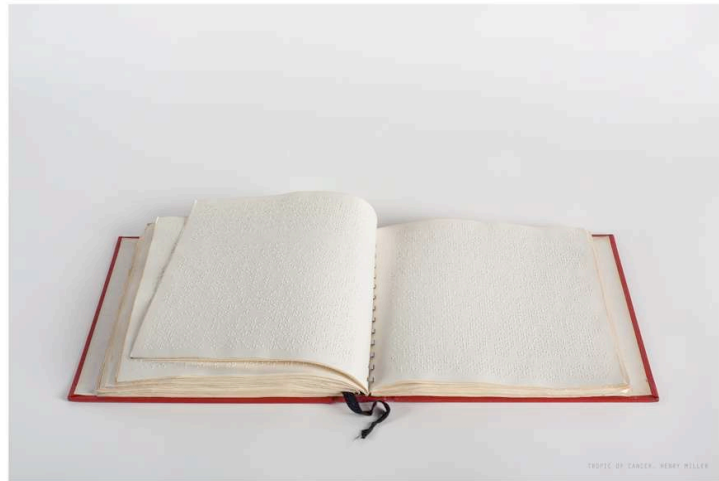


Literature's greatest hits

A photographer's homage to books uses Braille editions to underscore the threats physical books face in the digital age

by Susan Brenneman
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Name your favorite, the one book that most sticks in your mind.

Over nearly four years, photographer Catherine Wagner made that request of friends, acquaintances and outright strangers. She kept a tally on her iPhone and turned the top vote-getters into the spine of her latest work, "trans/literate," an homage to books — the cardboard and paper sort that some predict won't survive the 21st century.

The list of titles and authors reads like an exceptionally weighty version of English 101. "Most people went back to their teenage years, to high school or college," Wagner said. "They chose the classics. I took very specific notes, and when more than three or four people said a title, that's how it got into the series."

Among the favorites: "The Great Gatsby" (named equally by young and old, by men and women; "it crossed the most boundaries," Wagner says). "Moby-Dick" (mostly men). "The Bell Jar" (guess). "Siddhartha" was deemed transformative by its fans, who were also likely to roll their eyes in embarrassment. Virginia Woolf got three nods, for "To the Lighthouse," "Mrs. Dalloway," "Orlando." Toni Morrison, two: "Beloved," "Sula." Borges made the list. So did Kafka, Joyce, Mark Twain and the Bible.

People on airplanes chose quickly. "They knew they'd never see me again," Wagner said. Those in her circle were more self-conscious. "They said, 'Let me think about it and I'll email you.' "

Wagner settled on 30 titles for "trans/literate." The resulting photographs couldn't be more straightforward – formal diptychs, the book closed and opened on a glowing white background. But as solid and documentary as these images are, they are also mysterious and abstract, a paradox contained by the kind of books Wagner photographed: Braille editions.

Wagner chose Braille because the raised-dot writing system for the blind is at risk. Fewer and fewer Braille books are published as audio books and screen-reading technology take their place. All physical books are under threat in the digital age, but perhaps the first to go will be in Braille.

"Everywhere I look," Wagner says, "people are on Kindles, they are 'reading' audio books. But I'm plugged in to the really intimate experience of holding a book, reading a book."

She was drawn to the bright jewel-tone bindings of library Braille editions – "like color field paintings." The embossed dots on the open pages made for a subtle invitation. "You see people walk up to the photographs, look to the right and the left and try to touch," Wagner said.

In the end, the images capture frustrated access – the classic framed and behind glass, in a code rarely cracked, identified by titles you know but can barely discern. The names may be the last thing you see – in the right-hand corner, overprinted in raised dots, spelling out a fading source of knowledge.