

## ONCE UPON A BLOOK

Miriam Schaer

Blook! What the heck’s a blook? A furry *Gorgrond ogron* in *Worlds of Warcraft*? A printed publication based on blog content? A babbling stream with a speech defect?

Yes to all and also, according to preservation librarian and bookbinder Mindell Dubansky, any book-like object that is not actually a book.

Blook's can be sculpted or manufactured, decorative or functional, antique or contemporary, passive or interactive, as serious as tombstones or as playful as exploding cigars — and sometimes both, as the objects from Dubansky’s blook collection demonstrate in all their *trompe l’oeil* glory and kitsch in her engaging exhibit, *Blook's: The Art of Books That Aren't*.

Even in the twenty-first century — age of iPhones and e-readers — the codex is so universal a symbol that it remains the plaything of anyone seeking to benefit from its archetypal meaning as a repository of information. As a result, blook's can have as their subtexts almost anything books have as their texts. The consideration of blook's as a collectible in their own right stems from an acknowledgment that books are commentaries on the things they represent. They celebrate — modestly for the most part — the fake, the flawed clone, parody, imitation, appropriation. The commentaries can be hokey, like book-shaped cake pans and ice-cream molds; jokey, like *Good Cookies for Smart Cookies*, (p. ), a book-shaped cookie jar; or dead

serious, like a prayer “book” to the memory of James Fagan, 1875 to 1897, carved from black anthracite. Whatever the subject, they borrow the cultural mojo of books to enhance their own. Many of Dubansky’s blook's, even the sculptural ones, serve functional ends as book-shaped book-ends, vases, headstones, containers and the like. Many are novelties, cheaply made items masquerading as books for their amusement value — blook's like *Secrets of the American Cup or the Cause of the Controversy Vol. 1*, (p. ), which opens to reveal a liquor flask; *Forever Amber*, (p. ), which is not a romance novel but housing for a small bottle of perfume; and other

blook's that conceal items such as a Crosley pocket radio, a Betsy Ross doll or a spring-loaded snake.

Personally, I find myself drawn to blook's with surprising interiors. I enjoy their riffs on the expected, their playful twists, even if the jokes are groaners. The seven cookbook-like volumes of *Chef-an-ette*, (p. ), resting on a metal bookshelf, tilt forward

to reveal hollow receptacles for personal recipe cards home cooks are meant to fill.

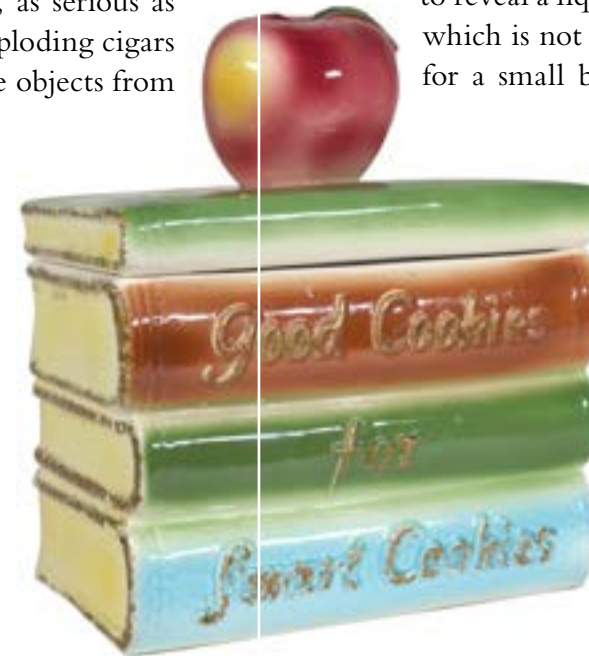
The U.S. Occupied Zone of Germany, a “*Stereo Book*” (p. ), from the 1950s surveys the post-World War II occupation in a format novel for the time. The blook opens to an interior box with segmented areas showing stereographic images of German cities, a map, and a viewer so readers can see the cities in three-dimensional depth.

Practical to the the core, *The Care and Feeding of Books* (p. ), is an actual first-aid kit for damaged books. It houses most of the tools, tapes and salves DIY mending demands.

One of my earliest encounters with a blook was with my own *Baby Book* — a white book-like box with pink lettering and fake gilt edges, filled with memorabilia from infancy on: inoculation records, snapshots, drawings, report cards, hospital wristbands and more all jammed together. I re-member combing through it, looking for answers to the ordinary mysteries of a suburban child-hood, hoping they’d be more interesting than they were. It’s anyone’s guess where that blook is now

As an artist, I’m most drawn to blook's that seem to anticipate contemporary artist books, especially ones by artists who carve or alter exist-ing books, transforming them into sculptures unreadable except as art. Blook's have been with us a long time and we have lived with them as with an unacknowledged breed of dog or cat, enjoying their presence while failing to recognize their common heritage. Dubansky’s exhibit opens our eyes.

MIRIAM SCHAER is an artist based in Brooklyn, New York. Her most recent book is *The Presence of Their Absence*.



Cookie jar. *Good Cookies for Smart Cookies*.  
Maker unknown.  
American. Mid-twentieth century.