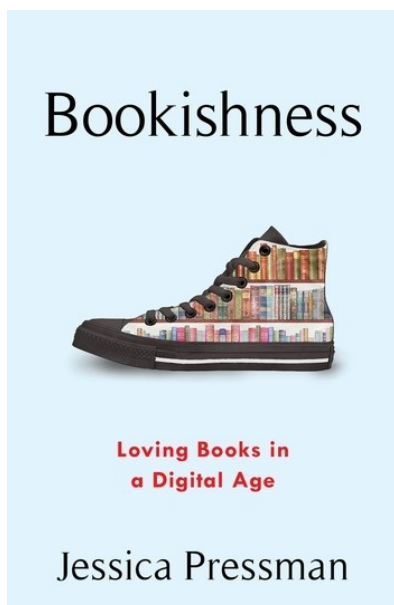


Books: why and how do we care about them?

Ana Sabino

UNIVERSIDADE DE COIMBRA | CLP

ORCID: 0000-0002-6143-9426



Jessica Pressman, *Bookishness: Loving Books in a digital Digital Age*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2020, 216 pages. ISBN: 9780231195133

Everyone was talking about Jessica Pressman’s “bookishness” much before Jessica Pressman’s *Bookishness* came out. The author had already remarkably debated bookishness as a concept in the *Michigan Quarterly Review*’s 2009 Fall edition, written as a result of her talk in at an earlier symposium organized by Jonathan Freedman and also called “Bookishness”. From then on, her view on the concept gained notable traction and has been cited extensively in digital humanities, media studies and neighbouring fields. It seems to put a name on our eagerness to hold, feel, smell, and collectively cherish these printed and bound stacks of paper we call books. It allows us to tag other objects that have similar qualities to books. It bridges social sciences, book, media, and technology studies. It is an aesthetic, above

all linked to consumerism patterns and cultural status — more than literature *per se* and not necessarily in a good or bad way. It certainly is a useful concept, now fully expanded in this volume. *Bookishness*, the book, collects a series of talks that the author gave around the globe for the past ten years. Each essay seems to present take a different angle to the question “What is a book?” and, specifically, “Why do we (still) care about it, in its physical form?”. The truth is that we do care, so much that bookishness spills over into so many objects other than books, and loving books is such a visible and functional social descriptor.

The text is structured into six main chapters, besides the introduction and a coda. Following an introductory “How and Now Bookishness”, each chapter describes a particular view on books: we are prompted to see them as “Shelter”, “Thing”, “Fake”, “Weapon” or “Memorial”. These are bite-sized, roughly twenty-page essays, each one taking part on a continuous view but also independent from each other, as expected in a collection of lectures. These essays generally progress through describing books or book objects that raise the questions examined in each chapter. The first chapter thoroughly presents and describes the (digital) context that made bookishness thrive. It is, in a way, a history of the death of the book, the last wave of which is largely responsible for the emergence of bookishness. It also deconstructs the idea that linear reading is the expected norm, is generally beneficial, and its decline is harmful for reading at large.

After this, we are invited to recognize the way in which books can and have been providing us “Shelter”. Books or book spaces (such as libraries, book shops or reading spaces) often offer refuge from a fast and highly networked world, not only in our lives but notably within contemporary narratives themselves, in very diverse ways. The chapter ends by questioning the underlying privilege and exclusiveness of this shelter offered by bookishness, which can be viewed as elitist. “Thing” makes us appreciate the book as something that is actually *there*, and this materiality is especially important in a hyper-connected time when presence and intimacy are being revised. Even the way unread books haunt us in our desks makes a point in showing us that their presence makes them both palpable to our hands and close to our hearts, all the way to the point of fetishism if necessary. This is especially noticeable in the way books are often characters of their own, in so-called “it-narratives”, emerging during the nineteenth century but also very present in our time, as the various examples described well seem to prove. Another interesting phenomenon are “Fake” books, which are so pervasive in our culture — for instance, objects shaped like books used as home décor or printed fabric that can make your bed sheets double as a page-turner. These, of course, border on the idea of kitsch, but most importantly

they underline how much we are attached to books in general, and not only to literature; in a global way and not only within a literary niche. Surprisingly, the author also presents books as a “Weapon” — mainly because of how they can potentially be used as a response to threats presented by the digital. In this chapter we find an analysis of *House of Leaves* (2000) by Mark Z. Danielewski and *The Raw Shark Texts* (2007), by Steven Hall, which, as the author points out, were seminal objects for this book, their analysis having been where its structure started to take shape. Books can also serve as “Memorial”, representing the loss of presence. This chapter is almost entirely dedicated to Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Tree of Codes* (2010), reading it both as text and object — both of which speak of absence and confront us with feelings of the tearing apart and breaking up of/with a book. A final coda offers us a peek into the author’s personal relationship with books and her motivation for writing this one.

During one of the book’s launches, the author stated that she has always tried to dissolve the binary between print and digital. Why is it still important, given that digital is far from new and even post-digital has been around for several years now? Pressman stresses that code has made us increasingly aware of our real bodies. Now, during a time in which physical contact with other human bodies has been put into a halt, she reinforced her study of the bodies of literature. Less circumstantial and more important is the fact that digital technologies are, now more than ever, bringing us back to the printed form, for instance enabling wonderful print work that is widely accessible and affordable and hence allowing bookishness to expand.

As for *Bookishness* the object: the paperback cover is plasticised with a matt, rubbery finish that reminds us how much we love to hold these objects in our hands. The use of a sneaker shoe on the cover is somewhat questionable when there are so many other and such beautiful objects pictured inside, and frankly I am disappointed with the typography on said cover — both the choice of typeface for the title and author and the use of type itself could be more elegant. The light blue of the background seems to have the purpose of taking us into the digital realm, but the result is slightly bland. This book’s materiality deserved more, or better, but maybe that demand was petrifying for the publisher’s designer, who was most likely pressed for time. It is still a good volume to hold in our hands and highly readable in every way.

In summary, what is Jessica Pressman’s *Bookishness*? It’s a light, yet insightful book, chock-full of examples of works of literature that play with the idea of bookishness, filled with both curious facts and critical history about printed and bound books and their relationship with other media. But

most of all, it is about our own relationship with them. The subtitle — loving books in a digital age — is quite accurate, since this work is mainly about our emotions towards books, in a time when digital technologies have both threatened and enhanced them so much. But is it a love letter to books? Or is it a piece of criticism towards the way we replaced actually reading books to merely showing them off to attain social and cultural recognition and status? The reader will probably find that it is both.

© 2021 Ana Sabino.

Licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).