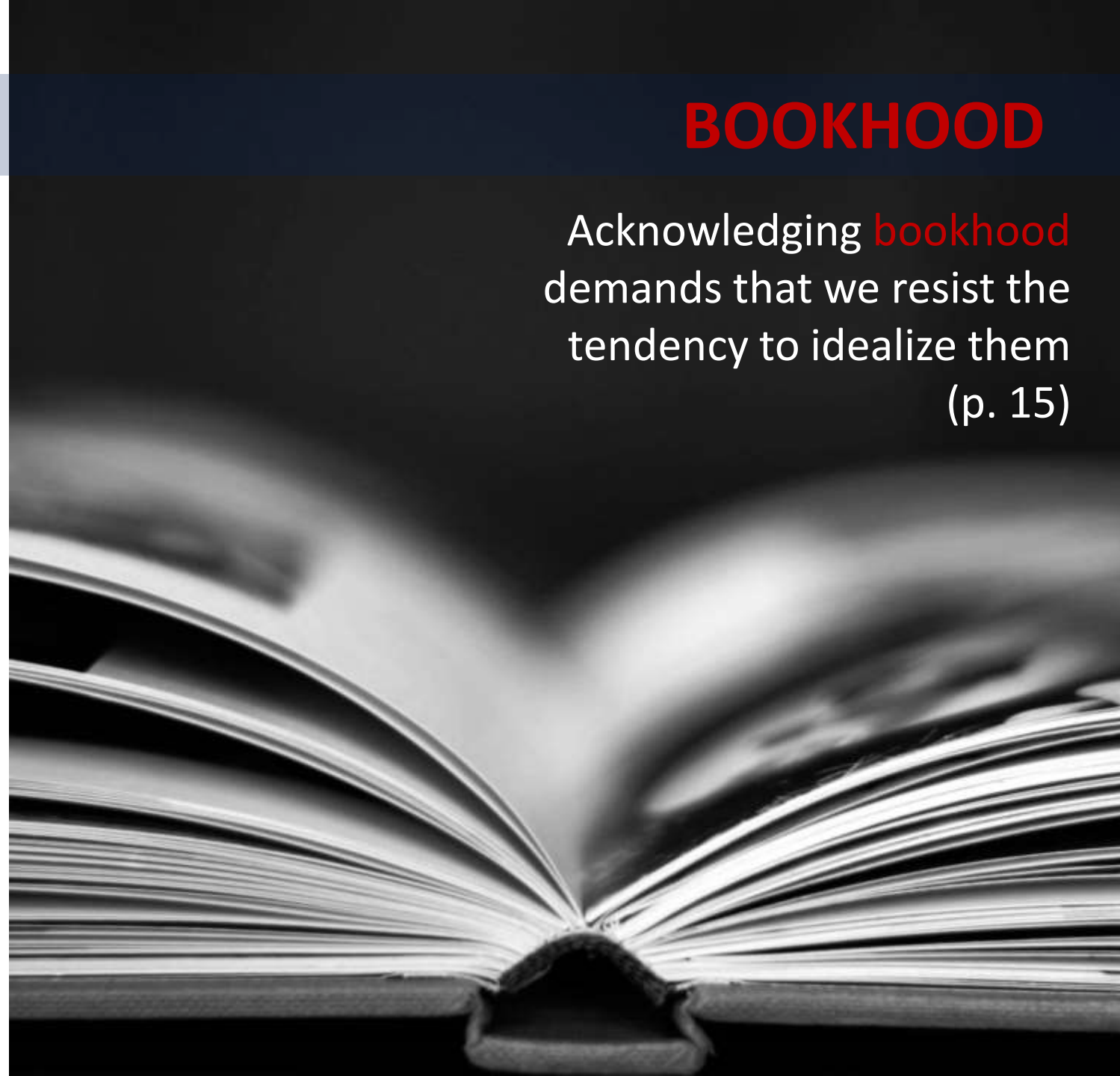


BOOKHOOD

Acknowledging **bookhood** demands that we resist the tendency to idealize them
(p. 15)

Stephen King, *On Writing*:
the book is “a uniquely
portable magic”

“And a book’s magic
always inheres in its form,
including that portability,
as much as in its
contents” (p. 8)





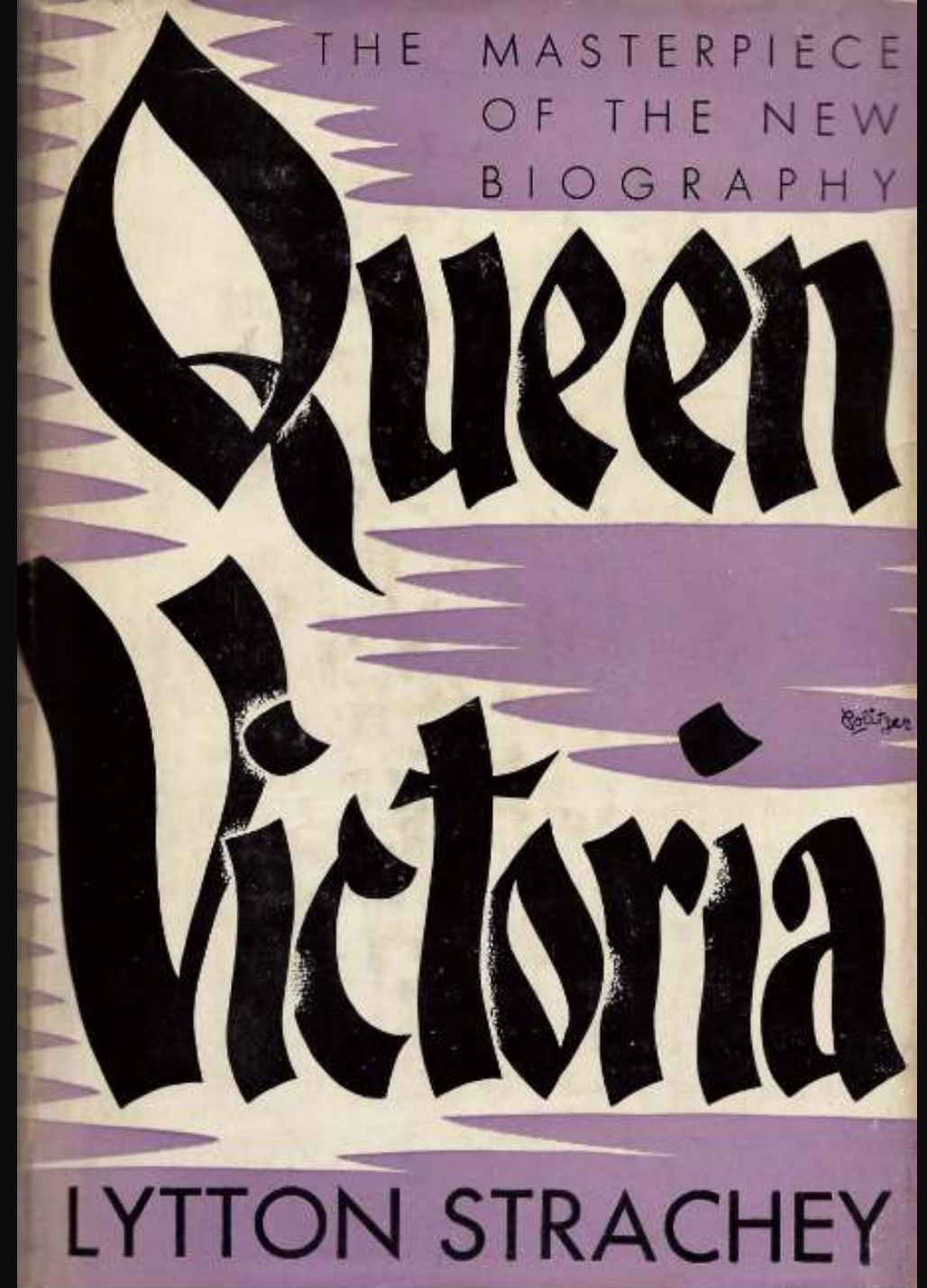
1. Beginning: East, West and Gutenberg

“The cultural status of the Gutenberg Bible reproduces a myth of Western superiority . . .

We tend systematically to downplay the pre-Gutenberg histories of print and to ignore the prior histories of textual reproduction outside Europe. The resulting incomplete narrative outside Europe serves to align mechanical printing with the European Renaissance and early humanism in a triumphant story of the dominance of Western Enlightenment values.” (p. 31)

2. Queen Victoria in the trenches

‘Pinned down in a field by mortar and machine gun fire’ in northern France in the late summer of 1944, one American infantryman dived into a ditch to sit out the bombardment. He found an unexpected diversion when ‘a lump in my pocket turned out to be “Queen Victoria”’. (p. 38)



The *Forget-Me-Not* was an illustrated, British periodical published by Rudolph Ackermann.

3. Christmas, gift books and abolition

“The practice of inscribing a book with a dedication or message confirms that such a gift witnesses an ongoing relationship rather than a one-off exchange: that is why there is such a mournful, voyeuristic pleasure in finding inscribed books discarded to second-hand bookshops.” (p. 71)



4. Shelfies: Anne, Marilyn and Madame de Pompadour



Marilyn Monroe reading Joyce's *Ulysses*
(Eve Arnold 1955)

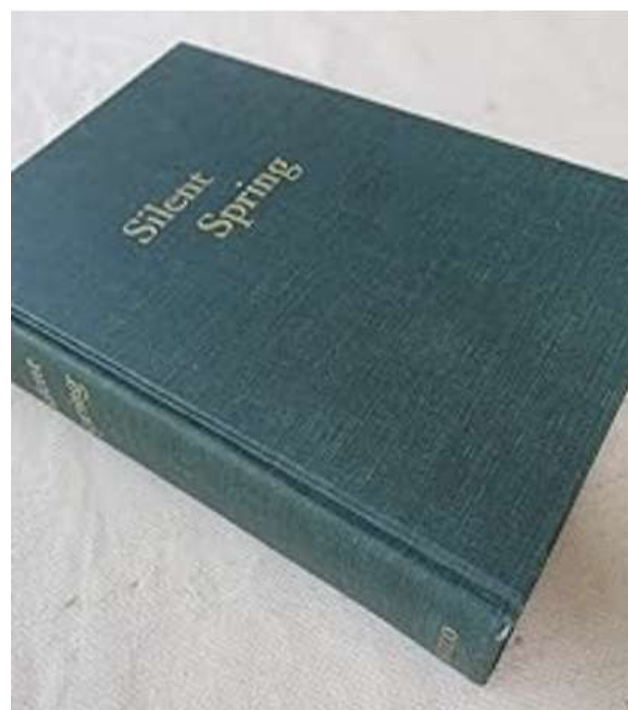
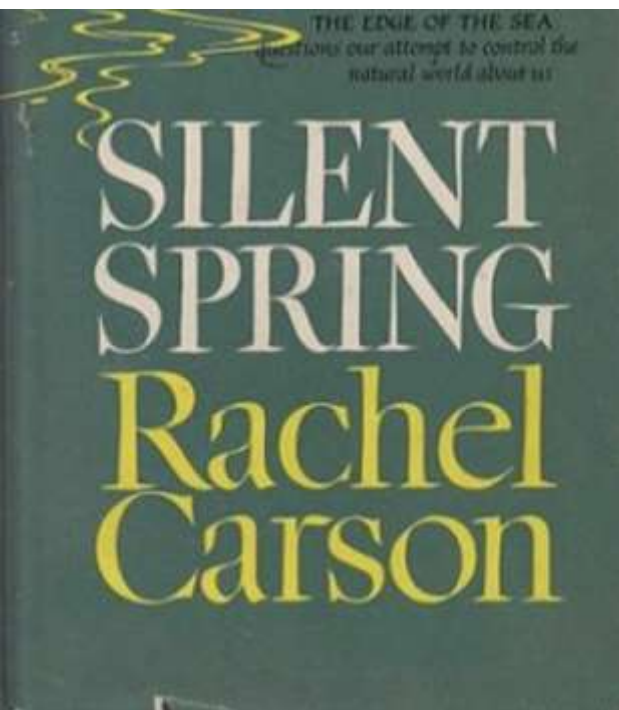
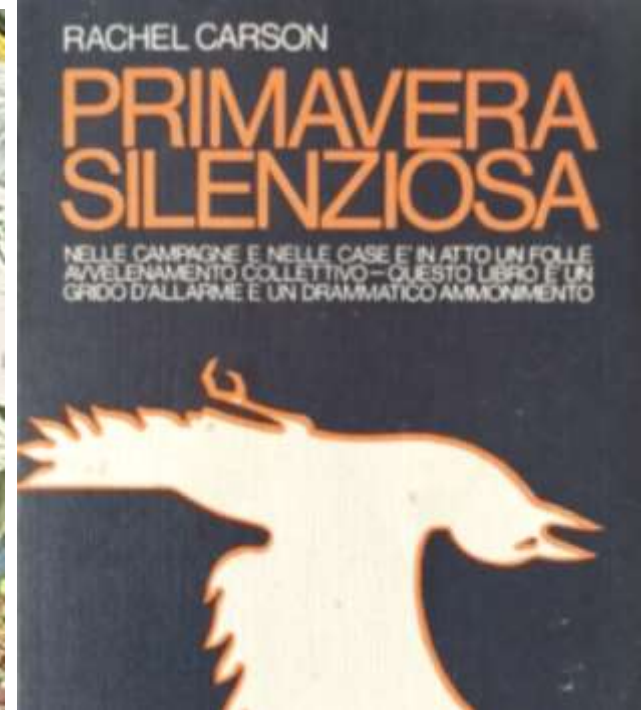


Lady Anne Clifford's *Great Picture*



François Boucher's portrait of
Madame de Pompadour

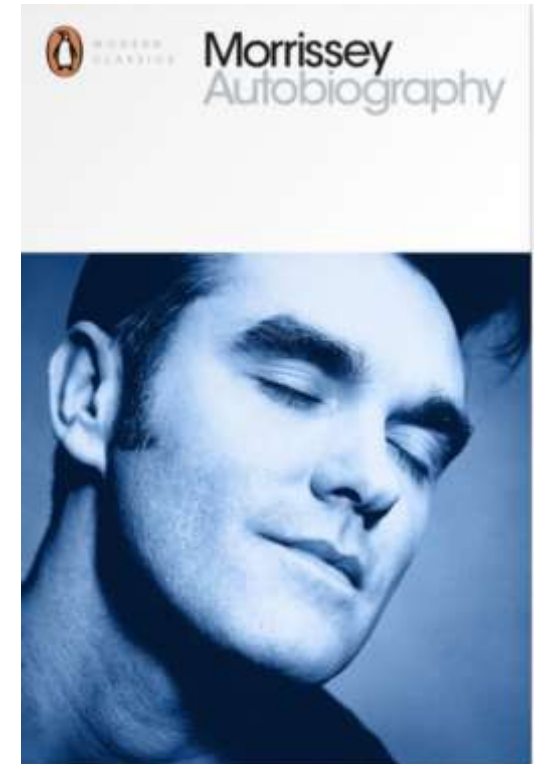
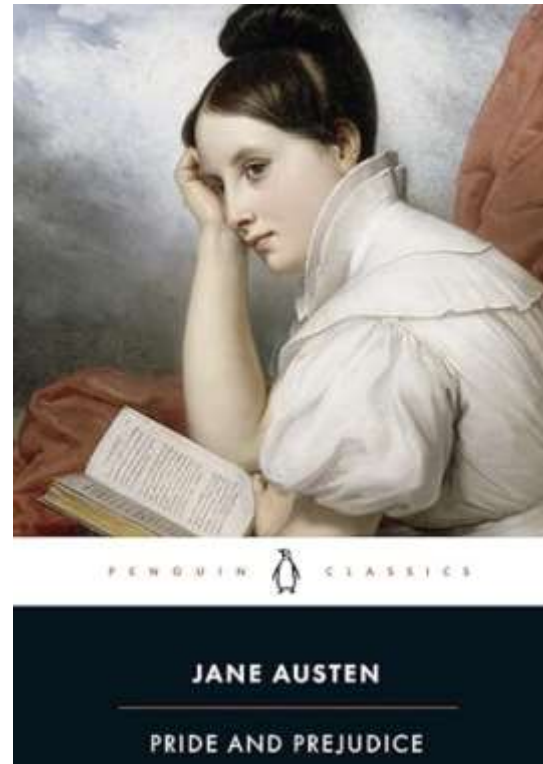
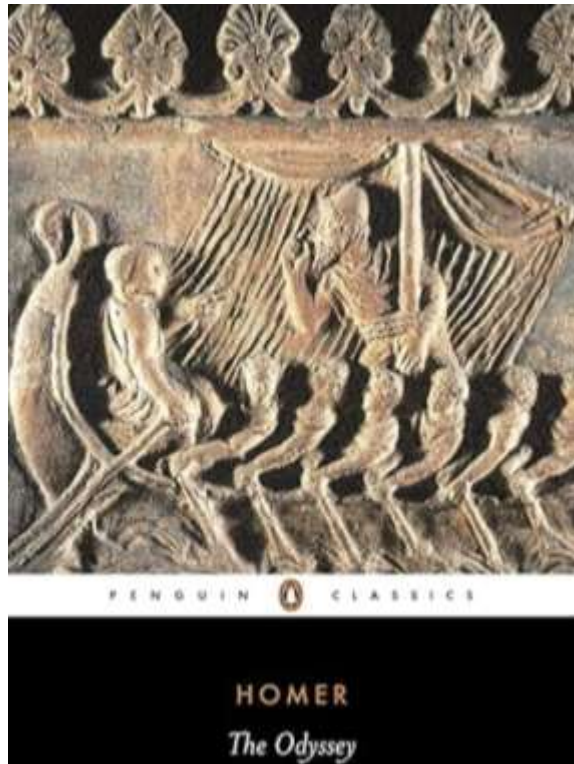
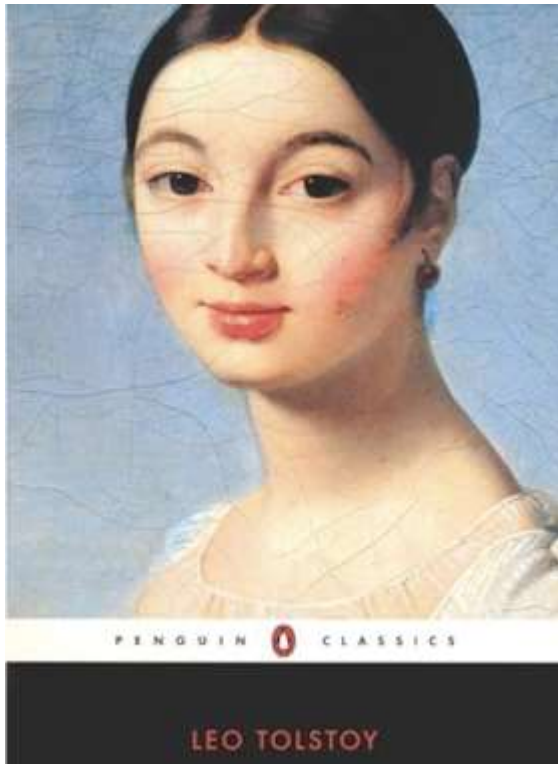


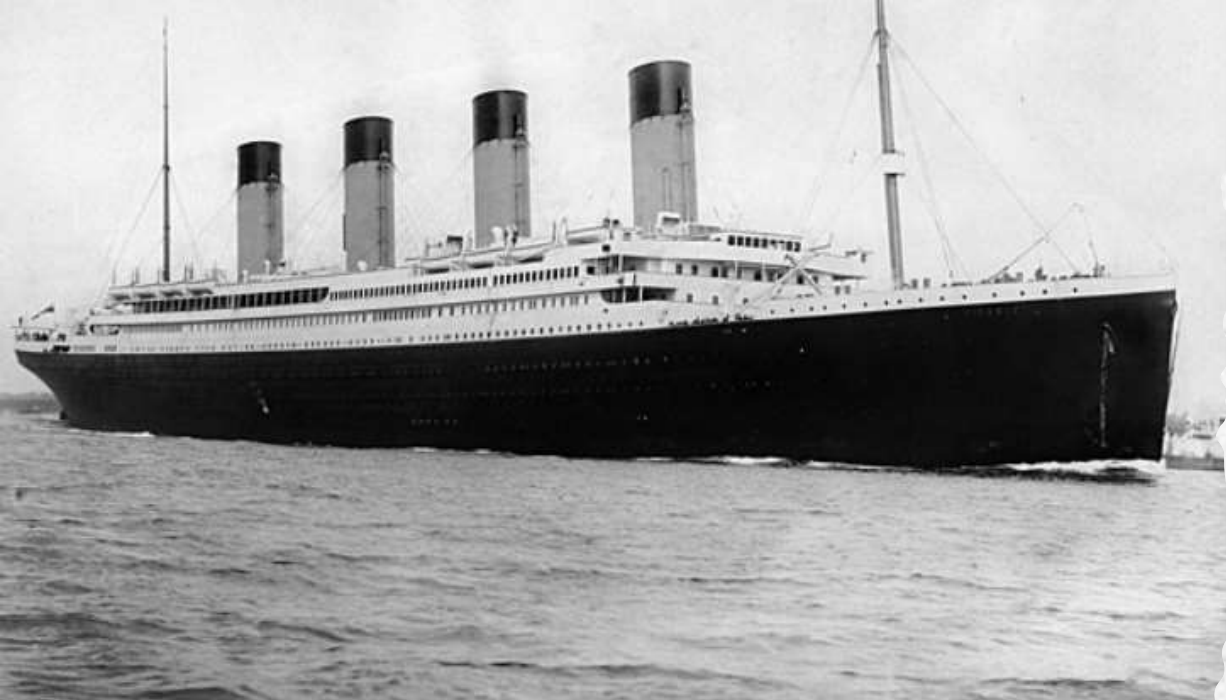


5. *Silent Spring* and the Making of a classic

- “A classic is a book which has never exhausted all it has to say to its readers”; “A classic is a work which persists as background noise even when a present that is totally incompatible with it holds sway” (Italo Calvino, p. 90)
- “A classic is the result of a particular kind of materiality involving format, typeface, length and binding” (p. 90)

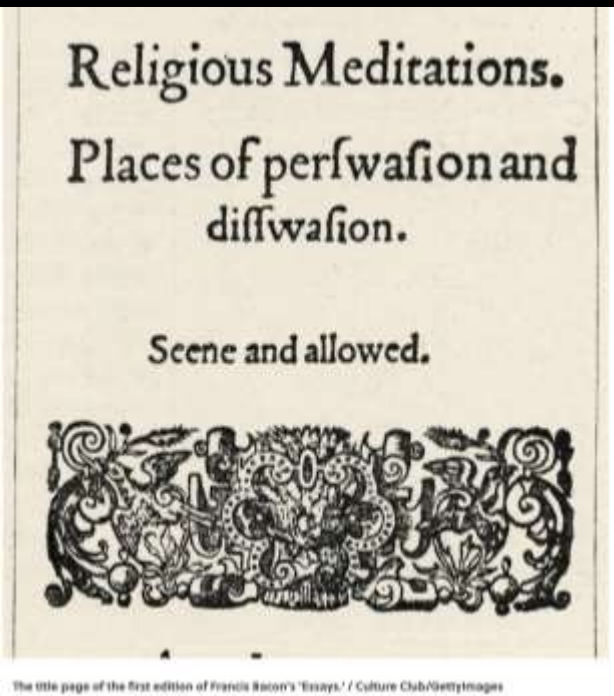
‘A book could be published as a Penguin Classic because it is a classic in the making. It’s something we would like to discuss with Morrissey’ (p. 92)





6. The Titanic and book traffic

- “Among other things, this pathology [bibliomania] made troublingly little distinction between the collector and the thief; each was programmed to acquire books by whatever means available” (p. 107)
- “Books’ intrinsic portability means they are always on the move, always migratory, always displaced. They are the ultimate diasporic objects” (p. 120)



The Return of the Jedi, Star Wars, episode VIII

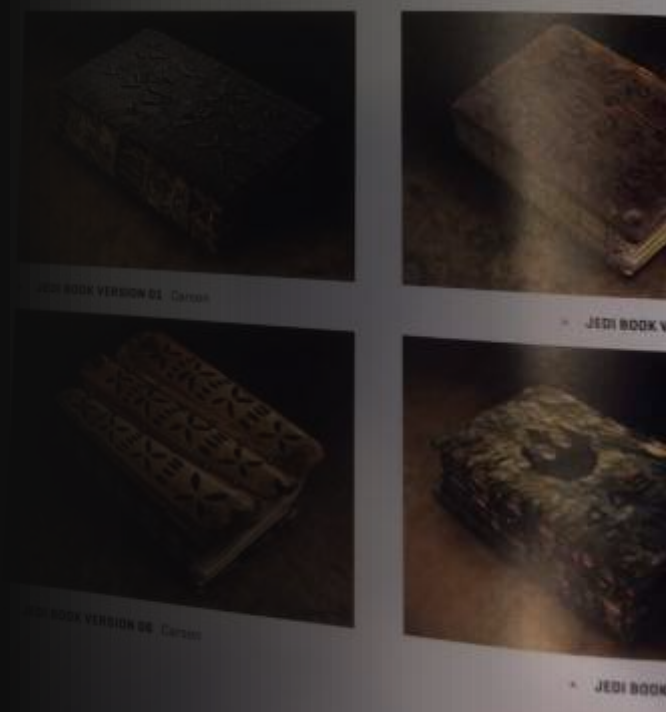
Codex Sinaiticus

7. Religions of the book

“That our earliest books are religious has been decisive in shaping attitudes to the book itself. All our books are Bibles in the etymological sense (that shared root of *biblio* and ‘Bible’) and they carry with them that significance. Even non-religious books are marked by an instinctive respect for the book object and an implicit prohibition on destroying it.” (p. 135)



Book of Esther





Heinrich Heine:

“Where men burn books, /
They will burn people also in the end.”

“Heine’s quotation creates a perverse,
unethical equation that
anthropomorphizes the book.” (p. 149)

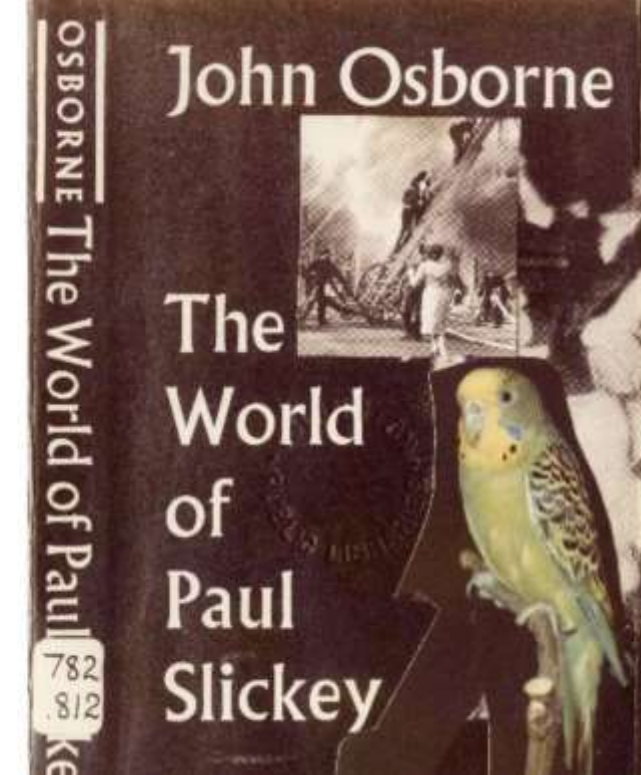
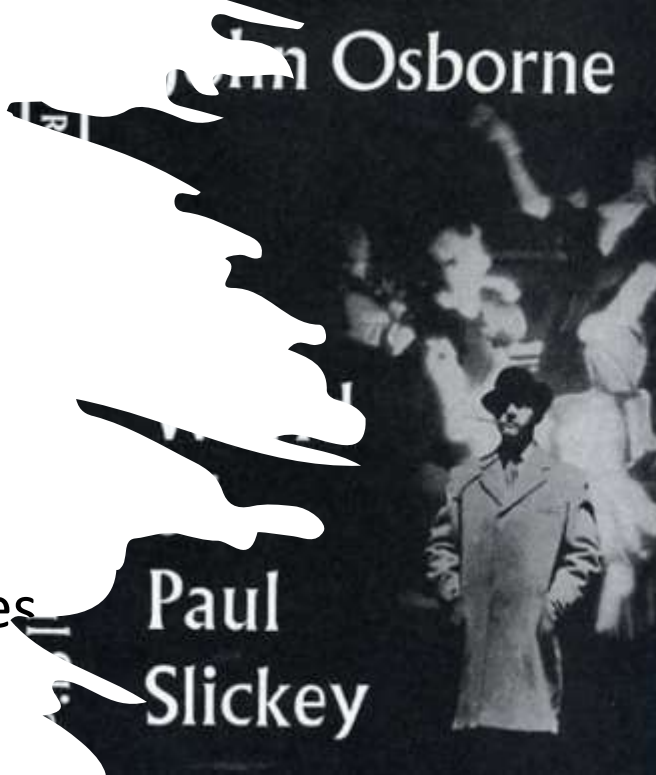
8. 10 May 1933: burning books

These burning books were not a substantive issue but rather props in a pageant intended to implicate, unite and intimidate a range of spectators. This was less about censorship than about political theatre.

Joe Orton and Kenneth Halliwell,
The Islington Library Case (1959)

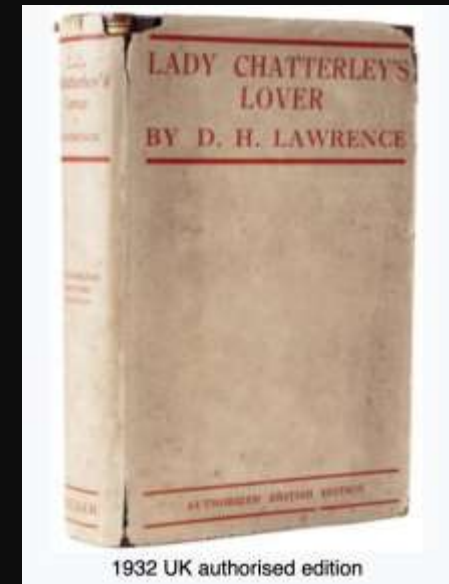
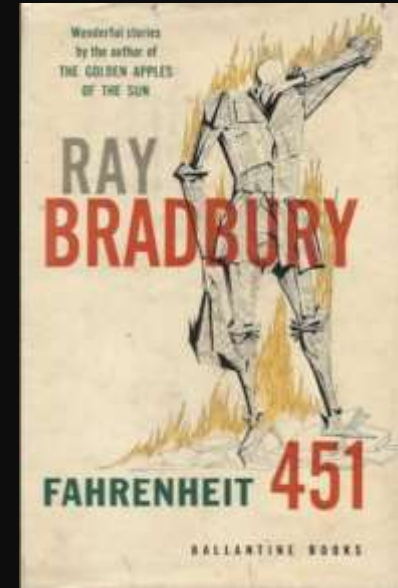
9. Library books, camp, and malicious damage

“The pair were not preparing collages from rare books or slicing out valuable illustrations of leaves from manuscripts. They were cutting and pasting on to some indifferent mass-market publications that could easily be replaced. Nevertheless, these library books were ascribed a value in excess of their actual status. The book’s value lay – then as now – in their very bookhood.” (p. 161)



10. Censored books: '237 goddams, 58 bastards, 31 Chrissakes, and 1 fart'

“We tend to think that that censorship obliterates or erases texts so that they are completely lost from view, and perhaps that is the fantasy of censors themselves. Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* imagines an off-kilter dystopian world in which books are summarily destroyed by fire crews employed to cause, not extinguish, flames”. (p. 170)



11. *Mein Kampf*: freedom to publish?

“‘This is America,’ proclaimed one US propaganda poster, ‘where you can read any paper, any magazine, any book you please. Where freedom of the press is a guarantee of your liberty.’ It was an important ideological principle, but it obscured some of the more complicated overlaps in forms of book censorship across the divide. Theodor Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*, among those burned by the Nazis, had also been banned in Boston a few years earlier.” (p. 189)

“... Calling up *Mein Kampf* from the library stacks, or taking it down from the shelves, I was troubled by the chill shadow it cast.” (p. 203)



Saint
Augustine of Hippo



12. Talismanic books

“Bibles have long been adopted for a range of non-reading purposes, from healing to record-keeping, and exorcism, and oath-taking. The eighth-century monk and historian Bede reports the use of a book to cure snake bites. St Augustine wrote that the Gospel of St John was laid on the heads of those suffering from fever.”
(p. 207)



Bede writing, from a 12th-century copy of his *Life of St Cuthbert* (Yates Thompson MS 26, f. 2r)

13. Skin in the game: book-binding and African-American poetry

“The book-human
relationship is reciprocal: if
we are made of books,
books are made up of us.”
(p. 226)



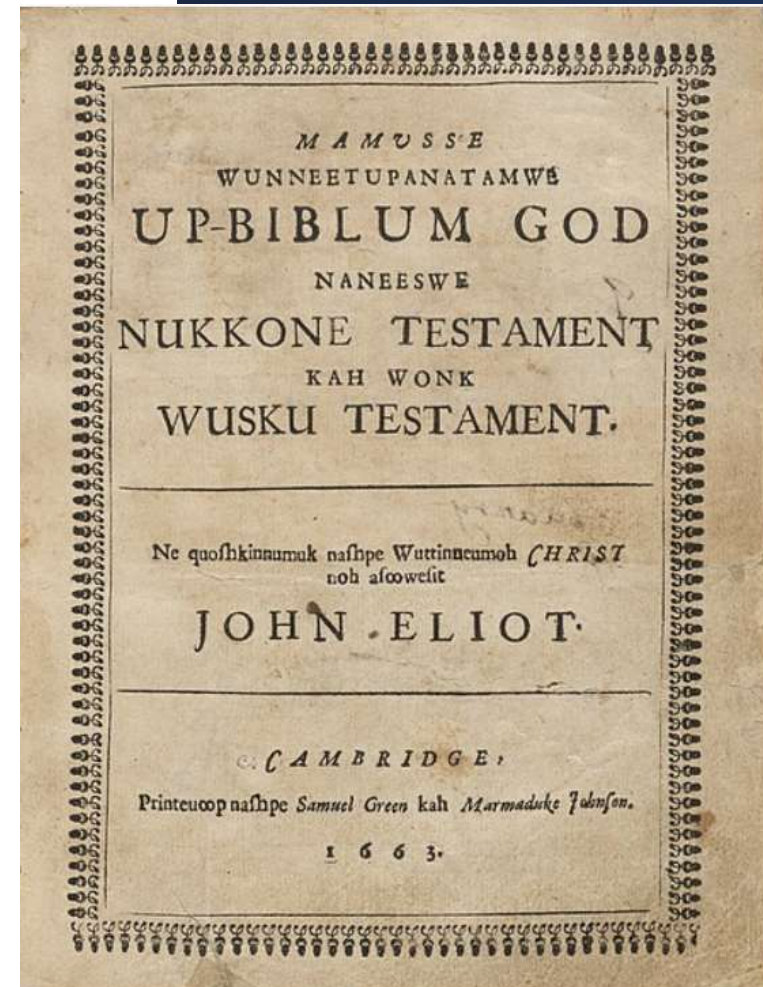


14. Choose Your Own Adventure: readers' work

“‘What is the use of books,’ Lewis Carroll’s Alice asks in her perspicacious way at the beginning of her adventures in Wonderland, ‘without pictures?’” Alice responds to new technologies which by the mid-nineteenth century had made illustrations more affordable and widespread including the John Tenniel pictures in the book about her. Before then . . . under-illustrated books were being visually pimped by their readers” (p. 243)

15. The empire writes back

“Ethnographers use the word ‘transculturation’ to capture the way in which subordinated groups respond to and repurpose the material of a dominant culture, sometimes using them for self-assertion, contrary to the intentions of the colonizer . . . In the blank spaces of these printed books [Eliot Bibles, translated into the language of the Algonquin people] we can map forms of compromised Native identity, self-assertion, spirituality and story-telling” (p. 268)



16. What is a book?

“Some of the heat around the definition of a book is because of the often antagonistic or defensive relationship with digital works. *Portable Magic* is about books as objects and therefore I haven’t included those material etherized texts for e-readers, or audiobooks.” (p. 282)

“A book becomes a book in the hands of its readers. It is an interactive object. A book that is not handled and read is not really a book at all.”(p. 293)

