

# The Bird Book

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This summer I visited a book binder to have a book restored for the first time. I come from a family of readers, but not one in possession of particularly prized editions and old tomes. The Bird Book is no exception. Neither extremely old nor extremely valuable, The Best Bird Book is a guide to Dutch birds, complete with illustrations, printed in 1971. My sister and I used to love looking through the illustrations of various birds, in this book that – to us as small children – felt enormous and old.

The book had once belonged to my grandfather and was one of the few things my father had inherited. Our father remembered reading the book when he was a child, which for me and my sister added to the mythos surrounding the books, since we only knew our father after he became blind. The Bird Book was now falling apart; the spine was letting go, the cover hanging on by a thread. The book binder informed us that it would be relatively expensive to get the Bird Book repaired, and that the cheaper option would be to just buy another copy second hand. After all, it would be the same book.

This gave me pause. Would it be the same book? In some ways it would certainly be. My family doesn't have a habit of writing in our books, so no marginalia would be lost, and content wise the text and illustrations would be exactly the same. It does, however, feel like something would be lost. Would this be the book that held my grandfather's newspaper cuttings about rare bird sightings? Would this be the book with my father's childhood fingerprints? Would this be the book I cut myself on when I was four? There is of course an emotional value attached to this specific book, this object. Can we say there is anything physical about that attachment?

The Bird Book is not special because the information it contains is special, or because it is a fundamentally special book. The Bird Book is unique because it is haunted. German philosopher Theodore Adorno states that "Things do not go into their objects without leaving residue". What Adorno means is that an object can never exhaustively be captured with description alone. I can describe my coffee cup in exact detail, down to the serial number and place of purchase (tourist gift shop at Amsterdam Airport) but I will never be able to fully capture how it is different from all the other cups in the same line. Adorno claims that it must be different (non-identical) to all other cups however, because if it was truly identical there would only be one cup. This non-identity, for Adorno, makes things irreplaceable. To be truly identical is to be the same. All objects are haunted by this residue of non-identity.

The Bird Book also carries years of being part of both our household and my father's household. It is full of an ecology of history, and – if we want to get technical – flakes of skin and hair of my family members. It is easy to think of bodies as having neat borders, but those borders are constantly rising and falling. We breathe in and breathe out, produce waste, constantly lose bits of ourselves and replace them with others. We are an ecosystem of microbes, sinews, blood and bones, and the boundaries we draw up will always be porous. Theoretical physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad calls this a material-discursive cut. A border is always placed, rather than occurring naturally, and these borders are always material and discursive. They are both socially determined and based in material. When we eat something, like a piece of bread, we consume something that is inanimate, and take it into our living bodies. The piece of toast becomes eaten, and part of it becomes part of us; we absorb it, until it is impossible to tell what parts of us are made of bread. When do we dissolve the distinction between the consumed and the consumer? When do the bread and I become one? This is a material-discursive cut. There is a distinction between me and my food that is eventually

unmade. The cut between me and the bread is material, but also socially determined. If the bread gives me food poisoning, or it has gluten and I have a gluten allergy, I will be likely to separate myself from the bread. However, if the bread is smoothly absorbed by my, body I will quickly stop thinking of it as meaningfully different from me.

The bread that I consume is often sourdough bread, made with my own sourdough starter. A sourdough starter is a jar of live microbe “goop”, that you make by combining water and flour, and letting it ferment until you have wild yeast. My sourdough starter (affectionately named Råghilde) has been with me for years, and is a pretty physical reminder that we are, as biologist Rob Dunn says, never home alone. We are always together with the invisible critters that infest our homes, and that sometimes — when treated well — are willing to help us make bread. Philosopher Jane Bennett refers to these entanglements of matter as assemblages, meaning that we are never acting alone but always acting as a swarm with other swarms.

What responsibility do I have towards Råghilde, or the Bird Book? I live in community with these lively things that have histories and hauntings. In some ways both the book as well as the sourdough starter contain parts of me, and I contain parts of them, having exchanged microbes with both on various occasions. I could get a second-hand copy of The Best Bird Book, but it wouldn't be this Bird Book. Part of that is simply sentimentality that is not based in material, but part of that is a feeling of responsibility not to treat matter as replaceable; as if two versions of the book would be the same, and they wouldn't both keep existing at the same time if I bought a replacement. So the Bird Book is being repaired, Råghilde is getting fed, and I'm hanging on to the microbes and skin flakes.

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