



# BOOKS!!

ECL 596: Professor Jessica Pressman  
Fall 2025

Day 18: Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking  
My Library" (1931)

# Walter Benjamin (1892-1940)

- Jewish Philosopher and social critic.
- Marxist theorist.
- Frankfurt School.
- Fled Nazis & committed suicide during escape



# Discussion:

- Where to start?
- What does this essay do?

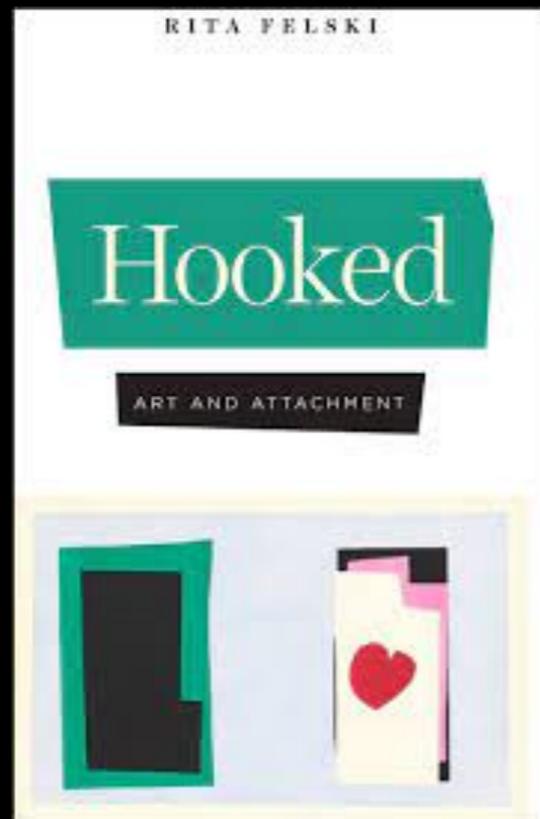
# From your blogs- creativity of the collector

- JJ: Benjamin describes important information beyond the text, such as “dates, place names, formats, previous owners, bindings and the like: all these details must tell [the collector] something—not as dry, isolated facts, but as a harmonious whole” (63-64). All of these can provide some value for the collector, thus demonstrating that value does not come from any single place. Rather, it is ascribed by the collector themselves.
- MYLES: What struck me is how Benjamin distinguishes between collecting and a collection. He emphasizes that a true collector’s passion “borders on the chaos of memories” and that the act of collecting is tied to stories and histories rather than just utility or monetary value..In “Unpacking my Library”, Benjamin reminds us that collecting and creating one’s own archive is not passive, but an emotional and physical endeavor.
- DELINDA: The tension Benjamin describes between order and disorder in collecting really resonated with me. Collectors want to organize and catalog everything, but the actual experience of collecting is messy and emotional and sometimes totally random.

## From your blogs- books as personal memories

- ALIN: Benjamin doesn't talk about books in a practical way, like something to read and then put away. Instead, he sees them as companions that carry stories beyond the ones written inside. Each book has a history of where it came from, how it was found, and what moments in life it connects to. I find that beautiful because it shows how reading and collecting are emotional acts. They are about memory and attachment, not just knowledge...In the end, Benjamin's essay feels like a love letter to books and to the act of collecting them.

# Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (University of Chicago Press, 2020)



“stress on attachment: how people connect to art and how connects them to other things” (viii)

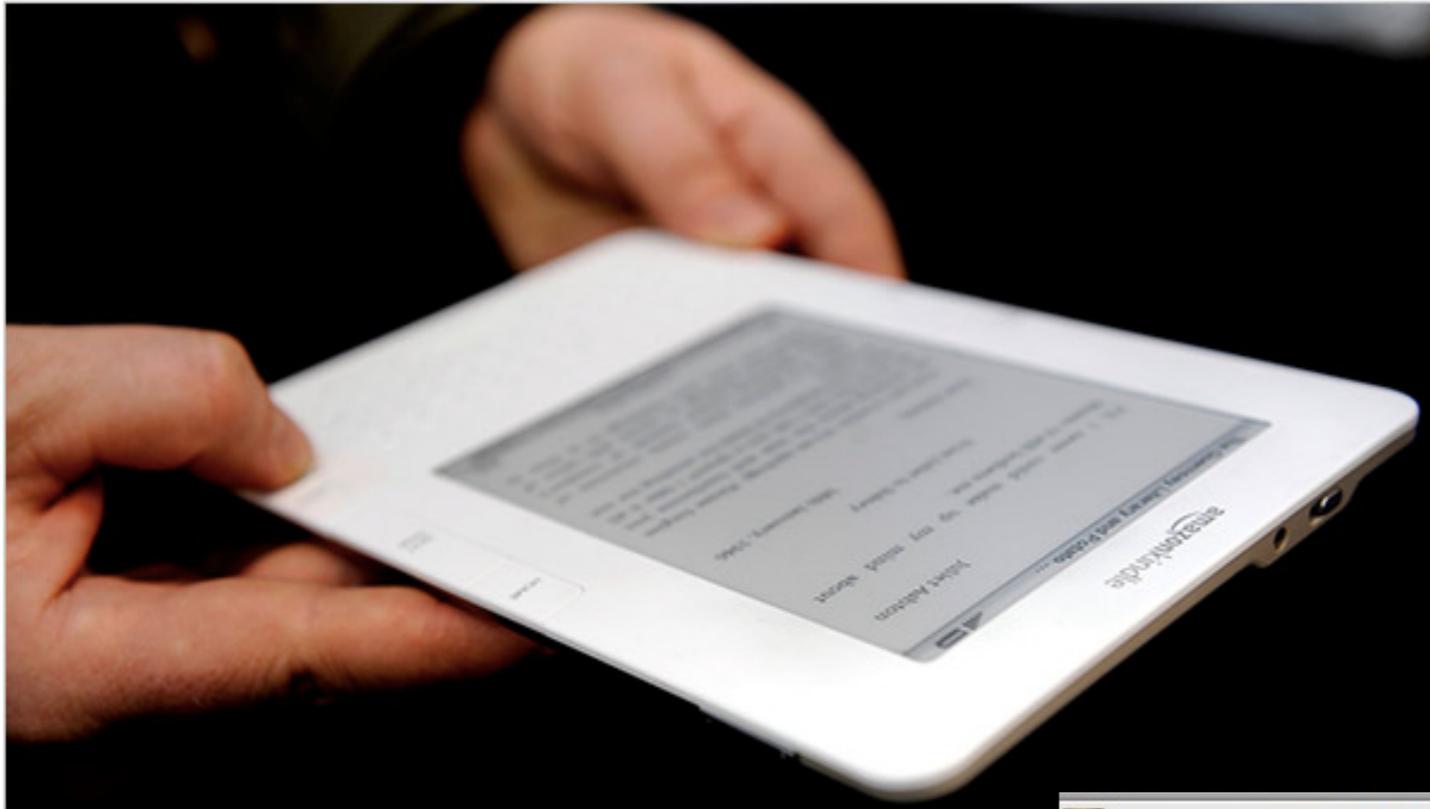
“Why do works of art matter? Because they create, or cocreate, enduring ties” (1)

“Works cannot be cordoned off from those who actualize them; they are constituted via the act of reception” (147)

“People are bound together by a work; it is the rationale for students and teacher coming together” (156)

# BOOKSHELVES AS SELF- PRESENTATION

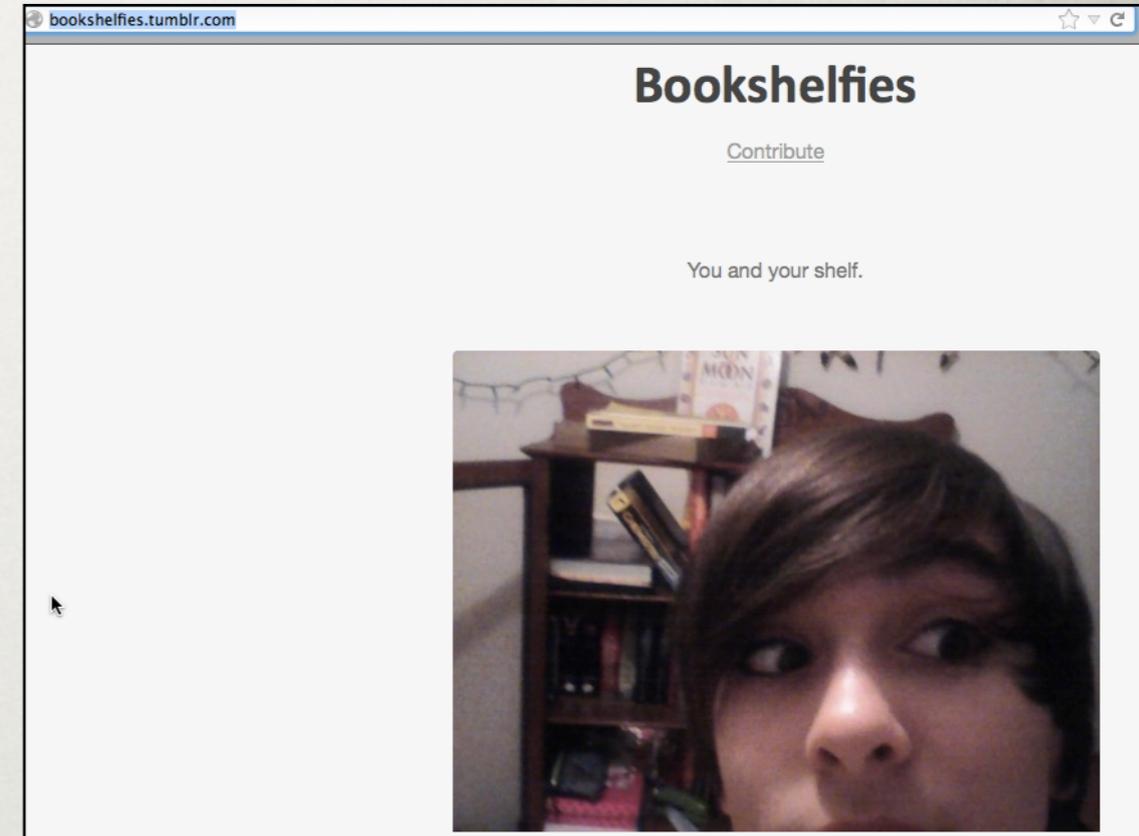
## With Kindle, Can You Tell It's Proust?



WRITTEN IN PIXELS The Kindle 2.

By JOANNE KAUFMAN  
Published: April 24, 2009

Emmanuel Dunand



## BOOKSHELF PORN

Porn for book lovers. A photo  
blog collection of all the best  
bookshelf photos from around  
the world for people who  
\*heart\* bookshelves.

# Unpacking My Library: Writers and Their Books



# BOOKSHELVES AS FETISH



# Books as Things and Actors

- “books arouse” (59)
- “Property and possession belong to the tactical sphere” (63)
- collecting is personal: “the phenomenon of collecting loses its meaning as it loses its personal owner” (67)

# COLLECTING &/AS OWNERSHIP

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“A collector’s attitude toward his possessions stems from an owner’s feeling of responsibility toward his property”

“ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in his; it is he who lives in them.”

“ And the non-reading of books, you will object, should be characteristics of collectors?... it is the oldest thing in the world”

# Commodity Fetishism

- “The acquisition of books is by no means a matter of money or expert knowledge alone” (63)
- “For a collector’s attitude toward his possessions stems from an owner’s feeling of responsibility toward his property” (66)

[View full results for 'commodity'](#)

[Help on Dictionary Entry](#)

# commodity, *n.*

View as: [Outline](#) | [Full entry](#)

[Quotations: Show all](#)

**Pronunciation:**  /kə'mɒdɪti/

**Forms:** ME-15 **com(m)odite**(e, -dyte, ME-16 **com(m)oditie**, -dytie, -detie, (ME **comedytee**, ... [\(Show More\)](#)

**Frequency (in current use):** ●●●●●●●●

**Etymology:** < French *commodité* (15th cent. in Littré), < Latin *commoditāt-em* ... [\(Show More\)](#)

†1.

**a.** As a quality or condition of things, in relation to the desires or needs of men, etc.: The quality of being 'commodious'; conveniency, suitability, fitting utility; commodiousness. *Obs.*



# fet·ish

*/'fediSH/*

*noun*

1. a form of sexual desire in which gratification is linked to an abnormal degree to a particular object, item of clothing, part of the body, etc.

"Victorian men developed fetishes focusing on feet, shoes, and boots"

**Similar:**

fixation

sexual fixation

obsession

compulsion

mania

weakness



2. an inanimate object worshiped for its supposed magical powers or because it is considered to be inhabited by a spirit.

**Similar:**

juju

talisman

charm

amulet

totem

icon

idol

image





# sou·ve·nir

/,sōovə'nɪr/

*noun*

a thing that is kept as a reminder of a person, place, or event.  
"the recording provides a souvenir of a great production"

**Similar:**

memento

keepsake

reminder

remembrance

token

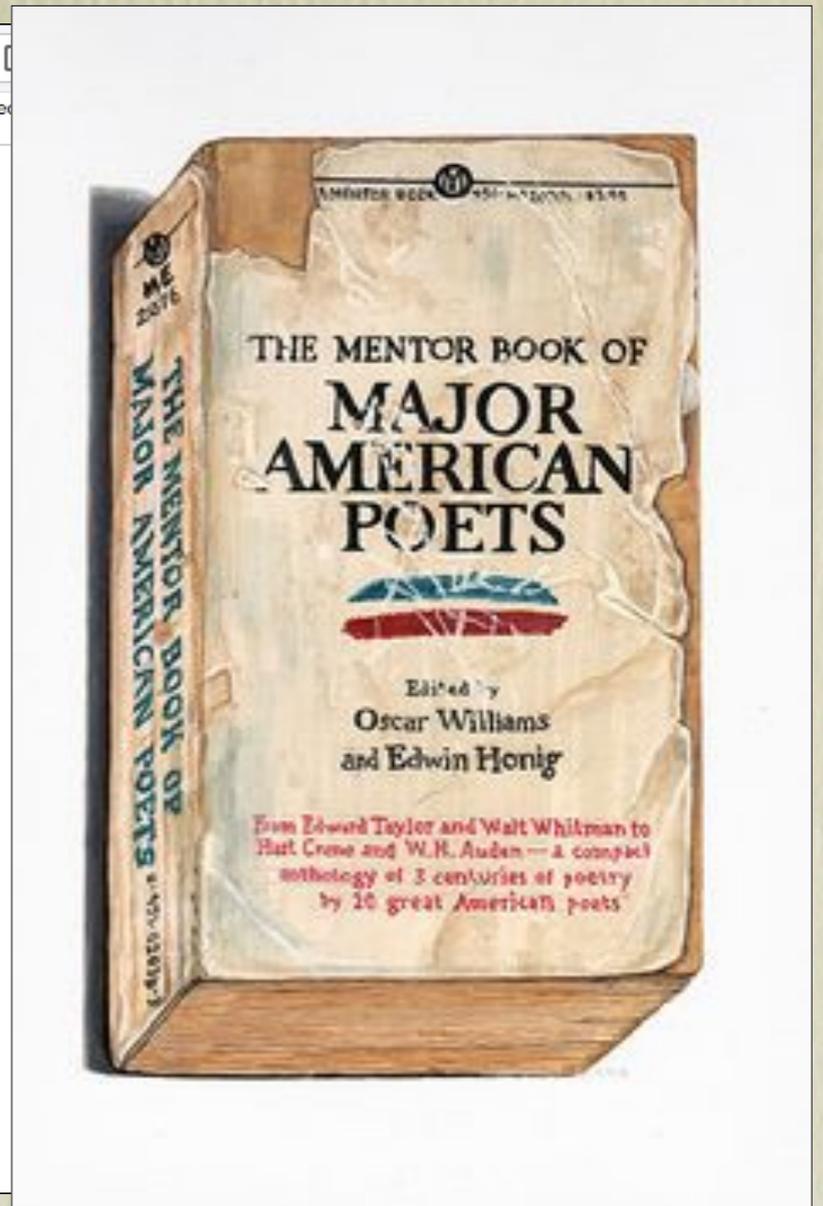
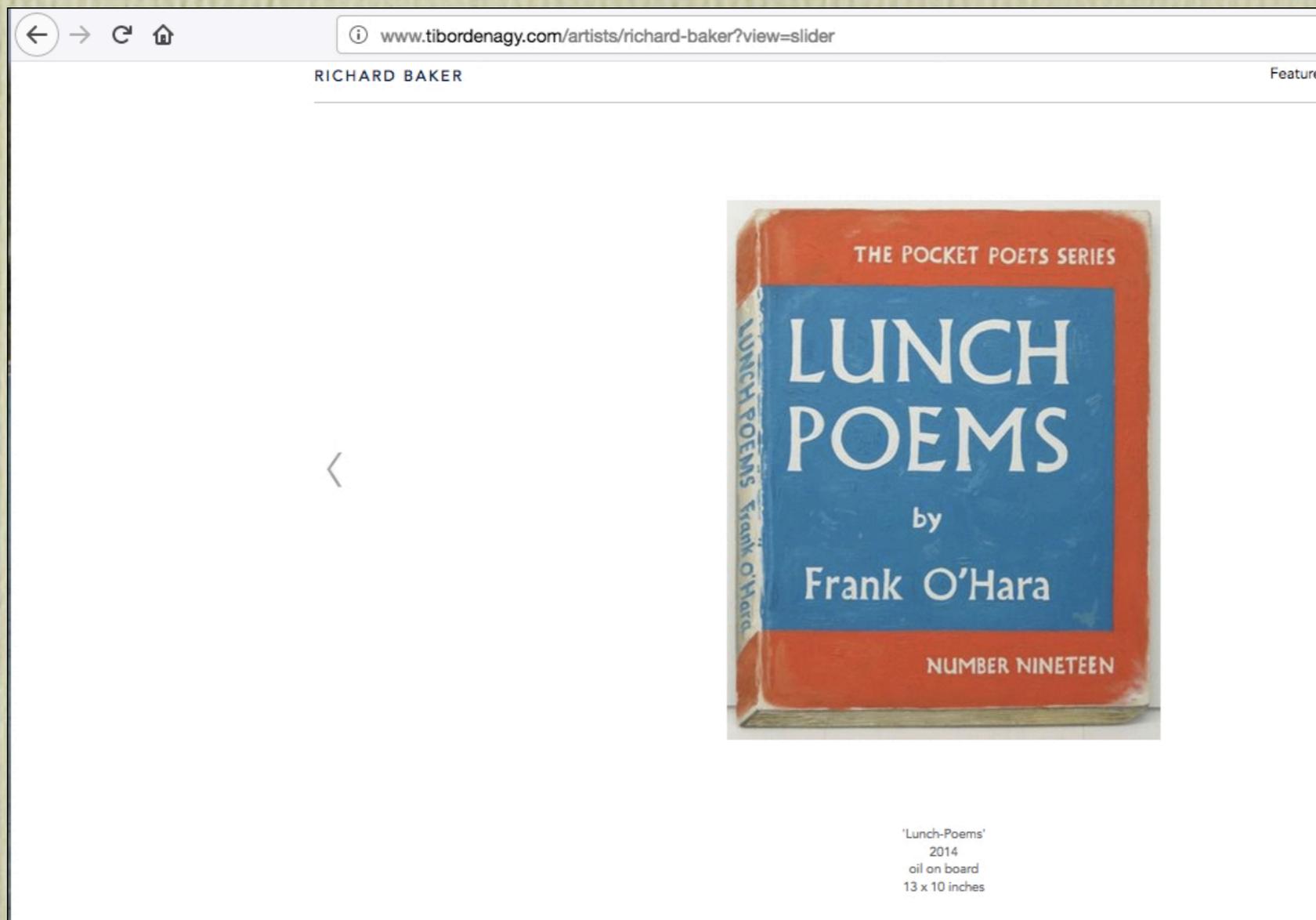
memorial



*verb*

**INFORMAL**

take as a memento.  
"many parts of the aircraft have been souveniried"



- Richard Baker's paintings of books

# Victoria Reichelt's bookshelf painting



“david sequeira,” 2008 (oil on canvas)

# “Organizing the Bookshelf”

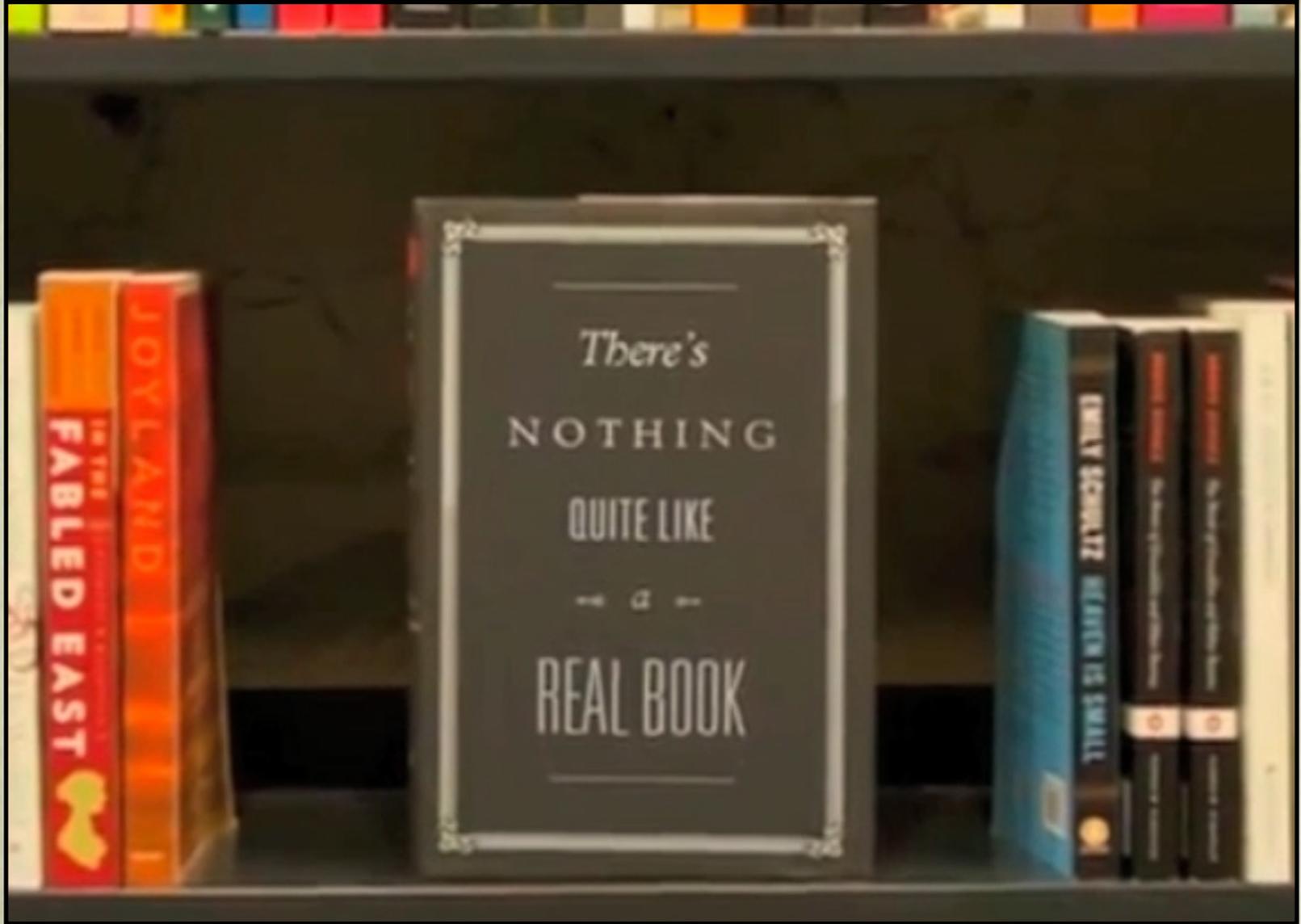
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhRT-PM7vpA>

**Sean Ohlenkamp & Lisa Blonder  
Ohlenkamp (201)**

# Bookish Stop-motion videos



Sean Ohlenkamp, Lisa Blonder Ohlenkamp et. al.  
“The Joy of Books” (2012)



# Take-aways/Questions

- What does this essay add to our learning?
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