

Writing in Practice volume 9
Storytelling with Books
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ABSTRACT:

This image/text essay *Storytelling with Books* documents part of a hybrid art/creative writing project. The project explored the possibilities of storytelling using dying books which were being thrown away from thrift shops. A collection of books were folded into sculptural forms. A short story called *The Bookbird* was written using the text redacted from one of these folded books. It told the story of a book transforming into a bird. The *Bookbird* short story was then taken through further iterations—it was cut up and pasted into another dying book where it interacted with the text in that book and a cut-up musical score. It was then revised and typed up again. As it went through further iterations the story gained agency—it was a story about transformation and the narrating character, the bookbird, gained agency and wanted to fly. This new iteration of the short story was cut up into 4000 individual words which were glued onto 4000 small feathers. When each feather was dropped it would land word-up. In a silent durational performance the featherwords were moved by air-moving objects (fans, feathered gloves and shoes). Constantly rearranged, the featherwords could fly, move, be read in random sequences. Air played the role of a ghost-writer. The *Bookbird* short story, raised from within a dying book, became a text which fully transforms.

Keywords:

artists books / altered books / cut-ups / creative writing / practice-based research / storytelling / iterative process / performance writing / visual performance / experimental writing

WRITER'S STATEMENT: ON BOOK-SADNESS

I have been using the books from the sale bins in thrift shops to write with. Altering the text inside them, redacting, highlighting, bandaging words underneath pale masking tape.

One day, I hold one of my transformed books in my hands and whisper its fragmented narrative aloud, imagining I am reading it to a blind ghost-reader. In this quiet moment I feel incredibly sad.

It's lockdown again.

Will anyone ever read these books or will they become untouchable carriers of disease?

Will anyone experience the gaps between these words as a pause, as something only slightly louder than silence, while the whole online world is shouting?

I wonder what will change—if museums, galleries, bars and restaurants will still exist, if bookshops and libraries will survive, if people will still want to find a corner in which they can sit quietly and read. Or will everyone be too afraid to breathe each other's air?

WHAT TO DO WITH BOOK-SADNESS:

Obtain a selection of dying books. Think of the shapes which paper can be folded into: paper boats, pirate hats, aeroplanes.

Fold a page, a book, a library of thrown-away books.

Alter the width and direction of the folds, overlapping page-edges like feathers, like wings.

Keep the hands moving while the books are folded into three-dimensional forms. If more shapes are needed, more sculptural possibilities—reach for a scalpel knife.



Figure 1: *Folded Book Sculptures*. *Ghost Writing Installation, Engine Room Gallery, 2020* (Photo credit Jessica Chubb)

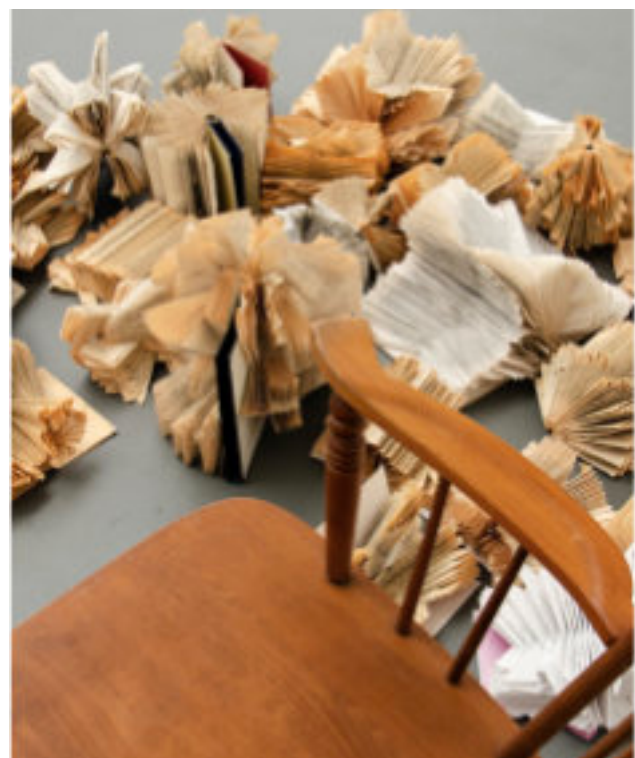


Figure 2: *Gathering Books*. *Ghost Writing Installation, Engine Room Gallery, 2020*. (Photo credit Jessica Chubb)



Figure 3: *A Bookbird* (folded book sculpture, 2019)

STORYTELLING WITH BOOKS:

Buy a selection of dying books from sale tables in thrift shops.

Fold the pages so the books have new shapes.

Fill a floor with them.

Take photographs of them.

Spend time with them and consider what they want to become.

Choose one folded book and redact the text so the words which are left visible tell the story of the book's transformation: from book into bird.

Type up these words as a transcript. Extending the transcript, write a short story.

Cut up the short story and paste it into another dying book.

Bring the book back to life with a spell of letters—
transform the letter O into raindrops.



Figure 4: *The Bookbird*, altered book detail. (Photo credit Jessica Chubb)

Transcript:
It is raining outside.



Figure 5: *The Bookbird*, altered book detail. (Photo credit Jessica Chubb)

A large bird flies in. Its feathers sound like heaven paper – as it grabs me by hunger-pinching my spine in its beak.

A nurse comes rushing, flapping her hands, shouting at it to get out.

The bird flies out of the window with me.



Figure 6: *The Bookbird*, altered book detail. (Photo credit Jessica Chubb)

It speaks into my spine, as it tells me that it has been looking for me since it saw me kidnapped in that handbag, and what on earth have I been up to... allowing myself to be held hostage for so long after making a perfectly grantable wish... And here is the story – almost alone in my own universe – I should have been telling all along – that when books aren't certain they are – admit no manner of doubt – wanted any more, they can sooner or later become birds, by flying like this – by leaving like this, with everything they – ever thought they wanted being left behind.

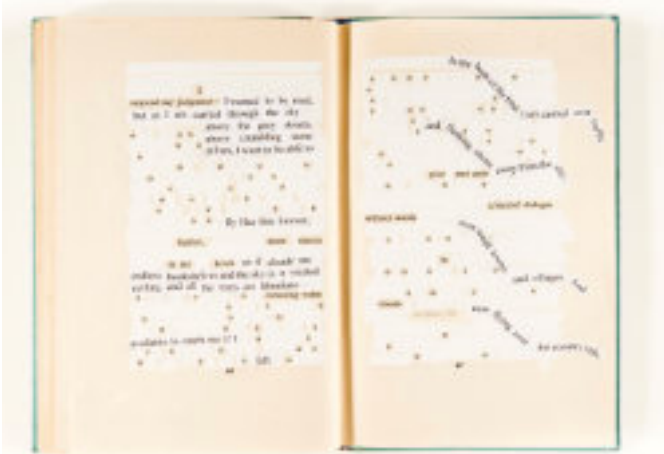


Figure 7: *The Bookbird*, altered book detail. (Photo credit Jessica Chubb)

I suspend my judgement – I wanted to be read, but as I am carried through the sky above the grey streets, above

crumbling stone pillars, I want to be able to fly like this forever. Lighter, more sincere in my heart, as if clouds are endless bookshelves and the sky is a vaulted ceiling, and all the trees are librarians – caressing voice – available to catch me if I fall. In the beak of the bird I am carried over traffic and flashing sirens, away from the city. Gaze and gaze, a kind of dialogue without words, over small towns and villages, and in clouds, another life, now flying over the countryside...

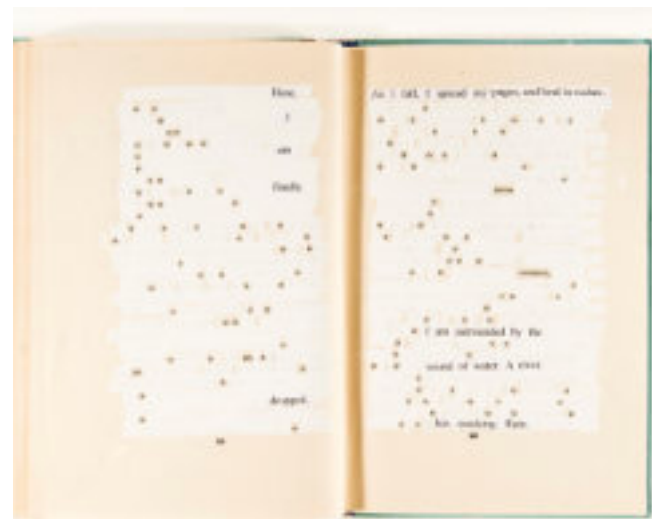


Figure 8: *The Bookbird*, altered book detail. (Photo credit Jessica Chubb)

Here, I am finally dropped. As I fall, I spread my pages and land in rushes. Stem essence. I am surrounded by the sound of water. A river. Ice, cracking. Rain.



Figure 9: *The Bookbird*, altered book detail. (Photo credit Jessica Chubb)

My pages turn grey as words wash away. When the rain stops, sound of running water, I shake and ruffle myself dry in an icy gale. I'm shocked as I find my voice and exclaim a loud melody. Doh, Quiet, Soh, Doh, Doh, Soh, Quiet, Doh. Note: sing these notes first slowly, then quickly, and again with a sound long-drawn-out. Master one note at a time. I try again, a little more softly. Doh, Quiet, Soh, Quiet, Oh, quiet, Doh, Doh, Soh, please, Soh, Doh. Sing these notes as tree and water meditation.



Figure 10: *The Bookbird*, altered book detail. (Photo credit Jessica Chubb)

Feeling fresh and new, as if I am made of nerves and nonsense, I watch feet and legs emerge from my spine. Staggering, I gasp at my new body. What a body it is! Welcome. A varnished beak. Eyes that feel as solid as gold. Cardboard feathers on my back. Paper feathers – longing – on my chest. I stamp icy ground with my new claws. How remarkable they are. They're made of coils of tightly wound paper. Eternity means rebirth, as long as desire for life is not extinguished. I nip in and out of rushes and draw myself to my full height as if I am greeting the dawn. I fire up a call as sleet washes my grey feathers white. Doh Doh Quiet Soh Soh quiet Doh Doh Me Me Soh Soh please. What do I follow? A great desire to try adventure.



Figure 11: *The Bookbird*, altered book detail. (Photo credit Jessica Chubb)

Think well before you choose to escape at your own risk – into the new life. Senses open. Above me, the sky fills with dark clouds.

I watch the thickening clouds for a long time, as if they hold all the ink in the world inside them, and when ink falls as rain, an entirely new story will be written – replenished – across this winter landscape. But it isn't rain these clouds bring, they bring... s n o w s n o w s n o w s n o w s n o w... and thousands of birds.

SPECULATION:

'The Bookbird' short story is not a closed text.

It is still fresh and unpublished.

It speculates: it asks, *what if iterations allow the air to come in. What if flight can occur between words? Cut it into paragraphs. Sentences. Cut the sentences into individual words. Repeating itself, the story gains agency. Becomes character (even more bird-like). This story, raised from within a dying book becomes a story which transforms. It wants to fly. What if... a ghost writer is required?*



Figure 12: *Ghost Writer Required* (glass bottle, redacted book page, salt, air). *Ghost Writing Installation, Engine Room Gallery, 2020.*



Figure 13: *The Bookbird* (short story on four-thousand feathers)

RITUAL:

Glue individual words from a cut-up story onto tiny feathers.
 Listen out for voices from the future:
 "What are feathers but the ghosts of birds?" [15]
 Feathers are words.
 Air is a ghost and a writer and a destination.
 Become aware—recurring words whisper in a language of haunted nouns:
snow icicle glass echo fragment trauma frost cage cold gale winter mirror ice trap silence ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost
 Do not be afraid. Use ritual.
 Select/make objects which move air.
 Add more feathers.
 Read fairytales. Transformations and iterations, illusions and reversals.
 Impossible tasks.
 Think of what stories were, long before they were printed as books. Long before books were dying things. Be sad about the past and the present.
 Listen out for voices from the future:
 The future has a strange-sounding voice.
 You'll know it, when you hear it calling.
 Paint a pair of red shoes, white.



Figure 14: *Air-moving Objects* (altered fans, feathers, bellows, colander, shoes, gloves, broom, horn). *Ghost Writing Installation, Engine Room Gallery, 2020.*

TIME AND MOVEMENT:

In a silent room with a locked door for an hour the storyteller lines up the air-moving objects.
 Feather-words fall from a pillowcase scattering word-up (as they have been designed to fall).
 The storyteller sees the story; the story sees the storyteller.
 For two hours the storyteller's words are rearranged by air.
 Repetition. Iteration. Repetition. Three hours pass.
 The silent room is a living book. Its floor becomes a page.
 The door is a spine.
 For four hours the eye of a camera is watching the storyteller who doesn't want to be watched.
 For five hours a story moves around inside this room.
 For six hours the door (spine) remains locked.
 The storyteller can't read the story so the story reads the storyteller.



Figure 15: *Video stills (detail).* *Ghost Writing Installation, Engine Room Gallery, 2020.* (Photo credit Jessica Chubb)



Figure 16: *Air-writing. Ghost Writing Installation, Engine Room Gallery, 2020.* (Photo credit Jessica Chubb)

THIRTEEN WAYS TO RE/WRITE A STORY: THE BOOKBIRD

Fold some old books and fill a floor with them.
 Co-write a story with a folded book, about a book transforming into a bird.
 Cut the story into fragments and paste it inside an old book.
 Cut the story into individual words and glue each word to an individual feather.
 Gather objects which move air, and take them to an empty room where no one else is breathing. Silently drop the feathers onto the floor. Let one of the objects write nothing at all.
 Let a feathered fan write.
 Let a colander write.
 Let gloves write.
 Let a broom write.
 Let a flat fan write.
 Let bellows write.
 Let shoes write.



Figure 17: *Red Shoes, Disguised*. Ghost Writing Installation, Engine Room Gallery, 2020.

STORIES TRANSFORM:

They always have, and always will. Storytellers tell stories which can be told, and hide stories which can't. From within stories, haunted nouns whisper of private ghosts. Storytellers make illusions, believe in illusions, become illusions. Iteration: tell the same story over and over again and it will open itself to flight.

Let a storyteller write...

WRITER'S STATEMENT: ON STORYTELLING:

To take a prose world contained in a story and break it down into words is to break apart a story that has been carefully put together. This violence is a strange thing. The vocabulary has already been chosen. So the story is the same but it has been cut by scissor blades. The story is broken so it can repeat itself. It is pasted onto feathers in order to be re-written by air—something I can't even see. Today, I'm sad. And

here I am with what I have written, destroyed. The story can't be reassembled yet still I attempt to resurrect it. I move air, stirring feather-words with a set of antique bellows. A colander. A fan. A horn that doesn't work. I am inside one story or all stories in this silent room, trying to remake something which has been cut into pieces. I think of Rumpelstiltskin's demand for a first-born, and hands bleeding as they spin straw into gold. A pair of feathered shoes that used to be red are on my feet, almost tripping me at every step. These shoes are only pretending they aren't red enough to kill me. Delicate gloves, pale lace pierced through with quills, are tight on my fingers. The feathers flex as I move, transforming my hands into dead wings. I am writing with dead birds and air. I am inside the heart of a fairy tale.

This is an impossible task.

A story I have written, repeats, and rearranges itself. I repeat myself: I write stories because there is an untellable story that has always haunted me. It is a ghost which is fragmented inside this throat I can't tell it with. I write stories to stay alive—I can't say this aloud but can write it down. To assemble stories piece by piece is to keep trying to remake this untellable story, to re-write it yet again as something else, something more, something tellable. And now I break apart one of the tellable stories I have written, destroying its carefully constructed phrases. This violence is a strange thing—I have softened it with feathers. And yet these feathers are no longer soft. They were plucked from the corpses of dead birds. Once living, flying, singing, scratching, nesting, screeching, creatures. Words on feathers travel on the air I move with a fan, a witch's broom, a white pillowcase. This locked room is silent of bird-song, silent of the violence of claws, silent of the sounds of sharpness and torn-softness—all these silences move with the air through this untelling. Red shoes

are murderous because they can dance without ever ending the dance. They step in these gaps between words which are filled with so many conflicting forces; slowness, air, violence, empathy, destruction, reconstruction, iterations, movement, disintegration.

Rumpelstiltskin was hungry for something no one would ever give him. He demanded a first-born but what if he really wanted
I mean what if all he ever wanted, was to spin gold into straw?
An illusion attempts to re-write a story with the feathers of dead birds, reconstructing a story that will never be read because it has been broken apart. It is an impossible task.

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About the author

Jess Richards is the author of three novels: *Snake Ropes*, *Cooking with Bones* and *City of Circles*, all published by Sceptre in the UK. She also writes short fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry – many of these have been published in various anthologies. She is currently working on a creative nonfiction project on the theme of birds and ghosts. Originally from Scotland, Jess currently lives in New Zealand with her wife. She completed her PhD,

'Illusions, Transformations and Iterations: Storytelling as Fiction, Image, Artefact', at Massey University in 2020. This hybrid art and creative writing project culminated in a set of visually and textually transformed books.