

MYSTERY LIBRARY
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My favourite Wikipedia article is called 'Stanisław Lem's fictitious criticism of non-existent books'. The article's title is simultaneously precise, accurate and preposterous. These three adjectives also properly describe Lem's writing. The Polish author Stanisław Lem, best known for his philosophical and satirical science fiction, dedicated a significant amount of his writing to inventing fictional criticism of non-existent books in a variety of styles and degrees of seriousness. The discourses he fabricated around futuristic catalogues, theory, and information-distribution have held up quite well.

Lem published *Imaginary Magnitude*¹ in 1981. The book, a collection of introductions to books supposed to be written decades into the future, is now known as one of his more serious fictional-critical efforts. *Imaginary Magnitude* features the fictional *A History of Bitic Literature*, an extremely thorough monograph outlining bitic literature, a fictional area of study around literary works of nonhuman origin, or computer-generated literature (sometimes meriting the employment of a machine to interpret the writing of a machine). And then there's *Vestrand's Extelopedia*, which, in Lem's futuristic universe, is the latest in a

1 Stanisław Lem, *Imaginary Magnitude*, 1981

string of books that attempt to solve the problem of the traditional encyclopedia: the moment it is printed, its information is out of date. The *Extelopedia* relies on a computer process that can foresee what will happen over a vast field of knowledge (eight hundred gigatrillion Sema-Numerical computations, to be precise) and can update its information when necessary. The Wikipedia-like *Extelopedia* comes in forty-four ‘magnetomes’ bound in ‘pseudoskin’ and is voice and movement responsive. Lem referred to the texts in *Imaginary Magnitude* as ‘Liberated Introductions’. I very much enjoyed this idea when I first read it – that a text’s mere physical existence is itself a burden and perhaps even oppresses its very essence – and in 2015 began pulling other Liberated books into a collection called Mystery Library.

I founded Mystery Library as a selection of fictional books within works of fiction (hereafter referred to as *mystery books*). As the catalogue is entirely composed of metadata without a physical counterpart, I made it primarily available online. The books I include in Mystery Library are written about in varying degrees of detail and length, but all of them are valuable

exactly because they do not – and sometimes cannot – exist.

Some examples from the collection: in her short story ‘Nobody was Tomorrow’,² the Mexican artist Mariana Castillo Deball wrote of a society that produces a ‘petrified book’ as a symbol of peace. The American author Renee Gladman, in her novel *To After That (Toaf)*,³ wrote a book-length eulogy of a failed attempt at writing a novel. As it progresses, (*Toaf*) becomes a recursive survey of Gladman’s own writing of what she calls a ‘ghost book’. And the American poets Jennifer Karmin and Bernadette Mayer sneaked a series of fictional, blank poetry books into a single line of a poem in their *The Sexual Organs of the IRS and Other Poems*.⁴ These three examples, some admittedly more developed than others, are important to Mystery Library precisely because of their ethereality. If, as the Mexican artist Ulises Carrión has written, ‘The most beautiful and perfect book in the world is a book with only blank pages, in the same way that the most complete language is that which lies beyond all that the words of a man can say’,⁵ then surely a mystery

2 Mariana Castillo Deball, ‘Nobody was Tomorrow’, *F.R. David*: ‘A is for ‘Orses’ issue, 2008

3 Renee Gladman, *To After That (Toaf)*, 2008

4 Jennifer Karmin and Bernadette Mayer, *The Sexual Organs of the IRS and Other Poems*, 2016

5 Ulises Carrión, ‘The New Art of Making Books’, *Artists’ Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, 1985

book is the most beautiful book *not* in the world. As a graphic designer, I see Deball's, Gladman's, Karmin's and Mayer's ideas as influential pieces of design, published verbally and then carried out in the minds of readers.

Despite their uncanny nature, mystery books occasionally travel from out of the mind and into the physical world. In 2006, nodding to Jorge Luis Borges' short story 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*',⁶ the French artist Pierre Huyghe published Miguel de Cervantes' *The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote of La Mancha* under the author name Borges invented: Pierre Menard. More of Borges' fictional books (*Axaxaxas Mlo*, *Lxum*, *Lkwc*, *MCV*, *The Plaster Cramp*, and *The Combed Thunderclap*), this time pulled from his infamous short story 'The Library of Babel',⁷ were published by the Canadian poet Christian Bök in 2015 through Bök's print-on-demand bookstore.⁸ I believe it is wrong to assume that every mystery book wants to be made into a traditional paper volume, but I am entertained by the possibility that an author like Borges has knowingly embarked on a very long and slow publishing project wherein interpretation, design, production, distribution and sales

are delegated to strangers who live far into the future.

If mystery books are media that can never be absorbed, then what are the implications behind collecting them? The Austrian philosopher Robert Pfaller offers a possible answer with his notion of *interpassivity*. Pfaller's term was inspired by the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek's observation that the canned laughter used in sitcoms is not meant to inspire laughter in the viewer, but to relieve the viewer of the onus of laughing. Interpassivity offers that some works of art seem to include their own reception. Many people's habits of using their computers – machines of production, consumption, and archival work – to house more media than they could ever truly experience can be interpreted as the common practice of an interpassive user. The British-Australian graphic designer James Goggin has written that 'interpassive people don't have to read, watch, or listen to the information proving someone or something exists – they just need to know that information about that existence exists'.⁹

6 Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*, 1962

7 *ibid.*

8 <http://www.blurb.com/user/cbok>

9 James Goggin, 'Ways of Reading', *Dot Dot Dot* 17, 2008

By extension, Mystery Library's inventory can be interpreted as interpassive because each fictional text provides its own writing, production and reception. With this in mind, all that's left for Mystery Library members to do is observe the whole collection as if looking over it from a great height. Specific references or titles will be there regardless of whether or not members actively look for them.

In his introduction to *Imaginary Magnitude*, Stanisław Lem – an astute observer of the natural world and the expanse of the universe – writes that, while we share planet Earth with the animal and plant kingdoms, 'Nothingness is our domain and special department. The Explorer of this nothingness is man. But it is a difficult thing, unusual by virtue of being nonexistent, which cannot even be tasted without lengthy study and training; it paralyses the unready, which is why for communicating with a precisely tuned, richly orchestrated nothingness one must be conscientiously prepared, making one's every step toward it as firm, distinct and substantial as possible'. I sense an urgency in his writing. It's as if he understands better than most that confronting the paradoxes

and contradictions of the human intellect is a necessary practice that will bring us closer to the interstellar travels (inside or outside the human mind) he devoted his life to imagining. Mystery Library is here to survey and discuss this 'richly orchestrated nothingness' as it evolves over centuries of the written word.

One more of Lem's lines from his introduction to *Imaginary Magnitude*:
'I promise and guarantee a wonderful freedom, and give my word that Nothing will be there'.