

The Experiment Will Not Be Bound



UNBOUND EDITION PRESS

Atlanta

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FIRST EDITION

Printed in the United States of America

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS RECORD

Name: Peter Campion, 1976 — editor.

Title: The Experiment Will Not Be Bound / Edited by Peter Campion.

Edition: First edition.

Published: Atlanta : Unbound Edition Press, 2022.

LCCN: 2022942804

LCCN Permalink: <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022942804>

ISBN: 978-0-9913780-8-1 (hardcover)

Designed by Eleanor Safe and Joseph Floresca

Printed by Bookmobile, Minneapolis, MN

Distributed by Small Press Distribution

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Atlanta, GA 30307



Foreword

Time Is an Author

I think of time as another type of author.

There was this photograph of a dead bird, its body runover and flattened amidst wood chips. I believed it to be — to have been — a pigeon. Its chest, beak, wings, and claws all flat. The pigeon's quill feathers splayed out evenly. In my mind: It is a pigeon. It is not a pigeon. It is a photograph. It is a memory.

This photograph hung in the foyer of the house where I grew up. It rested in a small, oval, antique frame painted gold; distressed and peeling at the edges, red paint underneath showed through. A picked scab, gilded.

My father made that picture. He took thousands of photographs. He shot slide film for sharing visual examples in his Philosophy of Aesthetics and Philosophy of Architecture classes at Washington University in St. Louis. In 1986, he published some of his photographs, along with text destined for *The Tunnel*, in a special issue of *River Styx* (No. 21), called *Family Album*.

He was, as the literary world knows, deeply interested in metaphor. From him, I learned to understand that something utterly ordinary really could become astonishing — meaningful — depending on how it was framed, presented, and, thus, seen. A pigeon. Not a pigeon.

I began taking photographs around the age of 13. Occasionally, my father would take me out to photograph with him. Comparing our images from those trips, my pictures would fill the frame almost the same way his did. My image would be only slightly different, maybe just two inches off in some direction. In that small space could be similarity or difference, meaning lost or found. We saw the same thing and not the same thing in the same instant. Was it a pigeon?

My parents lived in a library, and that meant I grew up in one. Books were members of the family and took up space just as our bodies did. Each one of the thousands of books, like a photograph, held many intersections of time. They were, each and all, old and new and all at once. A page turns. A bird flies. My father loved Virginia Woolf.

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To properly care for and preserve books, it is important to catch an infestation in its early stages. Whether through natural use or deliberate damage, the patterns and behaviors of readers and other less engaged invaders get revealed.

Rules for the Care and Handling of Books

- Do not write in a book with a pen.
- Do not subject a book to abuse by paper clips, pins, staples, rubber bands, or tape.
- Do not force a book open by marking a place with eyeglasses or other objects.
- Do not assault a book by turning down its corners.
- Do not disfigure a book with underlines or highlights upon its pages.
- Do not abandon a book open, face down.
- Do not crush a book by leaning on it.
- Do not repurpose a book as a support surface for writing.
- Do not expose a book to liquids kept nearby.
- Do not stain or strain a book as a press for flowers or photographs.
- Do not flip through a book with licked fingers or a pencil eraser.
- Do not disrespect a book by eating, drinking, or smoking around it.
- Do not contaminate a book with breath or cough during close examination.
- Do not scorch a book in direct sunlight.
- Do not tempt a book with an open flame.

Books change like peeling paint, and not just because of what readers do when readers read.

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Most books contain an orgy of bodies in uncertain combinations: the body of the text itself; the fingers, tongue tips, and eyes of the reader; a mighty if mythical paper mite; a notorious and nocturnal silverfish.

Silverfish have flat bodies, a bit like living bookmarks. They eat the starch in a book's pages, knowing the nourishment of the words on the plate before them. They thin down the paper until it looks like lace. It is a beautiful destruction. Sometimes the damage starts to look like a topographical map with representations of different elevations, landscapes of thought in relief. With hunger so hard it hurts, this insect's damage will rewrite the text, leaving new

sound and sense for the reader to decipher. Eventually the infestation — bug, human, who knows — will erode what is holding it all together, and the body of the book is no longer a book at all. It is a disembodied book; it is unmade and remade. A pigeon. Not a pigeon.

The passage of time — its damage, decay, destruction — is a typographic sculptor. Readers and insects alike dig new routes — a tunnel — through every text. Each one maps their own intersection with time, denoting the pattern of their own reading life. Time is an author, (re)writing through each act of reading.

Still, books have meaning only when read, devoured, and savored. Mint, my father would say, is something you put in your mouth after eating — and is the least memorable moment of any meal. Like an unread book, there is no meaning to living a life untouched.

A bird flies. A page turns.

Publisher's Preface

Dig a Way Through

Just as our book designers in St. Louis, Missouri began their work on *The Experiment Will Not Be Bound*, readying it for print, a young man at the Chautauqua Institution in western New York rushed the stage and stabbed Salman Rushdie at least ten times. Rushdie, who survived his life-altering injuries, had been living under a fatwa calling for his death since the 1988 publication of *The Satanic Verses*.

With an unfathomable assault upon a globally revered author and a chilling warning to writers everywhere, the assailant attacked the very concept of freedom of expression that makes the literary arts — all arts — possible. At the same time, authors and books now face being banned in classrooms and libraries across the United States, and book burnings are again making headlines. Extremists seem especially threatened just now and with a new level of alarm by ideas, books, and writers. Fundamentalism in any form is always anti-intellectual.

It is with a sense of urgency, then, that Unbound Edition Press publishes this anthology. This book is not just an anthology of some inspired experimental writing (we think all writing, this sentence included, is experimental) but an *experimental anthology* in form. Being unbound — physically and philosophically — allows the pieces in this anthology to live in any order, to find the fit that works best for any reader, to be read randomly, sequentially, or thematically — or in any other way. This experimental anthology allows the editor to become a catalyst and the reader to become the catalyzing editor for others.

How this anthology may be made, unmade, and remade is just part of the experiment at hand and one that is now out of hand, too. With its contents reordered, this book, as it sits in this moment, might never be recovered. It exists only now; it exists in countless combinations. It is a book and not a book at the same time.

All of this breaks a lot of rules in the name of democratizing literature, returning the authority conferred upon it by authors, editors, and publishers to those for whom it was

written. That, surely, will be threatening to some traditionalists. Some readers and reviewers will love this (anti)book; others will hate it and perhaps attack it. That is part of the experiment, too.

No text is sacred, but every writer is.

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On a brightly cold April morning in 1995, I walked with William H. Gass across the front quad spreading wide just inside the archway at Washington University in St. Louis. I asked him how he was doing, after referencing Robert Alter's particularly brutal review of *The Tunnel* that had just been published in *The New Republic*:

Some may seize on it as a postmodern masterpiece, but it is a bloated monster of a book. ... The bloat is a consequence of sheer adipose verbosity and an unremitting condition of moral and intellectual flatulence. ...

Gass's real achievement is to have produced a complete compendium of the vices of postmodern writing.

"Oh, I am great," Gass replied to me. "You must remember how important it is to be hated by the right people." In that moment, I understood the strength and depth of my mentor's literary character, the titanium rod of an intellectual backbone that held tall his philosophy of aesthetics. And, I also understood Alter's failing as a critic in this instance: He had missed entirely the flatulent puns on Gass's own name, the universal intestinal tunnel running ripe and rancid through every human being, the anal-centric imagery of the insignia worn with pride by the Party of the Disappointed People, as imagined by Gass's narrator, William Kohler. Alter missed the self-awareness and intentionality of *The Tunnel* and its author.

In short, Alter missed the book. Life is shit. The best any human can do is to make it bearable through art, through experimenting with the creation of meaning where none exists. Should that fail, the only choice remaining is to dig one's own grave or dig a way through — to tunnel out.

Still, nearly 30 years on, readers might now forgive Alter's review of Gass's masterpiece. After all, the book was not published as Gass intended, and this surely contributed to critics like Alter mistakenly reading it as a traditional book at all. *The Tunnel* is an experience, not a narrative; it is a shuffled stack of supposedly random pages, not a linear story. It was — and may remain — beyond readers limited by traditional notions of reading. That is understandable: *The Tunnel* is a profound testament to the impossibility of writing bankrupt ideas into acceptable form, to justifying the unjustifiable. It is an unyielding study of morally induced

writer's block. And, because *The Tunnel* casts history's most hideous moments in Gass's lush prose, the work also places the reader in the same sort of moral blockage as the narrator. Gass balanced Kohler's writer's block with a morally induced reader's block. Is the text vile or vibrant? Can content be consumed separately from form, like the broth from a soup? How one answers reveals the character of the reader, not the writer.

Was it for this ...? Wordsworth asks in *The Prelude*, Western literature's other great contemplation on writer's block. Gass, a postmodernist steeped in the Romantics, answers Wordsworth's question with *The Tunnel*. Yes, this terrifying, fallen world is all there is. And, so, the experiment to make it tolerable must continue. This is why writers write.

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Perhaps readers — and some critics — would have been able to understand *The Tunnel* more easily upon publication had Alfred A. Knopf, Gass's publisher, brought the book to the reading public in the form the author intended. Form, for Gass, was inseparable from meaning, the way the body is inseparable from the language it produces. Gass's design notes for *The Tunnel* made clear:

This MS will naturally be manufactured and presented to the public as a book, and it will be a real book, no doubt about that, but it must not be a book symbolically. Symbolically it is a heap of pages on various topics which the narrator has shuffled together. This must seem to be the case although at another level the work is tightly organized and determined.

Gass also wanted *The Tunnel* bound in "rough, black cloth." He felt, too, that "it is important that my name appear nowhere on dust jacket or cover, and that nothing else be put on the jacket — no bio, picture, blurb, etc. ... Why not put the author's name on the book? Because it is Kohler's book. Because, in a sense, it is not a book. Because, in the reality of the novel, the novel itself is dispersed between the pages of another book."

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In a 2019 article titled "A 1995 Novel Predicted Trump's America," Alec Nevala-Lee wrote in *The New York Times* that:

Even under the best of circumstances, this plotless book of over 600 pages [The Tunnel] would have been one of the least commercial

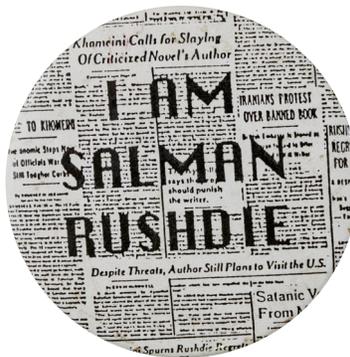
novels ever released by a major publishing house, and it had the additional misfortune of appearing halfway through a decade that was uniquely unprepared for its despairing vision of America.

Gass, far ahead of his time in predicting the rise of American fascism, had to concede some of his design vision for *The Tunnel* to the slim commercial interests of his publisher. Gass was ahead of his time, too, in his unrelenting support for Salman Rushdie, risking his own safety on a highly secretive trip to visit the targeted author in 1992. He returned from the trip to Boulder, Colorado with a plan to handmake and distribute buttons reading “I AM SALMAN RUSHDIE” to authors far and wide. Commercialism was never Gass’s interest; lifting and protecting international writers was.

And, so, it falls to small presses — labors of literary love — like ours to prove that “not a book” can be published properly. Our title, *The Experiment Will Not Be Bound*, is inspired, of course, by the spoken-word poem and song by Gil Scott-Heron, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*. Challenges to authority, calls for change, even the truth itself written boldly on the page often find little commercial support from television and advertisers — or publishers.

While *The Experiment Will Not Be Bound* is no pastiche of *The Tunnel*, it is an homage to its bold, experimental vision and to William H. Gass’s support of daring writers. Likewise, it is an homage to every writer who believes the experiment of writing, of books, of making and unmaking and remaking meaning, must continue, one sentence, one line, at the time.

Some of those writers are included in the seemingly random heap of shuffled pages presented here in rough, black cloth.



A 1992 button in support of Salman Rushdie and freedom of expression, handmade by William H. Gass.

Photography by Catherine Gass

Editor's Introduction

Openness and Intention

Choosing the contents of this anthology, I kept in mind a long sentence from Walt Whitman's 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*:

This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body.

I'm taken with the curious, seeming contradiction of this sentence, the simultaneity of an almost pathological selflessness — “give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others” — and a complete self-confidence, Whitman's unstinting belief in the necessity of his own work: “read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life.” The sentence feels sturdy — ruggedly held together by its own propulsive exuberance, and, at the same time, about to fall apart, even as it settles into the image of the beautiful human body.

This was what I looked for as an editor: despite its diversity, all the work included in *The Experiment Will Not Be Bound* shares a particular combination of openness and

intention, curiosity and assertion: I sought work in which authors seemed to venture out onto the skinny branches of their own sensibilities. For me, that's what makes art experimental — not some given formal procedure, much less an affiliation with whatever movement. That's also what immediately appealed to me about Patrick Davis's concept of an unbound anthology, his homage to William Gass's original plan for the publication of his novel, *The Tunnel*. Here was a chance to test the very identity of the anthology: even as a single experimental work would reinvent the relation of part and whole, so might the unbound book.

That experiment proves much more than a literary game. The authors included here write from a moment marked by environmental degradation, systemic racism, violence to women's rights and those of LGBTQ people, not to mention the rise of authoritarian nationalism and vast economic disparities. While these writers tend to avoid the merely topical or the predictably rhetorical, their work nevertheless gathers energy from such surroundings. Both agony and joy attend the task of reflecting and giving new body to the world at this moment.

Experiment in such a context implies urgency as well as risk — the way it does in Marianne Moore's poem "Those Various Scalpels" from her 1924 collection, *Observations*:

*These things are rich
instruments with which to experiment but surgery is not
tentative.*

The work included here is many things, but rarely tentative. Instead, it feels surprisingly inevitable — necessary, and so, recommending this anthology to you, I find it hard to improve on Walt Whitman: "Read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life."