

In 2015, I conducted a survey with 178 readers of a particular kind of book: the **photobook**. The survey asked questions of readers which are more commonly directed to makers of the book — about influences, work spaces, habits and reflections on process. Then in 2019, together with a variety of other research methods, I produced an account of the process of photobook reading in the form of eight ‘acts’ which spanned interactions with the book from before it enters the hands, and long after it is put down.

- Distance reading
- Inspectional reading I
- Inspectional reading II
- Progressional reading
- Conceptual reading
- Assimilatory reading
- Shelf reading
- Re-reading

As a significant part of a larger research project, these eight acts seek to encourage those engaging with books through production, review, sale and archival activities, to elevate their consideration of the reader as central to understanding a book’s life and its role in the realisation of meaning. In our Coventry Creates research project, Lucie Felix has brought her experience as an artist and children’s book author to aid the augmentation of this research for a new audience. Together we conducted interviews with local readers to sit atop a substantial base of existing data, and from which Lucie has constructed both an artists’ book with make-at-home instructions, and a video piece suggestive of the action and involvement of the reader.

“It’s a fun process... I’ve always enjoyed stories but I’ve never enjoyed English in school... in photobooks you still get that story arc but in a more visual manner, and that enjoyment is back. The learning is important but it comes second”.

For us, the connections between the photobook and the illustrated children’s book offered fascinating similarities. Both forms of the book often rely on physical properties and the haptic action of the reader, both build regularly on an interplay between text and image, and readers returning for re-reading like with few other forms of book. The work seen here presents both sets of readers with a view of reading to compare to their own, and with it, a set of simple questions which can be used as prompts for conversation that moves beyond discussion of the author, or of cognition, to explore more fully our reading habits.

- Where do you read? Does it depend on the type of reading you are doing?
- Where do you keep books and what does this say about your relationship with them?
- What happens when you close a book?
- What books do you re-read? Why? What’s different in returning to that book?
- What makes a good reading? Can a good reading be constructed from a book that you don’t like?

“When I finish a book I leave it on the desk and it reminds me to reflect on it. It nudges me to think about what I read and what I understood. Physically and mentally I have it sticking around for a few days”.

check in | donate | exchange | contact

If safe to do so, consider sharing books with friends, family and neighbours if you don’t already. Whilst reading is a very personal experience it offers a common space of discussion when books are returned.

Check in with local bookshops and libraries, they are fantastic hubs for reading support and information. Many have run online readings during lockdown and sought to help readers get started with digital books too.

Consider buying a copy of you or your child’s favourite book for a local library or school that may be stretched for funds. Always check if donations are accepted first and ask how to go about it.

Revisit your books and see if there are any you no longer want to keep, or your child is no longer interested in. You may be able to find a local pop-up library or book shelter to place them in.

Books help shape our understanding of the world. Some introduce us to new ways of thinking and feeling. In these instances it can be worth seeking contact with the author or publisher to see how they might be able to provide resources or books themselves for communities and groups who would enjoy or learn from the work.

This project has been set amidst the landscape of Covid-19 which has, and will continue to present, a dual challenge to the book. It restricts our ability to browse, examine and purchase in brick-and-mortar shops, and simultaneously engenders a feeling of unease at the sharing of these tactile works between readers. While reading has not been paused, significant restrictions have been placed on access to books via lending libraries or family and friends sharing -- privileging those with established reading means.

So, while bookshops were closed and books in universities, schools and nurseries were sanitised or locked away, we’ve been thinking not only about existing reading habits in a time of maintenance, but about how readers can support one another.

“With the photobooks I have the interpretation is always changing with where I am in life... you can see the transition from when you first read a book to when you revisit it later”.