

Amanda Lastoria, 'Buying Books and Selling Ourselves: Print Design as a Digital Mask', in *Bookshelves in the Age of the COVID-19 Pandemic* [online conference] 3-4 November 2020.

The first academic to undertake a PhD in Publishing in North America,<sup>1</sup> Amanda Lastoria first presented her article 'Buying Books and Selling Ourselves: Print Design as a Digital Mask' as part of the *Bookshelves in the Age of the COVID-19 Pandemic* online conference of November 2020. An in-depth exploration of the rapidly evolving ways in which books are aesthetically presented and consumed both in their physical forms and online, Lastoria's article focusses on the impact social media book trends have upon our experience as readers, purchasers, and publishers.

Lastoria begins her article by describing her engagement with *publisher's dummies* in her early career, relating how she would test the *dummies* (blank sample books) for their aesthetic and sensory qualities, such as texture, shape, and weight. She expresses the sense of awareness evoked by this process as to our sensory experiences of the books we handle and our reactions to these. Lastoria explains that we absorb books in their physical forms with four of our five senses, unconsciously assessing the artwork on their covers, the texture of their sleeves and edges, the weight and quality of their paper, and even the smell of the glue which binds them and the sound they produce when they are set down.

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<sup>1</sup> The Open University and SHARP, 'Covers, Bindings and Spines Re-examined: Amanda Lastoria', in The Open University and SHARP, *Bookshelves in the Age of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Full Event Programme* (2020), available online.

Lastoria's focus on the value of books as physical objects to be experienced and enjoyed in their own right as opposed to mere conduits of text to be examined, is particularly relevant in the uncertain age of the international pandemic. Indeed, this is a theme which has sparked recent debate in both the academic and artistic communities,<sup>2</sup> as is explored in the Claire Battershill's 2020 essay 'Writing with Spines: 'Shelf Isolation' and 'Sorted Books',<sup>3</sup> also presented at the conference. Battershill examines the rise in online challenge trends surrounding the creation of art and poetry using books as a physical media, such as *spine art* and *patchwork poetry*. Battershill states that these artforms are simply '[...] different readings of the texts',<sup>4</sup> and should perhaps be considered as being of equal cultural value as the textual content itself.

Lastoria goes on to say that our sensory experience when handling physical books exists in stark contrast to that of our online experiences when purchasing and consuming literature in a digital format, which allows for the engagement of only one of our five senses. This, she explains, is largely due to the sensory and tactile limitations of the digital *masks* used by most online retailers to display the books they sell. These *masks* (digitally produced two-dimensional versions of text covers) tend to be of a standard format, providing very little insight as to the tangible qualities of the book itself, and often proving misleading and disappointing to consumers. This is a notion which is perhaps increasingly relevant in an age where it is becoming ever more challenging to sample, purchase, and engage with texts in-

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<sup>2</sup> Claire Battershill, 'Writing with Spines: 'Shelf Isolation' and 'Sorted Books', in *Bookshelves in the Age of the COVID-19 Pandemic* [online conference] 3-4 November 2020.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* n.p.

person as opposed to online or as digital copies; indeed, Lastoria writes that the COVID 19 pandemic reinforces for us that 'books are commodities'.<sup>5</sup>

Lastoria concludes by explaining that the growing phenomena of online literary video reviews and social media literary challenges reduce the texts we love to mere '[...] digitised props that we also use to sell ourselves'.<sup>6</sup> These often feature online influencers who receive sponsorship from publishers and leading book retailers to review books, or even simply to appear on social media platforms posed before a backdrop of cleverly placed copies of new publications. Lastoria writes: '[w]e can now not only judge books by their covers, but also judge owners by their books',<sup>7</sup> finishing by saying that perhaps the way in which 'we buy books on *Amazon* and sell ourselves on *Zoom*'<sup>8</sup> is simply an evolution of the 'consumerist cycle'<sup>9</sup> which is intrinsically linked to our enjoyment of literature. With various online and social media based literary trends and challenges evermore prolific, perhaps we must ask ourselves whether online advertising can truly replicate an accurate depiction of the tangible qualities of texts for consumers, and whether this will ever satiate the sensory literary requirements to which we have become so accustomed to fulfilling.

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<sup>5</sup> Amanda Lastoria, 'Buying Books and Selling Ourselves: Print Design as a Digital Mask', in *Bookshelves in the Age of the COVID-19 Pandemic* [online conference] 3-4 November 2020, n.p.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* n.p.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* n.p.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* n.p.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* n.p.

Lastoria, Amanda, 'Buying Books and Selling Ourselves: Print Design as a Digital Mask', in *Bookshelves in the Age of the COVID-19 Pandemic* [online conference] 3-4 November 2020.

Battershill, Claire, 'Writing with Spines: 'Shelf Isolation' and 'Sorted Books', in *Bookshelves in the Age of the COVID-19 Pandemic* [online conference] 3-4 November 2020.

The Open University and The Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing (SHARP), 'Covers, Bindings and Spines Re-examined: Amanda Lastoria', in The Open University and SHARP, *Bookshelves in the Age of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Full Event Programme* (2020), available online at:  
<[https://fass.open.ac.uk/sites/fass.open.ac.uk/files/files/Final%20programme%20Bookshelves%20Conference%2026\\_10\\_2020.pdf](https://fass.open.ac.uk/sites/fass.open.ac.uk/files/files/Final%20programme%20Bookshelves%20Conference%2026_10_2020.pdf)> [accessed 22 November 2020].