

English 359 460
Seminar: Topics in Media Theory: Histories of the Book

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Wednesdays 2-5
Murray Hall 302

This course studies how the written word travels through time and across media. What is a book? How do you make one? What rules have different cultures developed about when to share, sell, preserve, censor or pulp? How did the books on our shelves or our cloud storage get there, and how do we ensure that what we write today will survive into the future (do we want it to)? What light can artifacts from different times and places shed on the ways you store and retrieve information, inside the classroom and beyond?

We will answer these questions through 2 research projects along with 3 weekly activities:

1. **Reading:** In preparation for each class, we'll read poems by Emily Dickinson (1858-64), novels by Ray Bradbury (1953) and Ling Ma (2018), and a history of the book by artist Amaranth Borsuk (also 2018), alongside shorter scholarly essays. Most weeks, you'll also be asked to **watch** or **listen** to a few video or audio files or browse other digital resources.
2. **Discussing:** One of the skills in which this class aims to provide practice is **listening**: following the thread of a debate among multiple classmates, figuring out the logic of a claim with which you disagree. Another is **thinking**, including deciding when and how to jump in with a counterargument or with evidence that confirms a position advanced by someone else. In order to guarantee your classmates the attention they deserve, please **shut phones and laptops** except at times when you are using them to research specific factual questions being discussed at that moment in class.
3. **Making:** Over the course of the semester, we will allow time in class sessions to make paper; bind a book; print a page; record an audiobook; and try out writing with stylus on clay, chalk on slate, and quill on paper. An open mind is required; technical or artistic background is not.

This course fulfills the theory and/ or seminar requirements for the English major.

Requirements

Weekly activities:

1. *[Blog posts \(5 points each – please complete 5 out of the 6 posts\)](#)*

On the dates indicated, you must, by midnight the night before class, post a 250-500-word contribution to the class blog, guided by that week's prompt. The goal here is to engage as scholars with the issues discussed rather than defending opinions developed outside the classroom. The blog post may include external links or responses to your classmates' posts, and must use full sentences and correct grammar. Because you and your classmates need to **read each other's post in preparation for seminar**, there is no point in submitting after the deadline. You may therefore **miss one blog post** over the course of the semester without explanation or penalty.

2. *Occasional in-class reading quizzes (10 points total)*

3. *Class discussion and participation in in-class making activities (15 points)*

Some people feel more comfortable talking than others; the less comfortable you feel, the more useful practice talking and being listened to can be. Your grade for participation will depend on what you contribute to our collective thinking, listening and talking. This class is not a lecture course, so its success depends on everyone's contribution, both as speakers and as listeners.

Research projects (25 points each):

- **SLEUTHING:**

By February 6, please choose a room of a library to visit (for example, the Periodicals Room in Alexander, the media room of the Douglass College library, the reading room of the Art Library at the Zimmerli museum, the reference room of the New Brunswick Public Library, the children's section of your hometown's public library). Sit and wander for a while, observing. Take notes. Sketch (it doesn't have to be good). Think of yourself as part detective, conducting surveillance, and part anthropologist, conducting an ethnography. How does this place work? What do people plan to do here? What do they end up doing? What do they bring in and take out? Who are these people? How do they interact with one another or with the people who work here? What objects on the shelves get used and which don't? How can you tell?

As you formulate questions about the library, there will be some that just looking and listening doesn't allow you to answer. (For example: Why does this place look this way and sound this way and smell this way? How old is this place? Who built it and why? How has it changed? Who isn't allowed in? Who is allowed in but doesn't come here?)

After your visit to the library (and NOT in advance of it), research those questions using the library's own website as well as at least **two sources NOT produced by the library itself**. These sources can be histories of your particular library, but if no one before you has devoted that kind of attention to the library you're studying, your source can be some more general book or article that provides context – for example, a history of American public libraries or a book about the architecture of downtown New Brunswick.

By **February 16**, please upload [here](#) a **1400-1600-word ESSAY (supported by at least 3 citations)** about the library you observed, drawing on personal observation, background research, and the context provided by our assigned readings. Illustrations are optional.

- **DESCRIBING:**

By April 3, please choose a book from among those we have examined in class, or another in the Rutgers Book Initiative catalog [here](#). Investigate it as a text, an object, and an artifact. Describe it by researching as many as possible of these questions:

Production: How was this book made?

Circulation: Who seems to have sold, resold or lent and borrowed it? What individual or kind of person seems to have read it? Does anyone seem to have read it without owning it or owned it without reading it? How far along in its life did it enter a library collection? Through whose hands did it pass before it ended up in yours?

Evidence: What can you find out in the Rutgers library catalog(s), or in other sources such as Worldcat, Google Books, or catalogs of other libraries? What does examining the physical object tell you that looking at a reprint or a digital representation of the original wouldn't?

Hypothetical evidence: What kinds of information could you ferret out if you were to interview people who have read or owned or catalogued or bought or sold this book? How would you track them down, or, if they're dead or otherwise unavailable, track down any surviving traces of their interactions with the book? What questions can't you answer?

Methods: What research tools would you need to answer these questions? Where in the library (physical or digital) will you go to answer them?

With your findings, write a **1400-1600 word ESSAY** (supported by at least 5 citations) where you describe the book addressing the answers to your questions. Afterwards, create a **3-minute VIDEO** where you will describe the most relevant aspects of the book you have selected.

Please upload your [essay](#) and [videos](#) here by April 20.

Books to Purchase. (All other required readings are available through the Canvas site.)

1. Ray Bradbury. *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), ISBN 067187036X
2. Borsuk, Amaranth. *The Book*. MIT Press (Essential Knowledge Series), 2018. ISBN: 9780262535410. \$15.95.
3. Ma, Ling. *Severance*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018. 0374261598. \$11.99.

Attendance

Along with what you learn by reading and watching in preparation for class, engaging with your classmates is crucial to the learning in this seminar. Given the hands-on nature of this class, much of our work is impossible to reproduce or replace outside of the times and spaces scheduled. There is no way to make it up or “get the notes.” Likewise, blog posts designed to be written while the hands-on activities are fresh in your mind cannot be postponed. That said, each person can miss up to one of our weekly classes over the course of the semester without explanation or penalty, registering your absence with the online system: <https://sims.rutgers.edu.ssra>. You may likewise miss one of the in-class quizzes; if you complete all of them, we’ll drop your lowest grade.

Academic Integrity

Readers have a right to know where ideas come from. Plagiarism violates that right, whether it takes the form of quoting or paraphrasing without citing your source; presenting someone else’s idea as yours, whether orally or in writing; recycling one piece of work to fulfill multiple assignments without explicit prior permission; or using *generative artificial intelligence (GAI) tools such as ChatGPT*. If in doubt, you can consult <http://wp.rutgers.edu/academics/undergraduate/plagiarism> or come to office hours. Please err on the side of asking, since any plagiarized assignment will be (at a minimum) failed and (at a maximum) will trigger disciplinary proceedings.

In concert with Rutgers’ code of conduct, which mandates “[that all work submitted in a course, academic research, or other activity is the student’s own and created without the aid of impermissible technologies, materials, or collaborations](#),” this course has been

designed to promote your learning, critical thinking, skills, and intellectual development without reliance on unauthorized technology including chatbots and other forms of artificial intelligence (AI). You may always use search engines, spell-check, and simple grammar-check in crafting your assignments.

Accommodations

I am committed to making this course accessible to all students. If you have a documented disability or other condition that may affect academic performance you should: 1) make sure this documentation is on file with the Office of Disability Services (<https://ods.rutgers.edu/>) to determine the accommodations you need; and 2) talk with me to discuss your accommodation needs, the earlier the better.

- Here is a [dyslexic-friendly font](#) you can download for free
- Here is a free font for [people with low vision](#)
- Here is a free [ADD/ADHD-friendly font](#).
- Here is a website that translates writing to speech - you can paste in your sentences and see how they sound: <https://www.naturalreaders.com/online/>

Academic Services:

- * Any student can obtain tutoring and other help at the Learning Centers on each campus: <https://rlc.rutgers.edu/>
- * For coaching help with writing skills and assignments: <https://rlc.rutgers.edu/student-services/writing-coaching> Rutgers Academics Student
- * More on other support available: <https://www.rutgers.edu/academics/student-support>

Office Hours

My office hours are after class in Murray Hall 012. You're welcome to make an appointment in advance or just to walk back from class together. If you can't make that time slot, feel free to email to schedule another meeting.

Documentation

- From time to time, I will take photos of class activities for posting on the [Rutgers Book Initiative](#) website. If you would prefer not to appear in such images, just tell me so: no reason or explanation is necessary, and it will not prejudice your standing in the class in any way. I will generally not name/tag people without their explicit permission, but, if you know that you never want to be named or tagged in a public image, please tell me that too and I will make a note of it. If you post anything from class yourself, I ask that you follow these same guidelines out of consideration for your classmates.

Note that Canvas (the learning management system that we are required to use) gives no guarantee that it is not collecting or selling your data; for ways to minimize this invasion of privacy, see <https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Canvas-Student-ePortfolios/How-do-I-change-my-privacy-settings-in-Canvas-Student/ta-p/1369>.

Participation guidelines

A+	A	B	C	D	F
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • actively supports, engages and listens to peers (ongoing) • arrives fully prepared at every session • plays an active role in discussions (ongoing) • comments advance the level and depth of the dialogue (consistently) • group dynamic and level of discussion are consistently better because of the student's presence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • actively supports, engages and listens to peers (ongoing) • arrives fully prepared at almost every session • plays an active role in discussions (ongoing) • comments occasionally advance the level and depth of the dialogue • group dynamic and level of discussion are often better because of the student's presence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • makes a sincere effort to interact with peers (ongoing) • arrives mostly, if not fully, prepared (ongoing) • participates constructively in discussions (ongoing) • makes relevant comments based on the assigned material (ongoing) • group dynamic and level of discussion are occasionally better (never worse) because of the student's presence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • limited interaction with peers • preparation, and therefore level of participation, are both inconsistent • when prepared, participates constructively in discussions • when prepared, makes relevant comments based on the assigned material • group dynamic and level of discussion are not affected by the student's presence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • virtually no interaction with peers • rarely prepared • rarely participates • comments are generally vague or drawn from outside of the assigned material • demonstrates a noticeable lack of interest (on occasion) • group dynamic and level of discussion are harmed by the student's presence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no interaction with peers • never prepared • never participates • demonstrates a noticeable lack of interest in the material (ongoing) • group dynamic and level of discussion are significantly harmed by the student's presence

January 17. INTRODUCTION

In class:

- Experiment: clay tablets/tongue depressor.
- Weather permitting: in pairs, go outside, take photos of all the text-based signage you come across (e.g., billboards, traffic signs, truck/van decals, etc.). Make a poem or text-based visual composition from your findings.
- Group exercise: “Name that Book.”
- View “[But is it a Book? A Choose-able Path Exhibition](#)”
- View minute 5 onwards of Gary Frost’s “[How to Operate a Book](#)”

January 24. SUBSTRATE

To write in advance:

- [Blog Assignment #1](#): Choose a book that you own – battered paperback, treasured gift, long-forgotten picture book, doorstep textbook. On the model of the “Name that Book” exercise, describe what it looks/feels/sounds like, making sure NOT to mention anything about the words, numbers or pictures that it contains. Instead of its title, for example, you could describe the texture of its cover or the tightness of its binding; instead of listing page numbers, you could weigh it. Please bring your book to class this week, so that we can, as a group, try to match the book with the description.

To read in advance:

- Keith Houston, *The Book* (2016), pp. [35-73](#).
- Amaranth Borsuk, *The Book* (2018), pp. ix-12, 12-46, 54-74 & 106-109.

To watch in advance:

- Treasures of the UCLA Library: [Cuneiform Tablets](#) (Part 3 of 5)
- [How to Make Papyrus Paper](#)
- [How to Make Washi](#)

To do in advance:

- Use something that is NOT paper AS paper (for example writing a letter on a leaf, wrapping a sandwich in a banana peel...). Come to class prepared to discuss.

In-class experiment: slate/chalk.

January 31. PAPERMAKING

To read in advance:

- Amaranth Borsuk. *The Book*, pp. 36-60 (“From Roll to Accordion to Codex,” “The Manuscript Tradition,” “Reading and Writing’s Shifts”)
- Tsien Tsuen-Hsui, “Documents on Bamboo and Wood,” *Written on Bamboo & Silk*, pp. 96-99

To watch in advance:

- [Leporello scroll from Shaun the Sheep "Shaun the farmer" episode.](#)
- [Bamboo Slips Written with Ancient Classics Unearthed from 2000-year old Tomb](#)
- [How to Make a Scroll](#) (Bookroll)

Guest artist: Katharine deLamater.

February 7. FORMAT

To write in advance:

- [Blog Assignment #2](#): Identify one argument in our readings this semester that was either corroborated or challenged by the papermaking exercise, or that you wouldn’t have noticed in the reading if you hadn’t done the hands-on papermaking. If you have any questions remaining about the papermaking readings, feel free to raise them here as well.

To read in advance:

- From Cristanne Miller, ed, *Poems AND the [Emily Dickinson Archives](#)*
277: Going to Him! Happy letter! and Going-- to-- Her! (529); 319: Of Bronze and Blaze (152); 348: I would not paint-- a picture-(184); 381: I cannot dance upon my toes (203); 409: The Soul selects her own Society (218); 445: They shut me up in prose (223); 448: I died for Beauty-- but was scarce (225); 536: Some work for Immortality (294); 600: Her "last Poems" (274); 700: The way I read a letter's-- this (340); 788: Publication--is the Auction (386); 1268: A Word dropped careless on a page (565); 1702: Fame is a fickle food (666);
- Fascicles 24 and 33 from Ralph Franklin, *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*.
- Dan Chiasson, “[Emily Dickinson’s Singular Scrap Poetry](#)”.

To watch in advance:

- Letterlocking Project: [What is Letterlocking?](#); [Shakespeare props](#); [Jane Austen’s Signed Letter](#); [Triangle Shaped Invitation](#).
- [Dickinson](#). “Afterlife”; “Meet Emily”; “Because I could not stop”.
- [Finding Emily Dickinson in the power of her poetry](#)

View in class:

- BS Johnson, *The Unfortunates*.
- Anthology Trials. Collection. *Pamphlets, Ephemera, Press Cuttings, &c. Relating to a Number of Cases, Bound in One Volume*, 1794.
- Office ledger with locking binding.

- Rekonnekt magnetic notebook
- *Beeton's Household Management* fold-outs
- David A Carter. *One Red Dot: A Pop-up Book for Children of All Ages*. 1st U.S. ed. Classic Collectible Pop-Up. New York: Little Simon, 2005.
- Suzy Lee and Jesse Klausmeier. *Open This Little Book*, 2012.

In-class experiment: folding a sheet (book); subway fold (newspaper)

Guest Instructor: Meredith McGill

February 14. COPYING/TRANSCRIBING/TRANSMITTING

To read in advance:

- Excerpt from Frederick Douglass. [Narrative](#): Preface, Letter from Wendell Phillips, Esq., and chapters 6-7

To listen in advance:

- Stuff to Blow your Mind. [The Facsimile, Part 1](#).

To do in class:

- Douglass Day transcribe-a-thon; copying comics with silly putty.

In-class experiment: transcribe a Dickinson poem AND first page of syllabus. Some groups use quill and ink, some groups use typewriter and carbon paper.

February 21: BOOKBINDING – STUDIO SESSION

To read in advance:

- Ling Ma (2018). *Severance*, through end of Chapter 14.
- Julia Miller, “Introduction”. *Books will Speak Plain*, 2010.

To watch in advance:

- [Making Manuscripts](#)

In class: Bookbinding studio. Instructor: Javiera Barrientos.

February 28. INSCRIPTION

To write in advance:

- [Blog Assignment #3](#): Identify one argument in our readings this semester that was either corroborated or challenged by the bookbinding exercise, or that you wouldn't have noticed in the reading if you hadn't done the hands-on bookbinding. If you have any questions remaining about last week's readings, feel free to raise them here as well.

To read in advance:

- Amaranth Borsuk, *The Book*. pp. 86-91 & 97-110
- Lapham's Quarterly. [“How Books Became Cheap”](#)
- Emma Smith. “Queen Victoria in the trenches”. *Portable Magic*.
- Keith Houston, *The Book*, pp. 61-81 (Introduction, “Starting the Presses,” “Type’s Founding,” “The Press Itself,”)

To watch in advance:

- [Chinese Arts and Crafts: Wooden Moveable-type Printing](#)
- [Devon Fitzgerald Rare Book School podcast](#).
- Stephen Fry, *The Machine that Made Us*
- [Making Books](#). Encyclopaedia Britannica Films.
- [Presswork: A documentary](#). Rare Book School.

In class experiment: EITHER redact a graph of syllabus into a story or poem OR reassemble 500 characters’ worth of words or phrases from this syllabus into a story or poem.

March 6. PRINTING -- STUDIO SESSION

[spring break]

March 20. PUBLISHING

To write in advance:

- [Blog Assignment #4](#): Identify one passage in *Severance* that you wouldn’t have noticed before encountering one of the concepts that we’ve discussed this semester. Name the concept (for example, “circulation” or “intellectual property” or “infrastructure” – the list could go on...), quote the passage, and explain how the book-making described in *Severance* compares to one or more of the case studies we’ve discussed.

To read in advance:

- Ling Ma. *Severance*, (2018) complete
- Amaranth Borsuk. *The Book*. pp. 205-255.

To watch in advance:

- Terry Belanger, [“Anatomy of a Book”](#).
- [The Bookmakers](#)

In-class experiment: memorization (Ma vs Dickinson)

March 27. READING

To write in advance:

- [Blog Assignment #5](#):

To read in advance:

- Ray Bradbury. *Fahrenheit 451*.

To watch in advance:

- [Fahrenheit 451](#) (Dir. Francois Truffaut) – on reserve
- [Marginalia. Writing in Books?](#)

To browse in advance:

- Europeana. [“The Rise of Literacy in Europe”](#)

In-class experiment: make an audiobook of an excerpt from [Fahrenheit 451](#) (each group chooses a passage)

April 3. MAKING/UNMAKING

To write in advance:

- [Blog Assignment #6](#): Choose one scene that occurs both in Bradbury’s novel and Truffaut’s film. Compare the form and content of its treatment in both: what details appear in one but not the other? how does the camera angle compare to the novelistic narrator’s perspective?

To read in advance:

- Amaranth Borsuk, pp. 111-113 & 140-195.
- Flanders, Julia, Syd Bauman, and Sarah Connell, “Text Encoding,” pp. 104–22 in *Doing Digital Humanities: Practice, Training, Research* (2016), edited by Constance Crompton, Richard J. Lane, and Ray Siemens.

In-class experiment: Use TEI to mark up syllabus AND a Dickinson poem.

Guest speaker: Francesca Giannetti, digital Humanities librarian.

April 10. NOT READING

To read in advance:

- Emma Smith. “Religion of Books”. *Portable Magic*.
- Kirschenbaum. Matthew. [“Prepare for the Textpocalypse”](#)
- [Columbia “Literary AI” exhibit](#).
- Karin Wulf. [“Textpocalypse: A Literary Scholar Eyes the “Grey Goo” of AI”](#)

View in class:

- Cardanus Rider [Richard Saunders]. *Rider's British Merlin : For the Year of Our Lord 1811 Being the Third after Bissextile of Leap Year Adorned with Many Delightful and Useful Verities Fitting All Capacities in the Island of Great Britain's Monarchy. With Notas of Husbandry, Fairs, Marts, and Tables for Many Necessary Uses*. London: Nichols and Son, Printers, Red Lion, Passage, Fleet Street, London., 1811.
- *Dame Wonders' Picture Books: Mary Goodchild*. New York: McLoughlin Bro's, 30 Beekman St., 1860..
- CROSS, John Cartwright & SANDERSON, James *The Pirate's Glee. (An Enemy Appears in View) Sung by Mr. Helme, Mr. Pilbrow, & Mr. Herbert at the Royal Circus in Black Beard. The Words by J.C. Cross. Composed by J. Sanderson.*, n.d.
- Tom Phillips, *A Humument*. (various editions)
- Graham Rawls, *Women's World*.

In-class experiment: "book autopsy"

Optional extra-credit, before class April 10: Attend and write a 300-500-word summary of a panel on the history and future of audiobooks, featuring Karl Berglund (assistant professor of literature at Uppsala University, Sweden), "The most difficult stage to study"? Understanding reading practices through streaming audiobook data" & Justin Tackett (Leverhulme Early Career Fellow, English & Comparative Literary Studies, University of Warwick), "Sound Technology and Vocalizing the Text", 12-1:30, Murray 302.

April 17. SELF-PUBLISHING

To read in advance:

- Mark Todd & Esther Pearl Watson. *Whatcha Mean, What's a Zine?* (2006), pp. 1-65.
- Alex Wrekk. *Stolen Sharpie Revolution* (2005), pp. 1-47.

In-class experiment: MAKE: a zine, drawing on whatever aspect of this semester's theoretical and practical readings you most want to remember after the end of semester. After class, mail it to someone whom you think it would interest. (Stamps will be provided!)

Guest speaker: Brian Cassidy, bookseller.

April 24: PRESENTATIONS

In class:

- Present research projects

In-class experiment: use the medium of your choice to annotate this syllabus as feedback on the semester. What will you remember and forget from this course? What advice would you give future students about how to get the most out of the course? What would you change the next time around, if you were teaching this course?

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