

## Notes from the field Feb 21, 2025

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### ABSTRACT

Notes of two activities related to movable books at Cambridge University in England. The first activity involved being an external examiner for a thesis at the Faculty of Education, Homerton College. The second was a study day comparing English-language movable books for children with Japanese movable books for adults. Although the entire program lasted only a day and a half, it had a profound impact and revolutionized the author's thinking about movable books.

### KEYWORDS

Cambridge University; Thesis on movable books; Japanese movable books.

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Recently I had the pleasure of going to **Cambridge University** in England to engage in two activities related to movable books. The first was to be the external examiner on a thesis for the **Faculty of Education, Homerton College**. The second activity was to participate in a study day, comparing English language, movable books for children with Japanese movable books for adults. The entire set of actions only took a day and a half but revolutionized my thinking about movable books.

The first event was a Viva at the Faculty of Education for Jody Coates, who has written a brilliant thesis on movable books, particularly the pop-up book, spanning the material ones from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present-day remediated ones being used in films, such as the recent film *Wicked* that came out in 2024. In so doing she gave a brief history of the of the pop-up book in relation to movable books, and then she focused on the pop-up book in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. In particular, she focused on the Disney company and how from the early days in the 1930's contributed to the history and making of the pop-up book format. She combined research, pedagogical knowledge, the knowledge of being a maker of movable books, and the theory of remediation in a splendid way. She wove all the elements together so smoothly that the links were imperceptible. We all had a thoughtful, deep discussion. Her committee was formed of two renowned Professors, Zoe Jacques was her Advisor and the internal examiner was Professor David Whitley. Dr. Coates' abstract is provided below.

Jodie Coates, *Oh, What a Novelty! The Paradoxical Pop-Up Box*  
Abstract

In this thesis, I argue that the familiar novelty of the pop-up book, in the century since its invention, has become the most vivid icon of 'children's literature' in contemporary Anglo-American culture – a recognisable shorthand for the book made for the child, the childlike or childish story, or the book as it is experienced from a child's perspective. This thesis provides a critical analysis of how one particular book format achieved such a profound status in children's media culture, by examining the under-researched phenomenon of the remediated pop-up book: the pop-up book that is reimagined within, and dispersed across, non-book media.

I employ Bolter and Grusin's theory of remediation to demonstrate how the historic 'remediating power' of the pop-up book has been effectively inverted in an age of media convergence, as the pop-up book surfaces, increasingly frequently, beyond the boundaries of the book-object. To explore the curious space occupied by the pop-up book in a nostalgia-drenched, yet forward-looking, media landscape, I investigate where, how, and to what end the pop-up book has been remediated in a diverse range of educational, commercial, and artistic contexts. In my investigation, I have compiled a corpus of toys, advertisements, animated film and TV, music, art trails, theatre productions, museum exhibitions, and virtual reality experiences, which all feature a remediated pop-up book. By approaching this seemingly eclectic corpus of texts as a unified group, I expose how the remediated pop-up book presents a valuable tool for researchers to mark and track how creatives have recalibrated the figure of the child in changing times by invoking children's unique relationship with 'media-made-for-children' via the disruptive, yet choreographed, pop-up book.

Abstracted from the affordances of paper and the confines of the book-object, the remediated pop-up book behaves differently. The pop-up book's expected performative script is rewritten, and the relationship between its perceived 'magic' and engineered 'mechanics' is caricatured within its new material, virtual, or hybrid configuration. The elasticity of a new media logic allows the pop-up book to be reinvented in a plethora of ways – as an extension of a character's inner lifeworld, a traversable 'bookscape', a punchline, a violent battleground, a puppet, dangerous propaganda, a living being, a manifestation of spirituality, a weapon, a perfect birthday gift, a theatrical song-and-dance stage, or a portal to another world – often capitalising on the pop-up's proclivity to anchor the user's imagination to tactile, sensory experiences.

To critically examine the aesthetics and altered scriptive invitations of these remediated pop-up books, I investigate the chain of remediation that takes place prior to the release of the final product, highlighting how groups of creatives – paper engineers, fabricators, animators, auteurs, composers, performers, writers, and so on – reshape each other's work during various stages of collaboration on remediated pop-up book projects. I argue that analysing the creative, multi-step process of remediation exposes how creatives attempt to actively generate an 'authentic' experience of the pop-up book to the user – whether as an immersive, transportive vessel or hypermediated, confronting artefact, or both simultaneously. The pop-up book is a contradictory object. It is nostalgic and novel, flat and three-dimensional, and resistant to – but often reliant upon – machinic and digital technologies. I conclude by discussing how these inherent tensions, and other 'pop-up paradoxes', can be exploited and amplified by creatives, within any given medium, to utilise the remediated pop-up book as a self-reflexive site of resistance that places 'the child and their media' as the centrepiece of a wide variety of discourses – particularly regarding the progression of 'the digital age'.

By moving away from the study of the physical movable book object and its readers, I ensure that vastly diverse inter-media experiences of the pop-up book offered to both children and adults are not excluded from movable book history. Instead, I forefront these remediated pop-up experiences as a means to re-evaluate the substantial cultural importance of what might be otherwise overlooked as one of many popular novelty book formats. Childhood is a concept riddled with contradictions: a truth that the pop-up book – in all its remediated forms – captures with playful eloquence.

The second activity I undertook at Cambridge University, was a Study day held at The University Library in the morning and at the **Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies** in the afternoon organized by Professor Laura Moretti, Professor of Early Modern Japanese Literature and Culture.<sup>1</sup> The study day was well attended by Professor Moretti's graduate students, visiting scholars and recent graduates. Dr Alessandro Bianchi, the Head of World Collections at Cambridge University Library also attended. The morning session was held in a rare books teaching space. Dr. Emily Dourish, Deputy Keeper of Rare Books and Early Manuscripts selected the materials and oversaw the session. Led by me, together we explored and carefully examined a magnificent set of movable books for children from the 18th and 19th centuries. I had the privilege of talking about and sharing my thoughts about these beautiful, engaging and innovative, movable books. In the afternoon, we were hosted by the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies. In department teaching space, Dr Tinios a distinguished professor and consultant introduced his books

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Moretti held a workshop at The University of Pennsylvania on September 9, 2024, and more information can be found at this link: <https://ceas.sas.upenn.edu/events/2024/09/09/engineered-action-movable-books-early-19th-century-japan>.

from his point of view and Professor Moretti shared some of hers. These Japanese movable books were strictly intended for adults, and often of an erotic nature. The last segment was an open forum where the three of us informally co-led a discussion and all the participants shared their knowledge and asked questions. Speaking for myself, the contrasts and similarities across cultures, time periods, and intended readers-viewers-players or interactors provoked me to think in unexpected directions. I am intrigued by how the design and formats and similar devices for movement are used across cultures, implied age groups, and players. I have many new avenues of comparative research to pursue! I have included a few photos below.

The entire day and a half was incredibly rewarding. We all talked and thought and learnt, and it was an ideal educational and creative experience. We hope to have further cross-cultural, cross University, and cross disciplinary engagements on this fascinating new area of research on movable books.

