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Remembrance of scents past

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A book can be appealing in so many different ways. For some people it is the content: the promise of an interesting text, or a fascinating story that captures their attention. For others it is the physical characteristics of the book: a charming cover, a beautiful binding, good typography and the quality of the paper that draws them in. Then there are those who are attracted to a book based on a much more instinctive reaction: they like the way it smells. Especially among booklovers, it is not uncommon to hear how much they love the smell of a book and how entering a bookstore with used books pleases their noses. As Ray Bradbury said, 'A book has got smell. A new book smells great. An old book smells even better. An old book smells like ancient Egypt'.

As romantic as this quote may be, there is a far more pragmatic reason why books (and old books in particular) do, in fact, have a distinct smell. Without delving too deep into chemical technicalities, one can argue that the empirical reason behind an old book's aroma is quite pedestrian. The 2009 study 'Material Degradomics: On the Smell of Old Books' analysed the factors contributing to the scent of old books, a scent which the researchers described as 'a combination of grassy notes with a tang of acids and a hint of vanilla over an underlying mustiness'. According to the study, the organic materials that compose a book—paper, ink, and glue—react to their environment. Heat, moisture and light are all agents that contribute to the degradation of these organic materials, causing acidity levels to rise and speeding up the process of deterioration. The noticeable odour of old books is actually a sign of their decay; indeed, books of the nineteenth century that were printed on highly acidic paper are now a source of concern for the preservation departments of libraries, as the fragile paper that was used in their production is now causing them to fall apart at the seams.

If this scent that so many seem to cherish is nothing more than paper covered in brown spots, faded ink and decomposing glue, how does it manage to evoke such a sentimental reaction in book lovers? The answer lies in the human brain. The sense of smell, or olfactory perception, has a strong link to memory. The olfactory bulb—the instrument that perceives odours—is part of a region in the brain called the limbic system. The limbic system also consists of the amygdala, the area of the brain where memories and emotional reactions are processed, and the hippocampus, the part of the brain responsible for associative learning and

for transforming received information from short-term to long-term memories. Scientists believe that the olfactory bulb's close proximity to the amygdala and hippocampus is the reason why smells are able to trigger such powerful emotional memories. In essence, odours cannot be processed unless they travel through the areas of the brain that are associated with memory functions. Psychologists refer to this process as the Proustian Phenomenon, named after Marcel Proust. In his celebrated work *In Search of Lost Time*, the author describes how experiencing the scent of a cookie dipped into tea unleashes a flood of childhood memories. Whenever bibliophiles experience a trip down memory lane after that all-too-familiar whiff of an old book, it is the Proustian Phenomenon they have to thank—or to blame.

Thanks to the so-called Gutenberg revolution and the advances it brought in print, books became ubiquitous objects. In its physical form, the book is an object that not only tickles the nose with its scent but also has the ability to engage all other human senses. Naturally sight is the most obvious, as eyes are the main instruments for deciphering text and image. Then there is touch, used not only when holding a book or turning its pages but also for writing and reading systems used for the blind and visually impaired, like Braille. The sound that paper makes as pages are turned can be music to one's ears. Finally, in a rather unconventional twist, there are those people who actually devour, or taste, books—and not in the metaphorical sense. Xylophagia, or the desire to eat objects made of wood or paper, is part of a disorder called Pica that compels people to eat materials not usually considered food.

Although the latter example is extreme, it illustrates that up until the digital age the book has been an exclusively tangible object, experienced only in the physical world. However, as the digital era marches on, the status of the book as a physical object is changing. Electronic reading is now a reality, and the transformation of books from physical objects into digital entities entails all kinds of consequences. In the sphere of digital books we still have a chance to employ our sight, touch and hearing, which also means enjoying the benefits of the digital era such as the increasing popularity of e-book add-ons like embedded video, auditory reading and audio books. However, it seems that where books are concerned, our olfactory desires and pleasures are being more and more neglected.

In 2009 a product that promised to address this most unfortunate lack of aroma in the electronic book world was announced. Smell of Books™, a self-described 'aerosol e-book enhancer', declared the end of odourless electronic books. According to their website the 'enhancer' was compatible with almost all popular electronic reading devices and came in five different aromas, each destined to satisfy different tastes. There was the *Classic Musty Smell* or 'collected works of Shakespeare in a can'; the *New Book Smell* which could 'bring back

memories of your favorite local bookstore'; the *Scent of Sensibility*, marketed to women who wanted their e-reader to make them feel as though they were 'living in a Jane Austen novel'; *Crunchy Bacon Smell*, also known as 'the low cholesterol alternative for health conscious e-book lovers'; and finally, *Eau, You Have Cats* for dedicated feline owners. This series of e-book aromas, the product of the innovative company DuroSport Electronics, was, unfortunately, short-lived. The company was quickly forced to recall the entire product line, not only due to defective units but also to controversy. Smell of Books™ was instantly under attack by an association called "The Authors Guild", who were exasperated at the product's invasion in a new market of custom aromas for books, the control of which, they claimed, should belong to their authors. Public disputes between several of the company's high-ranking executives on the site's corporate blog added the final blow that led to the product's recall.

It was all too outrageous to be true. In time, Smell of Books™ was exposed as part of an elaborate online April Fool's Day spoof. Despite its highly quixotic disposition, this prank did touch on a relevant, prevailing issue: namely, that the nature of the book is changing and, as with any process of change, some things will be lost while others are gained. Perhaps the avid bibliophiles who cannot imagine books without their characteristic scent find their electronic reading experience lacking, but there might still be some hope. *Paper Passion*, an actual perfume based on the smell of books, was developed by publishing house Steidl in collaboration with the perfumer Geza Schoen. This perfume, which was part of Steidl's special editions, is suited for anyone who does not want to let go of their page sniffing habits, albeit a rather expensive and quirky alternative. The digital book world is undergoing constant change and innovation, so it is rather early to make the assumption that smells will never be a part of it. Whether or not there is a place for aromas in the digital sphere is something that remains to be seen, but it is undoubtedly safe to say that its current absence does not go unnoticed. For those incurable romantics who still find the scent of books captivating, and who feel slightly robbed of that scent in the digital world, there are still plenty of tangible, wonderfully fragrant old books to be enjoyed.

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