

Books I Hate (and Also Some I Like): with Genevieve Kaplan

written by Katharine Coldiron | November 16, 2017



“Chapbook, settings for these scenes, from Convulsive Editions”

I met [Genevieve Kaplan](#) at a reading, and I kid you not: the moment she got up to read, a beautiful fragrance – jasmine, I think – drifted past me. It continued as she read her fascinating, intellectually adventurous poems, and evaporated when she sat down. It’s possible that the docent walking by at the time was wearing a nice perfume, but I doubt it.



"Poem, "here is love,"
2017"

Kaplan earned her Ph.D. from USC, and she is the author of three chapbooks as well as [in the ice house](#), published by Red Hen. She is also a maker of books in a more literal way, as the editor of a chapbook series from [Toad Press](#) and the creator of poetry in unusual forms: decks of cards, strips of cloth mounted on cacti. She approached this interview in a manner unlike any of the other writers I've talked to.

Tell me about books you hate.

I have a dark spot in my heart for books that aren't well-considered physically, that aren't well-constructed. Elements like poor layout, overzealous gluing, too-thin paper, or ornamental details like deckled edges – these have the effect of, I think, often unintentionally resisting readership.

Any examples?

Two that immediately come to mind:

Viet Thanh Nguyen's [The Sympathizer](#), specifically the Grove 2015 paperback edition. This book crams so many words on a page and has such narrow margins that the design makes the prose practically unreadable. Certainly uninviting.

Daniel Ladrowsky's [Darling, I Love You: Poems from the Hearts of Our Glorious Mutts and All Our Animal Friends](#). This book has a cute, tactile, lightly corrugated coverstock with French folds, and the poems inside are illustrated (by Patrick McDonnell, of the comic strip *MUTTS*), and admittedly the book trying to be cute, a gift book. Where it goes wrong is the deckled edge, which makes it nearly impossible to turn the pages in any normal fashion. Why? A deckle, which is essentially a gesture toward handmade, limited-edition, fine press work, always annoys me but seems particularly egregious when used in mass-produced titles.

Deckle edge is a pox for people who like to read, in my view.

Yes, a pox! I'm a sucker for good, clean design, and I like it when writing is presented clearly and with purpose.

It's so interesting to me that you interpreted this set of questions toward book design rather than book content. How marvelous that you've found a way to dislike books that doesn't disrespect their authors.

In some ways, I see how I'm chickening out. Why not use this forum you've created to talk about content, subject matter, poetics? Here's why: a book's physical aesthetic is a key part of the reader's experience, and I'm interested in how it's becoming more central to many writers' processes as well, especially in poetry. Recent books like Tyehimba Jess's [Olio](#), Phillip B. Williams's [Thief in the Interior](#), or Duriel E. Harris's [No Dictionary of a Living Tongue](#) engage the reader with the page and the book in unexpected ways: the pages may tuck in and fold out; the poems invite the reader to squint their eyes or turn the book in a circle or even instruct to cut out a page and bend words to create a newly physical poem. In these examples the design choices are central to the poems—the content of the book—and are the only way to allow for the type of reading that is.

I have practically infinite patience for writing—I'm always willing to wait and see how the author's choices, even if they seem obtuse at first, eventually reveal themselves to readers; I trust the author to construct the poem or the narrative to the best of their ability. I wonder why I don't extend this same patience to the visual parts of a book. I know the aim for book designers or printers may be different: save money, make a desirable object, get it done quickly. And those may not jibe with the writing inside the book. As a book-maker myself, I'm always thinking about how design choices can highlight or attract us to literary content.

Do you think this aesthetic focus has changed anything about how you read?

Yes, sometimes. Because I'm attracted to good, clean, inviting design, I'm more inclined to pick up books from presses whose aesthetic I admire: [Otis Books/Seismicity Editions](#), [Dorothy: a Publishing Project](#), [BOA](#), etc. I worry that I might miss some good writing, though, by bypassing books whose presentation I just can't get behind.

Have you made different decisions about your writing based on your negative reactions to books?

I really think carefully about presses and journals that I submit my own work to, as I want my poems to find homes that are aesthetically appropriate, pages that invite the reader rather than dissuade. I've also lately found myself writing about design principles, for example, poems about "the running header" – I guess I'm a little obsessed.

Sounds wonderful. I'm slightly obsessed with fonts, and want to write about them, but the font fan rabbit-hole on the internet is actually quite scary.

Oooh—font fan rabbit-hole! I'm both intrigued and afraid.

What was the last book you read that you recommend?

I recently recommended the Blunt Research Group's [The Work-Shy](#) to a friend who is working on a longer poetic series. [Ed. note: don't let the phrasing here fool you. Blunt Research Group is a collective pseudonym; the book is poetry.] In particular, I recommended it for its design, and the way it presents both the poems and the contextualization of those poems (names, prose paragraphs, archival images) in a clear and inviting manner.

What are you reading right now, and do you like it or hate it?

I've been reading [Elena Ferrante](#)'s Neapolitan novels, which I overall I give a thumbs-up to. Although the romance-novel-covers at first kept me from picking these books up, or taking them seriously, really, they've really won me over. *My Brilliant Friend*, the first book in the series, is especially good. The series, however, doesn't feel like it shouldn't be read all at once (which is what I'm doing), and I bristle at the little memory prompts that occur in the latter books, reminding me, for example, of a moment in the character's past two books earlier. I'm like: *I just read that. Don't you trust me? I haven't forgotten book one.*

Do you keep books or give them away?

Both. Once the shelves start to overflow, I try to cull a bit. I used to think a person could never have too many books, but that's not really true. Now I tell myself: the libraries can never have too many books.

Have you ever physically thrown a book across a room?

No. I would never!