

# Does your book come back to life after death?

*An investigation into the resurrection of medieval manuscripts and incunabula through live interpretation and emotional performance in the post-print era by Ingo R. Glückler.*

This article was originally presented at the 2013 IMTAL Global Conference on creativity and innovation in today's museum theatre at Artisphere (1101 Wilson Blvd., Arlington, VA 22209, USA).

Before getting on to the article there are two things that I want to impart: First, the author of this article is an independent historic interpreter, specialized in professional costumed interpretation. In addition he is the founder of a historic performance troupe that has performed at 28 historic sites run by the government of Baden-Württemberg in Southern Germany. Secondly, the author is the library director of the Catholic University of Linz in Austria. In this context he is publishing "interpretation – The International Bibliographic Database of Living History" (<http://www.livehistory.de/interpretation/>). Throwing both qualifications together will lead automatically to interpretation of rare books through live interpretation and emotional performance.

A library's mission is to build collections, provide comprehensive information resources and services, ensure the preservation and long-lasting availability of collections and - last but not least - to interpret written heritage. The first three tasks get a lot of attention today. In contrast, heritage interpretation of rare books has widely been neglected. Today, heritage interpretation in libraries simply consists of displays that exhibit the material aspects of books as a work of art taken out of context. Rare books remain mere decoration either stored in the mass grave of closed stacks or displayed in showcases as dusty fossils in rigor mortis. Contrary to the beliefs of many curators rare books don't speak for themselves. What a sender (here the displayed book) says and what a receiver (here a visitor) hears are typically two very different messages. Therefore, visitors need guidance, usually provided by object labels that display the title of the work, followed by the date and place of creation. As if that weren't enough, a paradigm shift is producing alarming symptoms. As readers turn to ebooks, the book, as we know it is dead.

It doesn't have to be like this. Behind every rare book, there is an even greater dramatic story that makes for great theatre. In the following text I will explore some essential aspects of uncovering these stories behind rare books and their intangible cultural heritage through live interpretation will be discussed.

The book has shaped our civilisation like no other medium. In order to interpret the sociocultural elements of

rare books by the means of historic interpretation we should look closely at three aspects of the book itself: The reader, the content and the author. Let's have a look at each of these three elements separately.

First, the reader: The rare book collection at the Catholic University of Linz contains 50.000 beautiful books written between 830 and 1800. For the last eight years or so nobody requested any of these books from our stacks. Since all of them are written in Latin or old German dialects, there are only a few classical scholars that could read them today. Thus, non-scholars do not understand rare books. Visiting a book display they look forward to making an excursion into book history with someone who is knowledgeable. Through historic interpretation only these visitors are able to grasp the book's content. In doing so the audience converts unconsciously from mere visitors to knowing readers. Thereby, performance is an effective teaching tool and has an emotional impact that is conducive to a long-lasting learning.

Secondly, the content: Historic interpretation enhances the visitor's appreciation and understanding of the book's content itself. Dramatic performances based on rare books are face-to-face encounters with social, economic and political history and concepts about life and society of bygone times. Moreover, visitors find personal meaning in things from the past. Through historic interpretation human destinies, emotions, mentalities, the spirit of the





age, interpretative frameworks, habitus and the imaginary world covered in the book can influence the visitor in a very special way. Books reveal their secrets through interpretation.

Finally, the author: As historical performers we are presenting an oral biography of an author who is connected with one of our rare books. The authentic embodiment of that author and the reconstruction of his character, personality, memories, conflicts, decisions and events which lie behind his work lead to understand what motivated him to write his book. The interpretation gives a voice to and celebrates the experiences of the author who usually is excluded from the grander narratives of conventional history. As historic interpreter we focus on overall themes of the book and on aspects of the character's life and his historical context.

Hence, library exhibitions are not really about books, they are ultimately about the people who created or were affected by those books.

Preparing a believable first-person character takes a lot of research on the author's social and material background as well as into the general time frame. Thus, the foundation work consists – first – of choosing a rare book and its author to portray, – secondly – the reading of the book, and – thirdly – the assembly of scientific material for a carefully scripted first-person narrative. Finally, in order to create the script one needs to sort and prioritize research material, determine a setting, convert the information from the book or the life of the author into good stories and arrange them into a series in order to show the interpreter's intent and focus.

Two examples: Among early accounts of pilgrimages to the Holy Land, the narrative „Peregrinatio in Terram Sanctam“ of Bernhard von Breydenbach published in 1483 stands pre-eminent as the first to be printed with views of the places seen en route. The pictures add in great measure to the popularity and commercial success of the book. In a fictitious literary reading his “freshly” printed book is presented to the public through stories in a way that allows the audience to share the experience of transcending time and place. After a scripted dialog we then take questions in character. In a post-performance we as scholars discuss historical context with the visitors.

Another example: “The Spontaneously Combusted Pomegranate of the Christian Samaritans” published by Princess Eleonora of Lichtenstein in 1709 was a frequently used cooking book that contains 500 recipes for Austrian



cookery. In a TV-style cooking show we with the audience present and prepare 18th century recipes taken from “The Pomegranate” in an improvised kitchen studio.

To sum up, historic interpretation is a useful, inspiring, effective and entertaining way to unearth rare books from the mass grave of closed stacks. It dusts off and revives book-fossils displayed in showcases and provides a human face to artefacts. However, always remember: it is all about the audience enjoying and learning about the book, the author and his life.

