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The Ordinary Numinosity of the Book: A Framework for Understanding Affective Encounters in Book Exhibition Contexts

This article proposes a framework for understanding how books function as affective agents in exhibition contexts. Drawing on museum studies, book history, material studies and the history of emotions, it argues that books participate in meaning-making through their material presence and emotional resonance. Developed through doctoral research on visitor experiences in book exhibitions, the concept reframes emotional response as a precondition for engagement rather than simply an outcome of curatorial mediation. In doing so, this article offers a perspective for rethinking exhibition practice, particularly useful for special collections librarians working with limited resources.

Introduction

The numen—drawn from religious and anthropological discourse—refers to a spiritual or ineffable quality that certain objects or places seem to possess, commanding responses of wonder, respect, or profound connection. In museums and library exhibitions, books often sit behind glass, closed or partially open, their texts partly or entirely inaccessible. Despite these constraints, expressions of wonder or delight before a book are no less common than before a celebrated work of art, suggesting that encounters with books can exceed the limits of access and legibility. Yet the study of book exhibitions has long been framed around a perceived incompatibility between the exhibition format and the book's nature as a medium for reading.

But what if this framing misunderstands how books operate in exhibitions? What if books possess their own capacity to generate meaningful experiences, independent of curatorial intervention? Within museum and heritage studies, such unmediated experiences have often been described as *numinous*: moments of intense resonance or heightened awareness that seem to exceed the material properties of the artefact itself.¹ Numinous experiences are most often discussed in relation to historically significant or

1. Kiersten F. Latham, "The Poetry of the Museum: A Holistic Model of Numinous Museum Experiences," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 22, no. 3 (2007): 20.

culturally valued artefacts.² Applied to books, however, a different question emerges: Might books in exhibitions evince numinosity not only because of the works they contain or the histories they represent, but also because they are books, that is, familiar forms that carry their own emotional and cultural associations?

This article addresses that question by examining how books function as affective agents in exhibition contexts. Drawing on museum studies, book history, materiality studies, and the history of emotions—as well as the author’s doctoral research on visitor experiences—it argues that encounters with books often begin with acts of recognition, shaped by viewers’ lived relationships.³ To describe this process, I introduce the concept of the Ordinary Numinosity of the Book (ONoB), a model that shifts attention from exhibition mediation toward the emotional histories visitors bring. The discussion begins by considering how New Materialist approaches to object agency reshape thinking about books as exhibition objects, before examining the limits of materiality alone in accounting for the intense affective responses a book on display can evoke. It then turns to emotion, as a mediating force between object and viewer, drawing on museum scholarship on numinous experience alongside key concepts from emotion theory. Finally, after outlining the ONoB model, it reflects on the theoretical and practical implications of applying this framework, with particular attention to special collections librarians working in exhibitions.

In an age dominated by digital media, books have undergone what Wurth et al. describe as a process of “de-materialization, repositioning, and re-conceptualization.”⁴ No longer the primary means of accessing information, physical books have been revalued as material and cultural objects as well as affective ones—a shift that makes understanding these additional layers of meaning increasingly important.⁵

Books as Agentic Objects: A New Materialist Approach

Materiality studies offer a useful starting point for recognizing books as agentic objects. Within this broader field, scholars working in new materialist traditions argue that objects actively participate in production of meaning and experience. Jane Bennett’s

2. Rachel P. Maines and James J. Glynn, “Numinous Objects,” *The Public Historian* 15, no. 1 (1993): 9.

3. For a more detailed account of the research informing this article, see Susana Sánchez-González, *Hooked by the Book: Bookish Emotions and Book Exhibition Experience* (PhD diss., University of Manchester), <https://research.manchester.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/hooked-by-the-bookbookish-emotions-and-book-exhibition-experience/>

4. Kiene Brillenburg Wurth et al., *Book Presence in a Digital Age* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2018), 7.

5. For discussions on emotional response and contemporary book culture, see Jessica Pressman, *Bookishness: Loving Books in a Digital Age* (Columbia University Press, 2020); Leah Price, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Books* (Basic Books, 2019); and Tom Mole, *The Secret Life of Books: Why They Mean More Than Words* (Simon & Schuster, 2019).

concept of “thing-power” helps clarify this idea.⁶ “Thing-power” refers to the capacity of objects to act, to produce effects, to make a difference in the world, or, “the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness.”⁷ Books don’t simply exist, inertly, on shelves: they are “vibrant matter”—they lean, gather dust, yellow with age, emanate particular smells, and occupy space in ways that shape how people move through rooms, make meaning in those rooms, and organize their lives, inviting us to consider what books do as objects, as well as what they signify.

Applying New Materialism to Books in Exhibitions

New Materialism thus offers a different view: even without access to their content, books communicate through physical presence. A gilt-edged folio may signal prestige or careful preservation, while a small, annotated volume suggests repeated and intimate engagement. These qualities do more than illustrate historical facts; they make other stories—within, around, and about the book—visible and sensed. The assumption implied in Beasley that “no amount of gazing at Shakespeare’s first folio will convey its intangible value unless we have already read Shakespeare” is thereby challenged, in exhibition contexts.⁸ When books are viewed only through this lens, they risk appearing as impossible exhibition objects, as their primary function—being read—is suspended within the display case.

Work in book history further develops this perspective.⁹ Gerome McGann describes books as operating through a “double helix of perceptual codes,” in which both linguistic content and bibliographic form work together to convey meaning.¹⁰ Gérard Genette’s concept of paratext likewise shows how titles, images, and layout shape interpretation, before any reading begins.¹¹ From this perspective, the book can be understood as a material form whose external appearance already communicates cultural and historical significance. The codex also carries expectations shaped by lived experience: visitors recognize the structure of pages and may imagine turning them, even when the object is sealed behind a case. Engagement emerges through embodied memories and the object’s material presence.

6. For discussions of New Materialist approaches, see Timothy J. LeCain, *The Matter of History: How Things Create the Past* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 74–75 and Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010).

7. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xvi.

8. Gerald Beasley, “Curatorial Crossover: Building Library, Archives, and Museum Collections,” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 8, no. 1 (2007): 26.

9. Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe Between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford University Press, 1994); Robert Darnton, “What Is the History of Books?” *Daedalus* 111, no. 3 (1982): 65–83; D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (The British Library, 1987).

10. Jerome J. McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton University Press, 1991).

11. Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

This approach does not diminish the importance of content: it reveals how privileging text over form reflects an anthropocentric habit, the tendency to equate the book with the message it conveys. Because text is often understood as the primary channel through which authors address readers, exhibition interpretation frequently focused on compensating for restricted access through extensive *human-centred* interpretative mediation—labels, audio guides, digital interfaces, etc. While these strategies remain valuable, they can unintentionally narrow focus to what the book itself communicates through its material presence alone.

The Limits of New Materialism for Understanding Exhibition Contexts

New Materialism, however, does not fully explain how books function as agents of exhibition experience as it assumes forms of engagement—touch, handling, sensory proximity—that are restricted in exhibition settings. What visitors encounter is primarily visual: form, scale, color, condition, illustrations, annotations, erasures, and marginalia. These qualities matter, but they do not fully account for the intensity or significance of the experience. Something else must activate this objectual agency; I argue that this is emotion.

Books carry layers of association shaped by personal histories of reading and by broader cultural imaginaries. When viewers encounter a First Folio, for example, they meet a canonical work and a familiar kind of object: a book. Encounters with familiar objects activate prior knowledge, memory, empathy, and imagination, directing attention toward the object's aspects that resonate with lived experience. Smith's concept of "bookhood" offers a useful way of naming this mode of engagement, foregrounding relations to books that encompass material familiarity and affective response; bookhood involves "remembering the smell and feel of a loved story, not just its plot or characters."¹² This response is shaped by a particular title's meaning, and also by recognition of the object as a book, with all the embodied memories and expectations that form entails. In this way, exhibited books communicate through *weight* as the carrier of a specific text and as an object, whose form and cultural life convey meaning.¹³

Emotion's Role in Activating Agency

If books communicate in exhibitions as *books*, the question becomes how that communication is realized and felt by the viewer. This is where emotion theory becomes relevant. Sara Ahmed's work, in particular, describes emotion as something that takes shape in the

12. Emma Smith, *Portable Magic: A History of Books and Their Readers* (Allen Lane, 2022), 11–12.

13. I borrow the notion of "weight" of the book from Susan Cox, who described books as carrying "certain connotations evident to the viewer which are based on the book's position in the scheme of human knowledge." Cox used this idea to inform exhibit design, encouraging curators to consider the intellectual and cultural associations books bring into the gallery. Her framework, however, situates weight primarily within established hierarchies of knowledge and literary value and does not fully account for the affective dimension explored here. Susan Cox, "The Book Exhibition as Artistic Medium: Theory and Practice" (master's thesis, University of Chicago, 1973), 4.

contact between people and things. For Ahmed, emotions are shaped by histories that continue to leave their impressions on us.¹⁴ By “impression,” Ahmed refers to how we respond in the moment of encounter: experiences remain active, and influence is shaped by accumulated effects with similar objects.¹⁵ Therefore, viewers do not encounter books as neutral observers; their responses are shaped by accumulated experiences that resurface through visual recognition of the displayed object. These *bookish emotions* may include tactile, psychological, and sensory memories, and moments associated with reading. What begins to surface here, then, is a mode of attention that moves beyond interpretive reading: a way of being with books, in which meaning emerges through presence and resonance, as much as through curatorial mediation.

Book Presence and the Immaterial Made Material

The concept of “book presence” provides additional nuance. In Wurth et al., books evolved into objects, that are simultaneously material artifacts and immaterial “mirrors of our experiences.”¹⁶ This immateriality “still partakes of the material in an infinite feedback loop,” because of its ability to elicit sensorial responses.¹⁷ This dual nature creates double agency: one that impacts through material properties and another one that signals through accumulated meanings. In exhibition, where direct sensory engagement is limited, this feedback loop operates at a visual and emotional level. In this context, the book on display is a “semiophore”—an object that mediates between visible and invisible worlds.¹⁸ It is a conduit for associations, memories, and feelings that extend far beyond itself. As such, the book self-referentially speaks, about its own content, the category of books more broadly, and about the viewer’s personal relationship with that category.¹⁹ In this sense, books in exhibitions allow viewers to re-experience worlds inhabited during previous encounters. This mediating function helps explain why some books can still produce powerful affective responses even when placed behind glass. Although central to many exhibition experiences, this quality of books as exhibition objects remains surprisingly underexplored in current theory and practice.

From Numen to Ordinary Numinosity

While librarianship has often prioritized access and preservation when discussing exhibitions, museological scholarship offers a more developed vocabulary for unpacking the type of affective responses outlined above. Maines and Glynn introduced the term “numinous” in 1993, to describe intense emotional experiences elicited by places, such as historical battlefields, whose “psychological rather than material significance”

14. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 6.

15. Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 8.

16. Wurth et al., *Book Presence*, 7.

17. Wurth et al., *Book Presence*, 5.

18. Krzysztof Pomian, quoted in Maines and Glynn, “Numinous Objects,” 10.

19. J. T. Hamilton, “Pagina Abscondita: Reading in the Book’s Wake,” in Wurth et al., *Book Presence*, 34.

makes them seem “as if they were inhabited by a spirit that calls forth in many of us a reaction of awe and reverence.”²⁰ Kristen Latham extends the numinous experience concept to museum artefacts, arguing that objects can also produce moments of heightened sensory, emotional, and intellectual “awareness,” comparable to those felt in historical sites, and akin to aesthetic encounters with art.²¹

Since numinosity has origins with the sacred or the extraordinary—objects and experiences set apart from everyday life—its application to books in exhibitions requires recalibration of how numinosity is understood. If viewers encounter books as rare artefacts and familiar objects, then their numinosity cannot be confined. In books, the numinous may also emerge through familiarity, repetition, and lived experience. In this context, “ordinary” in the ONoB does not diminish affective intensity, but reframes it, away from exceptionality, and toward familiarity, recognition, and emotion. This shift resonates closely with Kathleen Stewart’s concept of “ordinary affects,” which describes forces that circulate through everyday life: impulses, sensations, habits, and modes of attention. Ordinary affects do not operate through explicit meaning-making, but through the densities and intensities they accumulate as they move through bodies, objects, and social worlds.²² When read alongside museum scholarship on numinous experience, Stewart’s work helps explain how seemingly unremarkable objects can generate powerful emotional responses, not because they are extraordinary in themselves, but because they are entangled in personal histories, embodied memories, and repeated acts of care.

ONoB brings these frameworks together. Following Latham, Maines and Glynn, and Stewart, it recognizes that books in exhibitions can function as numinous objects because they are books: iterations of the codex, an object with which most visitors will have some kind of emotional history. The ONoB captures both the extraordinary and the ordinary—the cultural weight and symbolic significance that books carry collectively, and the personal, even mundane, emotional associations they hold individually.

A Model of Engagement Through the ONoB

In addition to providing a new vocabulary for articulating affective responses to books in exhibitions, the ONoB offers a model for understanding how engagement unfolds in this context. This process is structured around the following overlapping moments:

Initial Visual Contact: The viewer’s eye falls upon the book in the display case. Even before conscious cognitive processing occurs, the form of the codex—its familiar shape, structure, and presence—registers at an affective level.

20. Maines and Glynn, “Numinous Objects,” 9.

21. Kiersten F. Latham, “The Poetry of the Museum: A Holistic Model of Numinous Museum Experiences,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 22, no. 3 (2007): 20.

22. Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Duke University Press, 2007), 2.

Emotional Activation: The viewer's accumulated emotional investments in books—their bookish emotions—surge forward. These may include specific memories (e.g., bedtime stories, classroom experiences, cherished reading moments) as well as more diffuse feelings about books as objects (e.g., comfort, curiosity, reverence, nostalgia, excitement, boredom, struggle, stress).

Agency Awakening: This emotional charge activates the book's material agency (its thing-power) as a specific kind of exhibition object. Simultaneously, it imbues the book with symbolic meanings shaped by personal experiences and broader cultural contexts. This awakens the ordinary numen residing within the book.

Affective Encounter: The now-activated book "speaks" to the viewer, compelling closer attention. This moment represents a "bookish experience"—an encounter grounded in the recognition of the book, not primarily as a specific historical artifact or literary work but as an iteration of the codex with which the viewer has an emotional relationship.

Interpretive Integration: From this foundation, the viewer then engages with curatorial mediation—reading labels, processing contextual information, and appreciating design choices. Yet this interpretive engagement is now situated against, and inflected by, the emotional landscape established through the activation of the ONoB.

Critically, this model suggests that the strength and character of the affective encounter are contingent upon the depth and nature of the viewer's emotional investment in books. In Ahmed's terms, the greater the accumulation of positive impressions left by books throughout a person's life, the stronger the activation of the ONoB, and the more vivid and meaningful the resulting experience.

Because this experience emerges from, and is shaped by, an emotional response to the book-as-codex, I refer to this moment as a *bookish experience*. However brief or consequential, this experience unfolds alongside curatorial mediation, adding further layers of meaning to the encounter with the book, and to the exhibition visit as a whole, which can now be understood, among other things, as an opportunity to undergo bookish feelings—an appealing prospect for those with a strong affinity for books and perhaps one of the key sources of the appeal of book exhibitions more broadly. In this sense, the model also introduces two new analytical categories useful for the theory and practice of book exhibitions: the *bookish visitor*, defined by their emotional relationship with books, and the *bookish experience*, a mode of encounter in which the book as book shapes interpretation and engagement. Together, these concepts provide a language for recognizing emotional resonance as an outcome of exhibition practice.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, the ONoB model thus challenges the assumption that books are inherently disadvantaged exhibition objects. It demonstrates that books possess multiple modes of communication and affect that can operate powerfully within the visual and spatial context of exhibitions. This aligns with and extends Berger's insight that "we never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves."²³ In encountering a book on display, viewers interpret it not only through knowledge of that specific volume, but also through the accumulated cultural, emotional, and personal meanings associated with books more broadly. Visitors therefore encounter books through broader meanings and associated experiences.

This perspective aligns with museological research on affect, which recognizes that encounters with objects are shaped by embodied experience and emotional resonance.²⁴ While scholarship increasingly recognizes the importance of emotion in museum experiences, affect is often treated as an outcome of curatorial strategy—something intentionally produced, through design and interpretation.²⁵ The ONoB understands affect as something visitors already bring with them through their prior relationships with books. Exhibit creators are thus encouraged to consider not only the feelings they hope to evoke but also the affective resources visitors already carry.

Example: The History of the Book Interpretation Approach

During my doctoral research, I explored this idea by developing an experimental interpretive strategy that shifted the focus of object labels toward what visitors could immediately see and relate to in the display case. Later named the *History of the Book Interpretation Approach*, this method foregrounds bibliographical and material details alongside narrative explanation, creating moments of recognition through labels that highlight how books were used, prompts that connect displays to reading histories, and arrangements that draw attention to qualities shared across many books. For example, one alternative label noted that early volumes "were bound when sold," directing attention to the bookbinding as evidence of ownership and use. Another label described the metal clasp of a manuscript as a functional feature, designed to keep the book under tension, preventing parchment leaves from cockling or warping as humidity changed. Such details were absent from those books' original labels, which focused primarily on content. Participants in my study often described these prompts as helping them "know what to look at," suggesting that material interpretation can guide attention while still leaving space for personal response.

23. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin Books, 2008), 8. Originally published 1972.

24. See Sandra H. Dudley, "Museum Materialities: Objects, Sense and Feeling," in *Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations* (Routledge, 2010), 21–38; Christopher P. Boyd and Robyn Hughes, *Emotion and the Contemporary Museum* (Springer, 2020).

25. Marzia Varutti, "Affective Encounters in Museums," in *Heritage Ecologies* (Taylor and Francis, 2021), 129–144; Marzia Varutti, "The Affective Turn in Museums and the Rise of Affective Curatorship," *Museum Management and Curatorship* (2022): 1–15.

Adopting this approach, however, also brings a practical challenge. Providing the additional context needed to guide attention toward material and historical use elements risks producing text-heavy labels that overwhelm. One possible response may lie in the integration of digital interpretation, an avenue that would benefit from further research beyond the scope of this article.

Practical Relevance for Special Collections Librarians

Taken together, these implications highlight the relevance of the ONoB framework for exhibitions developed within library contexts. Many of the strategies outlined above—guiding attention through material interpretation, working with visitors’ existing familiarity with books, and allowing recognition to shape engagement—draw directly on forms of expertise that librarians already possess. In environments where time, space, and access to specialized technologies are often limited, the framework suggests that powerful encounters need not depend on elaborate display strategies. Instead, they can emerge from librarians’ deep knowledge of books as objects, and of readers’ relationships to them, reframing perceived constraints as opportunities to foreground material familiarity, use, and recognition.

Ultimately, the approach presented here encourages libraries to recognize their own authority in the context of book exhibitions. Librarians’ deep familiarity with books as objects, and with readers’ relationships to them, constitutes a form of expertise that is both intellectual and professional. Seen in this light, library exhibits need not aspire to replicate museum models but can assert their own strengths thanks to the librarians who curate them—specialists whose expertise in books and bookish audiences can enable distinctive and powerful forms of exhibition-making.

Limitations and Future Directions: Toward a New Museology of the Book

Several important caveats must be acknowledged. First, the ONoB framework assumes a level of emotional investment in books that may not be universal. The concept is therefore most directly applicable to what might be termed “bookish” visitors, that is, those who identify as readers, collectors, or enthusiasts, and for whom books hold significant emotional weight. Nonetheless, examining the responses of such visitors can yield valuable insights for enhancing engagement among less book-oriented audiences, and may even serve as a means of attracting new publics who have yet to form strong affective connections with books. Second, the model focuses on the unmediated response of visitors to the books on display, understood as an encounter shaped directly by the book itself as a codex rather than by curatorial decisions. This helps clarify the affective dynamics at the center of the ONoB, but it also means that the framework does not fully consider how these experiences relate to, or help with, the wider aims or narrative of an exhibition. Third, the visual nature of book

exhibition encounters means that the ONoB framework may be most relevant to exhibition formats where books are enclosed in cases. Alternative exhibition strategies that allow handling, page-turning, or other forms of physical engagement would activate different aspects of books' affective agency, and might require modified theoretical approaches.

These limitations suggest productive directions for future research. Empirical studies could investigate how emotional investments in books vary across different demographic groups and how these variations influence exhibition experiences. Comparative research might explore how the ONoB operates differently for manuscripts versus printed books, literary works versus reference materials, and contemporary versus historical volumes. Additionally, experimental studies could test interpretive strategies designed to deliberately activate bookish emotions and assess their impact on visitor engagement and satisfaction.

While the ONoB framework focuses on affective agency, it represents only one step toward a broader *museology of the book*. Museology, as a field, is concerned not simply with how books are displayed, but with the theoretical, curatorial, and institutional questions that arise when books enter exhibition spaces. A museology of the book would examine the material, sensory, and intellectual dimensions that distinguish books from other cultural artefacts and artworks, and it would address the interpretive challenges created by their partial inaccessibility behind glass. Moreover, it would also interrogate the historical divide between libraries and museums, advocating for collaborative models that draw on the expertise of both sectors.

Conclusion

This article proposes the Ordinary Numinosity of the Book as a framework for understanding how books generate meaning and affect within exhibition contexts. It has argued that the emotional force accumulated through lived relationships with books shapes how visitors look, feel, and interpret them. The ONoB acknowledges that bookish experiences remain active, even when the codex becomes unreadable and untouchable within a vitrine. By bringing together insights from New Materialist thought, museum studies, the history of emotions, and book history, the ONoB offers a language for describing a phenomenon long recognized but rarely articulated: books in exhibitions resonate as objects. Seen in this light, books in exhibitions are not diminished but transformed, their significance extending beyond textual content to the memories, expectations, and cultural meanings that gather around the codex—a dimension of books often overlooked in contemporary exhibition practice.