

# BOOKS & BONES & OTHER THINGS

Jan K. Coetzee

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*Willem Boshoff*

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For Asta

# WORDS ON THE BOOK

“This is an exceptional publication linking art, history and human interaction. As photographer, I am deeply impressed with the imagery that Jan Coetzee has created as illustration. As a consequence, the book transcends a merely academic approach to a more aesthetic one.”

**Roger Ballen**

*South African-based American photographer best known for his images that exist in a space between painting, drawing, installation and photography. His works include Outland (2000, revised in 2015), Shadow Chamber (2005), Boarding House (2009), Asylum of the Birds (2014) and most recently, Ballenesque: A Retrospection (2017). He also created acclaimed short films such as I Fink You Freeky, as well as sculpture installations. Some of his recent installations were at Paris' Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature (2017), Australia's Sydney College of the Arts (2016) and at the Serlachius Museum in Finland (2015).*

“It's high time that sociologists venture beyond the confines of academic sociology and that is exactly what Jan Coetzee has done in *Books and Bones and Other Things*. Part art installation and part sociological reflection, he shows how historical texts interact with one another and take on different meanings in the contexts in which they are read. A pleasure for anyone interested in the sociology of knowledge and the materiality of everyday life.”

**Kathy Davis**

*Senior Research Associate, Sociology Department, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam and long-standing editor of The European Journal of Women's Studies. An award-winning author of best-selling sociological texts, the most recent being Dancing Tango: Passionate encounters in a globalizing world.*

“Old texts, found objects, sculptures and an autobiographical gaze – an impressive and innovative account of reconstructing the South African lifeworld set in colonialism and apartheid. Poignant guide to future qualitative thinking.”

**Thomas S. Eberle**

*Emeritus Professor of Sociology, University of St.Gallen,  
former Vice-President of the European Sociological Association,  
and former President of the Swiss Sociological Association.*

“Through a narrative approach to human lives, this book reveals an interplay between symbolic and material objects. Knowledge, beliefs, ideologies and cultural patterns are embedded in books, artefacts, objects and art. When these books, artefacts and objects are set in visual and symbolic juxtaposition to one another and presented to the viewer as artworks, a space opens for their inherent beliefs, ideologies and cultures to be contested. Scholars in epigenetics will enjoy reading this book, which tells how societal behaviours affect phenotypic change, and *vice versa*.”

**Giampietro Gobo**

*Professor of Sociology and Methodology, University of Milan.*

“*Books and Bones and Other Things* contains a unique collection of objects and texts, calling for the appreciation and fascination of storytelling and story writing. Jan Coetzee’s sociological eye for the significance of memory and the implications of artefacts for memory, is sharp when he sets out to excavate sedimented layers of social reality. His narrative is personal, insightful and intriguing. A highly recommended story.”

**Katarina Jacobsson**

*Professor of Social Work and Sociology, Department of Social Work,  
Lund University, and the President of the Swedish Sociological Association.*

“Curriculum, the feminist theorist Madeleine Grumet once said, is the collective story we tell our children about our past, our present and our future. In one sense, the turmoil in South African society – and recently university campuses in particular – has to do with those untold stories, unheard stories, and untroubled stories shattered by the transition from apartheid to democracy. I cannot think of a more accomplished scholar of stories, or the narrative study of lives, than Jan Coetzee who in this ground-breaking book demands a reckoning with all those stories, of ourselves and others entangled in this post-1994 dance. This attempt at excavating the ‘knowledge in the bones’ is truly an exceptional piece of scholarship by Coetzee and an outstanding set of authors and should be required reading not only for sociologists but story-tellers and -listeners across the disciplines. It is the curriculum we desperately need.”

**Jonathan D. Jansen**

*Former Rector and Vice-Chancellor at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa and author of Knowledge in the Blood (2009), How to fix South Africa's Schools (2014), Making Love in a War Zone (2018) and several other books.*

“Understanding life experiences always goes through some kind of narrative interpretation about the self. The autobiographical journey narrated in this book and the author’s artworks keenly resonate with current trends in contemplative research.”

**Krzysztof Konecki**

*Professor of Sociology, University of Łódź, the President of the Polish Sociological Association and actively working in the field of meditation as epistemology.*

“Jan Coetzee appears before us as an artistic sociologist or sociological artist. His collection of books within a book, which he has turned into artistic treasures by combining them with other artefacts, shows us in a remarkable way how complex meaning and its production are. By linking this work to his biography Coetzee illustrates the power of semiosis.”

**Christoph Maeder**

*Professor of Visual Sociology, University of Teacher Education, Zurich, and former President of the Swiss Sociological Association.*

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# PROLOGUE

In today's world there is an increasing interest in the narrative study of lives. This comes in the wake of our need to better understand human experience, human motivations, and the ways in which we impact on our social and natural world. Since its inception sociology has grappled with the quest to understand social reality and the intricate interplay of relationships between self, other, community, and the social world. We know that we cannot analyse human actions and social interaction in an objective manner as these do not exist in some concrete form 'out there'. Rather, actions and social interaction are the outcome of the ongoing social and historical mediation of consciousness, and therefore they also require an understanding from within.

As a young academic in the early 1970s, I encountered John O'Malley's book entitled *Sociology of meaning*<sup>1</sup> and became immersed in concepts such as context, critical reflection, dialectic, encounter, existential, inquisitive practice, phenomenological, semiopraxis and subjectivity. These concepts became part of the sociological repertoire underlying my belief in the power of interpretive sociological analysis to open up better understandings of everyday experiences. They guided my epistemological journey towards unwrapping and breaking open the meanings and emotions of routine as well as exceptional moments in our everyday life and its roots in social reality. The books in this collection of *documents of life* contributed over a long period of time to present everyday social reality – specifically western social reality, and provide expressions of our past as well as reflections on our ancestry.

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1 O'Malley 1972.

In his ground-breaking work *Memory, history, forgetting* Paul Ricoeur reminds us that any phenomenology of memory needs to address two essential questions: "Of *what* are there memories? *Whose* memory is it?"<sup>2</sup> The texts contained in the installations in this book relate a particular history – they tell stories that go back to Western and Central Europe. The texts also centre on my own appropriation of memory, my own capability for self-reflection. To understand how memory works and how it is embodied in this book and the bookworks, one must realise that *to be reminded of something is at the same time to remember who you are*.

To represent the road travelled by all the thoughts and ideas in this collection of books has been a personal and difficult task. Accepting the relationship between self, other and external world, I start my understanding of social reality based on my autobiography. So, the departure point is my lengthy engagement with books as an academic sociologist. I look at the world around me and at the way in which my trajectory in this world leads me *to find* – in the literal sense – the texts in this collection and in the symbolic sense – to find what they tell us about life and living.

The books in the installations are therefore not meant to be seen primarily as objects that were written, bound between two covers and shelved – waiting to be taken up and to be opened in order for the objective data between the covers to be monologically accessed. Books are human creations. The words inside the texts – as well as the bound pages – originated from and bear witness to the intentions, motivations, hopes and sometimes even the fears and sufferings of human beings. They tell us something about our lifeworld; they narrate a message or a story. But in the context of the installations their ability to narrate is undermined: many of the texts in this collection are written in old, inaccessible languages and within opaque narrative structures. So, I cannot merely present these texts; I need to re-narrate, deconstruct and even subvert narrative conventions. And this happens by presenting the texts in a way that evokes new stories in the minds of 'readers' or that prompts a re-remembering of old stories in new ways.

All the works in this collection depart from the book as we came to know it. They were all written, created and presented in the format that we conventionally associate with a book. At no point do I attempt to deconstruct the material book

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2 Ricoeur 2004:3.

object. Their deeply instilled customary forms as objects and as vehicles for conveying their message via text, are largely left unchanged. Not a single one of the texts is available to the viewer to read or to browse. Many are incarcerated in museum cases – locked up in solitary confinement. Some are enclosed with other books in communal museum cases. But all are kept in custody with other objects to persuade the 'reader' to attempt a new reading.

The inaccessibility and untouchability of the books make written language somehow superfluous. But together with their accompanying sculpted and/or found objects the books take on a new, broader communicative function. Presented as part of installations, the books and their languages are excluded from interpretation and even response. All the books come from the past and contain content that is now closed, finished and largely detained, even though some of them were once perceived to be carrying the word of God. As a collection, and by means of their deliberate exhibition with other material objects, the books now require improvisation – a new interaction and experience – in order to be read.

The reader is invited to critically inquire into the aims, objectives, context, and content of the books themselves; to reinvent the books conceptually. The books therefore become artefacts that one sees and reads, without opening them and without converting the original print on the pages to meaning and message. By developing a new interactive relationship with the books and their accompanying material objects, the reader essentially constitutes a new text.

Four prominent South African artists contributed to this book and pointed to alternative ways of reading bookworks, including mine. Their contributions in 'Lenses for the viewing' follow the chapter 'Notes for an exhibition'.

As an intermezzo between the four essays and the photographic exhibition of my bookworks that follows, is a poem by Eliza Kentridge, called 'Birdlife'. It is deliberately positioned here to emphasise the immediate experience and joy of reading – the comfort of the familiar, the flight into the unknown. The poem reflects the imaginative relationship of a child to books: open to their power and receptive to their mystique.

In the first essay Willem Boshoff presents ideas on his work 'Blind alphabet', a series of artworks meant to be viewed in a gallery in the presence of a blind

person, and more intricately, by means of the blind person "reading" the work. The blind person reads a Braille text and intensely handles its accompanying sculpted wooden artwork, then explains to the sighted viewer what the particular artwork denotes. Interpretation becomes further problematised as each woodwork and Braille description refers to a most uncommon word in the English language. Just as sighted people sometimes need the blind to open their eyes to different and deeper meanings, the installations featured in my *documents of life* invite the reader to access a text that is closed, untouchable, unreadable, and must be interpreted via its juxtaposition with other objects, artefacts, and artworks.

In the second essay, 'Books in space: absorption and distance in two artists' book installations', Jonah Sack elaborates on Boshoff's tension between reading and looking. 'Blind alphabet' heightens and dramatises the strange duality of books – we need to deal with their physicality as well as their meaning. Sack points out that reading is essentially a private act, but one that we are often required to do in public – on busses, in parks, and libraries. One of his own works, 'Proposal for a new city, the same as the old one', enlists the large and unwieldy format of a newspaper – many copies which are strewn over tables and folded over stands like old fashioned fold-out maps with their awkward and impractical format. He inscribes the pages of the newspapers he creates – nesting artworks within artworks. The newspapers need to be opened in order for them to be read in the public space of the gallery, so the artwork also situates private reading within public viewing spaces.

In the third essay, 'The artist's book as democratic force', Kim Berman deals with books as a space and format for political and social activism. She aligns with Jurgen Habermas' assertion that there is a need for emancipatory intention in order to advance society's communicative capacity: speaking and writing – and by association bookworks – should purposefully aim to bring about change. As an activist artist engaged in the anti-apartheid struggle during the 1980s she used documentary communication in her artworks to highlight oppression. Her bookworks became a form of resistance, but at the same time an influence and exposé in imagining new futures. From intimate and small hand-held books to larger friezes projected on free-standing screens, these bookworks communicated the realities in South Africa at the time. The influential organisation which she founded, Artist Proof Studio, provides ongoing opportunities for transformational

arts practices and for working towards justice. Berman's essay provides a background for reflecting on topical issues – religion, colonialism, domination and struggle – alluded to in the installations of my project.

In the fourth essay, 'Bookworks and dialogic imagination', prominent South African bookwork artist Keith Dietrich demonstrates how bookworks take shape through a process of dialogical imagination. He links dialogical consciousness to the activity of reflexivity whereby an artist commits to looking back over his or her original standpoints in the light of being confronted with what contradicts and transcends the boundaries of these initial positions. He emphasises that creativity is a dialogical process that can intrinsically alter our understanding of art. In the case of bookworks, the dialogical process implies that books speak to each other across time and context in an external dialogue. But there is also an internal dialogue: bookworks speaking to and within themselves as art objects.

The 59 *documents of life* installations – contained in the section 'The bookworks' – bring books into a dialogue with each other: by gathering them together in one venue the books attain a different character and the whole collection starts telling us more than what an individual book or bookwork can do. The installations also bring the viewer into a dialogue with the wider context of time and history. If the viewer chooses to engage, then he or she is obliged to reflect – to look back on and weigh up the motivations, intentions, successes and sufferings implied in the bookworks – and to engage the wider range of historical and philosophical preconditions they offer for understanding our social reality and its making.

# NOTES FOR AN EXHIBITION

## Storytelling

From the beginning, humans have been dwelling in storytelling societies. We tell our stories, we listen to others' stories and we story our lives. We are the only ones on our planet to have this capability: to tell and record stories and then pass them on from one generation to another, from one culture to another. And our stories have consequences. They work their way into all aspects of our living together with other people. Storytelling is a meaning-making activity and important in our search to make sense of our lives.

Our stories tell of happenings and experiences. But they also tell of visions and of dreams. They speak of reality and of imagination, of politics and of religion. Of such importance are stories that had nobody ever spoken to us from the outside, we might only have had silence within ourselves. It is only by listening to the stories of others that we start to develop the capacity to tell our own stories. By internalising the voices of others, we come to discover ourselves and to discover our fellow humans. We are shaped by the stories preserved in our society. We are moulded in such a way that we appear similar to others in our direct community, and for this reason we can be recognised by people from *inside* and from *outside* as members who belong together in a unique collective: a society. But no child is a passive recipient of society's stories. We can resist the stories, we can participate in them and we can collaborate in the stories to varying degrees. Quite literally, even the young child starts to talk back.



“Curriculum, the feminist theorist Madeleine Grumet once said, is the collective story we tell our children about our past, our present and our future. In one sense, the turmoil in South African society – and recently university campuses in particular – has to do with those untold stories, unheard stories, and untroubled stories shattered by the transition from apartheid to democracy. I cannot think of a more accomplished scholar of stories, or the narrative study of lives, than Jan Coetzee who in this groundbreaking book demands a reckoning with all those stories, of ourselves and others entangled in this post-1994 dance. This attempt at excavating the ‘knowledge in the bones’ is truly an exceptional piece of scholarship by Coetzee and an outstanding set of authors and should be required reading not only for sociologists but story-tellers and -listeners across the disciplines. It is the curriculum we desperately need.”

**Jonathan D. Jansen**

*Former Rector and Vice-Chancellor at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa and author of Knowledge in the Blood (2009), How to fix South Africa's Schools (2014), Making Love in a War Zone (2018) and several other books.*



**JAN K. COETZEE** (MA, BD and DPhil, University of Pretoria) dedicated his working life to academia. He started his career at the University of South Africa; later became Professor of Sociology at the University of the (Orange) Free State (1979-1986). He then moved to Rhodes University (1987-2010) as Professor and Head of Department. In 2011 he returned to the University of the Free State as Senior Professor of Sociology where he initiated and directs the programme: *The narrative study of lives*.

He has published more than 70 scientific articles in accredited and international journals and authored/co-authored more than 20 book publications. He was the recipient of the Vice-Chancellor's Book Award (2002) at Rhodes University for his two books *Plain tales from Robben Island* and *Fallen walls*. Several of his Master's and PhD students occupy senior academic positions at South African universities.

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