

I just burnt a book. I didn't hate the book. In fact it's one of my favourites and I hope you will bear with me whilst I tell you about what happened.

The book in question was a copy of William Blades' *The Enemies of Books*, first published by Trubner & Co., London in 1880. This work is considered to be 'the first systematic study of book and library destruction' with chapters providing a fascinating account of the destructive powers of fire, water, gas and heat, dust and neglect, ignorance and bigotry, the bookworm, other vermin, bookbinders, collectors and lastly, servants and children. Personable and characterfully written, *The Enemies of Books* draws on the author's own experience of biblioclasm, as well as varied historical sources, to discuss both how and why books are destroyed. Highlights include a page-by-page analysis of the progress of a bookworm through an incunable printed by P. Schoffer in 1477 and an immensely painful Victorian diatribe on the danger to personal libraries posed by the supposed 'feminine weakness' of 'an ingrained curiosity'.

Books lead to books. I first came across a reference to Blades' work in Fernando Báez's *A Universal History of the Destruction of Books*, 2004 (trans 2008) which I had been led to by Jean-Claude Carrière & Umberto Eco's *This is Not the End of the Book*, 2009 (trans 2011). I mention this little trail as it led me not only to *The Enemies of Books* but a glut of books published since the mid noughties focussing on the material nature of the book, the experience of reading a physical book and the perceived fragility of this form in the face of screen-based technology. This concentration of interest on the physical form of the book and its destruction seemed to me to coincide, unsurprisingly, with an interest from designers and advertisers in the aesthetics of Letterpress printing. [The phenomenon of old looking, 'distressed' type as the face of a whole raft of marketable items seems to have reached its zenith in the Conservative Party Manifesto of 2010. This document, with its retro aesthetic, appeared to aim for](#) a sense of stability after the recession of 2008 [and](#) a reassuringly 'authentic' voice to narrate our [progress](#) into the digital future.

My work has always engaged with a search for value inherent in the Letterpress process. [Thus](#) the combination of these twin themes—fragility of the physical book, and a perceived stability in material processes—got me thinking about how one might explore [such a](#) contradiction on the press. I was a bit unsure of where to start until I realised that Print On Demand books held an interesting way forward. I ordered two inexpensive copies of William Blades' book, choosing *The Enemies of Books*, as it seemed to epitomise the argument for the value of the material book. If these copies really were produced on my demand then would it be wrong to destroy them at will? As a safeguard to my conscience I donated one to a book charity and then set about burning the other. I didn't enjoy my book burning. Despite knowing that another could be produced on demand it felt very wrong. The thought of the red embers tracing around the black type of each word still brings a twinge of shame.

I set about producing an ink from the ashes and once the laborious grinding, milling, and mixing was over used this ink to produce one oversized facsimile of the front cover of my 1902 copy of the book. The result was striking: the colour

of the ink a suitable sepia covering an area twelve times the size of the original cover with a satisfying satin sheen. On seeing the print a friend enquired as to whether he could display the work in an upcoming gallery show and I was pleased when it sold, safe in the knowledge that I could produce another 'on demand'. I hadn't, however accounted for my lack of experience in ink making and having made few notes on quantities and procedures used for the first print all subsequent attempts were consistently poor. By mid 2012 other projects had taken over and having faltered, my plan for an edition of the burnt book prints was put to one side.

This year however I was asked to produce an edition of 100 prints to be included in the special edition of *Parenthesis, The Journal of the Fine Press Book Association*. With no brief other than the work should be a little smaller than A4 the invitation provided a good excuse to try again to develop and share this work. In the intervening years my previous failure had clearly been working away on my mind, this time I was disciplined. I obtained a glass muller for consistent milling of the pigment and was guided in its use by a master etcher. I made trials using the ash from copy paper and laboured over notes on timings, quantities and desired consistency. Still far from an expert ink maker I'm happy with the new understanding I have of this most significant component of printing.

As for the print, each one is placed on a sheet of fine quality book paper cut to the same proportions as one page of the original with a reproduction of the cover printed at 1:1 scale in the position of the text block. The ink is a nihilistic sepia with a heavier, darker version picking out the title and author's name in Old Face type. In brief it is a reproduction of the cover of a book, without contents, about the destruction of books, printed via the destruction of a copy of the book produced in a supposedly materially inferior manner made possible by digital technologies which heighten the sense of value in materially rich 'authentic' production methods of the past. Got that? [Good](#).

[If you do come across one I hope that you'll find an exercise in destruction and creation charged with symbolism, anxiety, material and technology](#). If not, maybe the print will serve as a reminder of W. Blades' excellent *The Enemies of Books*, the beginning of whose conclusion reads:

"It is a great pity that there should be so many distinct enemies at work for the destruction of literature, and that they should so often be allowed to work out their sad end. Looked at rightly, the possession of any old book is a sacred trust, which a conscientious owner or guardian would as soon think of ignoring as a parent would of neglecting a child. An old book, whatever its subject or internal merits is truly a portion of the national history; we may imitate it and print it in fac-simile, but we can never exactly reproduce it; and as an historical document it should be carefully preserved."