

Containing an Introduction

Gill Partington and Adam Smyth

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The book is often imagined as a kind of receptacle. The language of container and cargo – of outsides and insides; of a text being conveyed; of opening up – is so ingrained in the way we speak and think about books that we barely register it. (Did you notice that this copy of *Inscription* has a page listing its ‘contents’?) When it comes to fiction, the metaphors run deeper still. The novel is imagined, Tardis-like, as carrying within its covers its own ‘world’, a space into which the reader can enter and lose themselves. ‘Good’ reading is often understood as immersive reading that forgets its material circumstances – the chair we sit in; the noise outside the window; the hum of the laptop with its nagging emails. And that means climbing in the (metaphorical) box of the novel. As more than one of the contributors to this issue note, this language of reading as ‘immersion’ is common. Gérard Genette’s theory of paratext uses these spatial metaphors of containment, too, figuring the book’s covers and front matter as ‘thresholds’ marking the boundaries between the book’s outsides and what lies within.¹

To read a book is to open a door, and to wander inside – and some writers, like George Herbert, in his *The Temple* (1633), exploit this head-on, as reading these poems becomes a process walking through ‘The Church-porch’, past ‘The Altar’ and towards ‘The Windows’. This deeply engrained sense of the book as a container – or, in Herbert’s case, that variety of container called a building – and of reading as an opening of limited space, is in part the reason why so many works of literature are preoccupied with boxes as key elements in their plots. (Start to make a list. Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* – Rodolphe’s Boulanger box of love letters, trinkets, and locks of hair from his female conquests. The caskets in *The Merchant of Venice*. The wardrobe in C.S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Lucy’s coffin in *Dracula*. Catherine Morland’s gothic chest in *Northanger Abbey*. John Masefield’s *The Box of Delights*.) One of literature’s great themes is the container, and writing returns to it because it sees in the box a reflection of its own material form.

But we can think about books as containers in more literal ways, too. Books have long been used as secret compartments, to hide contraband items, hipflasks, money, and guns. In the late 1970s, supporters of the German Red Army Faction smuggled guns into Stammheim Prison in hollowed out books, including a Christian liturgy text and a legal file. (Nowadays you don’t even have to make your own secret compartment: book-shaped gun safes are available on Amazon or Etsy.)

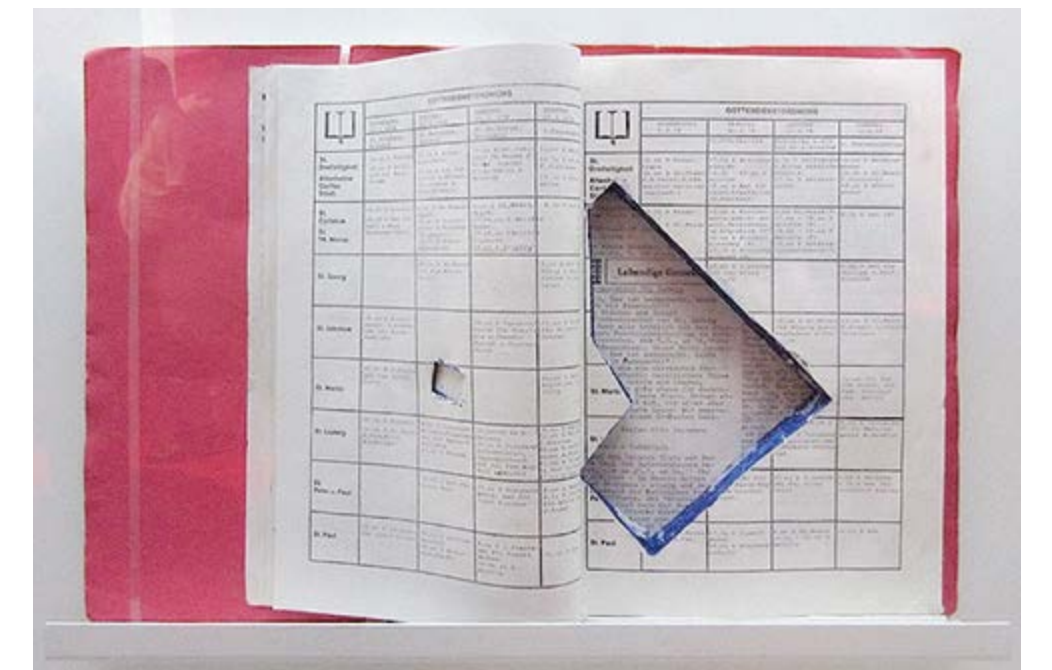
Hanno Böck, *Versteck für Pistole in Akten während der Stammheim-Prozesse. Gezeigt in einer Ausstellung über die RAF in Stuttgart* (2013).

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1. Gérard Genette, *Seuils* (Paris: Seuil, 1987); *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

2. Lucy Razzall, *Boxes and Books in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 97.



There are also certain kinds of text that required distinctive containers of their own, whether because of their size, format or status. Ancient Romans stored their scrolls in cylindrical *capsae*, a device that was revived in a different context in the nineteenth century, when novelty panoramas required purpose-made containers. Robert Cruikshank's *Going to a Fight* (1819) presents a long continuous strip of scenes extending to three and a half metres, housed in a wooden cylinder from which it can be unspooled.



Robert Cruikshank, *Going to a fight: the sporting world in all its variety of style and costume along the road from Hyde Park Corner to Moulsey Hurst* (London: Sherwood, Neely & Jones, 1819).

Cruikshank's scroll sits as a spectacular point within a longer history of many kinds of written texts being contained within boxes for practical purposes. Medieval coffers made from wood, often with leather coverings and metal fittings, might carry and protect a Book of Hours or some other kind of devotional text. These boxes for storing and transporting medieval books don't often survive for the period before 1500, but they must have been common. In 2019, the Bodleian Library in Oxford acquired a rare 15th-century French Gothic coffer that had been used for housing and conveying religious texts: you can see, and rotate, a 3D digital rendering of it at www.cabinet.ox.ac.uk/gothiccoffer. By the 20th century, the box had become a radical alternative to the codex: a way of shaking up what a book might be. We see this in B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969), where the novel is now a series of unbound sections held in a box, the stages of the story to be ordered and reordered by the reader; and in Phyllis Johnson's *Aspen*, first published in 1965 by Roaring Fork Press in New York City: 'the first three-dimensional magazine', each edition a box of loose inclusions, papery and otherwise.

This issue of *Inscription* explores the intersections of text and container from many angles: not only receptacles for books, but books as types of receptacles, and texts in other, container-y formats. Julie Park opens up pocket diaries – the eighteenth-century innovation of preformatted books designed to be filled by the owner: empty containers, destined to be further contained in the pocket. Claire Squires and Beth Driscoll examine chatterboxes – those ephemeral, origami forms containing (potentially) your fortune, and designed to be played with, as much as read.

From chatterboxes to actual boxes: Jean-Philippe Échard, Marie Radepont and Étienne Anheim decode the hidden fragments of text sealed up within the hollows of Early Modern musical instruments. Felicity Brown considers novelty miniature Shakespearean 'book boxes', complete sets of the Bard's work housed in their own tiny bookcases, the miniaturisation a celebration that can also look like an undermining. Joanna Kavenna's story, 'Les Alyscamps', tells us 'how I learned to think outside the box about thinking outside the box'; while the members of 39 Step Press discuss their 'Drood Box': a shufflable, reorderable and unfinishable reworking of Charles Dickens's incomplete whodunnit, the *Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Lucy Razzall, Lora Angelova and Elizabeth Haines unpack the strange twentieth-century history of file containers designed to shield their contents from environmental and pest damage; Canadian poet Christian Bök examines, vertiginously, the concept of scale in avant-garde poetics, both atomic and cosmic in scope; and Felipe Cussen finds nothing to unpack at all in his essay about empty boxes in conceptual art.

Our artists for this edition of *Inscription* open up new ways of thinking about containers, boxes, and enclosures. South Korean artist Kimsooja supplies us with a fabulous cover image of a shipping container painted brightly in the colours of *Obangsaek* – the traditional Korean colour spectrum – containing nothing, yet redolent with all of the artist's personal possessions, transported from her New York apartment to outside Saint-Pierre cathedral in the city of Poitiers, France. Daniel Jackson's AR artwork, *Inside of*, uses Kimsooja's cover image as a trigger or entrance, unfolding as a kaleidoscopic meditation on the interplay between inside and outside, with imaginary, axiomatic forms that can both contain and touch one another, inhabiting impossible coordinates. Erica Baum's photographs show containers in New York City containing nothing but full with the possibility of a framed absence. Harold Offeh presents two photographs of himself delivering a public reading from inside a large checked laundry bag: a container synonymous with migration, and a vessel freighted with historical narratives and bodies. French artist Jérémie Bennequin presents the results of his decade-long erasure of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*: a blank book and a pile of dust. Is the now-vanished novel contained in either?

Jeremy Deller repackages Andy Warhol's famous maxim for our own age: 'In the future, everyone will be cancelled for 15 minutes', and Joel Swanson reflects on his first drawing tool, a crayon and the cardboard packaging it arrived in, creating a whole series of sculptures from unfolded Crayola boxes. Kiff Bamford offers a Möbius strip, challenging readers to hold the filmic reel between their thumbs and fingers and to scroll through the contents, opening themselves to an endless surface that refuses to be either inside or outside. On our LP, Claude Closky mines everyday language that is utilised in advertising and commercials, reflecting on the wide range of human emotions that are contained within the commodified textual landscapes we inhabit. Michael Kelly and James Misson's large print contribution

considers the digital reworkings of typography, with a nod to Marshall McLuhan's observation that 'the "content" of any medium is always another medium'. And underpinning the layout of this whole issue is the iconic art of Daniel Buren, someone whose work has often revolved around disrupting and rethinking the gallery and museum as container (more on that on pages 69–77).

Thinking about containers runs deep in culture, now, and in the past. In Renaissance Europe, classical myths about the power and danger of opening boxes circulated widely, in literature and in painting. Pandora, the first woman on Earth, in Hesiod's *Works and Days* (c. 700 BCE) held a jar containing all the evils of the world, and also hope. Erasmus's translation of the story in his 1508 *Adages* changed 'jar' (or *pitthos* in Greek, used for storing wine or oil) into 'box' (or *pyxis* in Latin).² According to Hesiod, Pandora's curiosity meant that she couldn't resist opening a box left in her care and, in opening it, she released curses upon mankind – death and sickness. As the curses escaped, Pandora shut the lid but only Hope remained inside. Like the best myths, the meaning of this drama isn't stable: a box here is a container of trouble, but also a remnant of hope, and it is also something impossible to resist. Like Orpheus failing to not look back at his wife Euridyce, Pandora cannot not do the thing that is proscribed.

A similar, punishing moral order of secrecy, temptation, and consequence organises the story of Psyche, Greek goddess of the soul, who was set multiple trials by a vengeful Aphrodite to be with her beloved Eros. The fourth of these trials demanded that Psyche travel to the Underworld carrying a golden box to retrieve a piece of Persephone's beauty to bring it back to Aphrodite. Like Pandora, Psyche is instructed to not open the box; the pull of the story is in part about the sheer imaginative power of a box that must not be opened. Persephone fills it with her beauty and on her journey back, as she re-enters daylight, Psyche – refracted in this image through John William Waterhouse's pre-Raphaelite aesthetic – can't resist. What escapes is not beauty but a black, crawling sleep – 'infernal and Stygian' – and Psyche slumps into a deathlike stupor.

Which brings us neatly, perhaps, to the distinctly Stygian contents of one of twentieth-century art's most infamous containers, as discussed by Felipe Cussen. The safely sealed can of Piero Manzoni's *merda d'artista* succinctly advertises its contents, leaving us to take things on trust. Or not. Containers are a risk as much as an invitation. Open at your own peril.



John William Waterhouse, *Psyche Opening the Golden Box*, 1903.