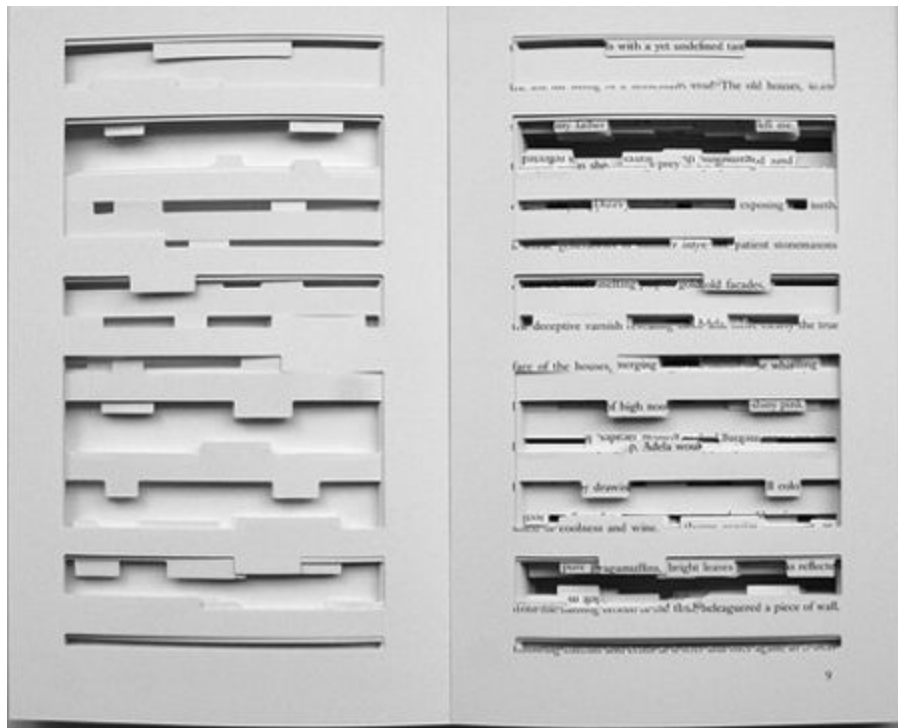


Tree of Codes by Jonathan Safran Foer

I was at my local bookshop recently looking for recommendations. The bookseller looked very excited and said he had something “out the back” that I might be interested in. That’s not the answer you expect from a highbrow bookshop in Clerkenwell. He brought out the latest novel by Jonathan Safran Foer, most famous for the novels *Everything Is Illuminated* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Foer is also famous, and occasionally derided, for the unconventional style and format of his novels. *Extremely Loud* for instance, is littered with photographs, lists of numbers, fractious syntax and ends with a 14 page flipbook of a 9/11 ‘jumper’ being sucked back up into one of the towers.

Initially, I wasn’t very impressed when the bookseller handed me a standard looking, slightly oversized paperback. He told me to open it. I flicked a few pages and then realised what all the fuss is about. *Tree of Codes* looks like this:



There has been plenty of talk recently about the ‘death of the novel’ and more significantly the ‘death of the book’, brought about by advances in digital technology. *Tree of Codes* gives this debate the middle-finger and says “Look what I can do!” The

story is a reworking of an earlier novel, Safran's favourite, *Cinnamon Shops* by Bruno Schulz, retitled *The Street of Crocodiles* when translated into English nearly half a century ago. Foer has cut, rearranged and redacted Schulz's original into something 'new'. The process of making such a thing involves the technique of diecutting each individual page. There's a video of the process here: <http://bit.ly/egTGWG>

I held the book in my hands with reverence as if I'd found a Lost Gospel or one of Lady Gaga's toenail clippings. It's a bibliophile's wet dream. The format invites an interaction that requires patience and delicacy; it is also a deeply aesthetic experience. Art always flourishes under oppression and The Death of the Book argument is requiring writers (and their publishers) to re-evaluate not only form but also narrative integrity and the overall purpose of the novel. The layering of the pages allows the reader to form yet another narrative by reading words that appear on pages further into the novel. It's the very essence of being 'in' a book. In an age where the word is subservient to the image, except of course when the words are made up of 140 characters, *Tree of Codes* synthesises word and image into what has come to be called 'Visual Writing.'

David Shields caused a literary stir last year with the publication of his book *Reality Hunger. A Manifesto* in which he argues against the conventional, historical precedence of form and linear narrative (amongst other things). A quotation, whether his own or not, as he doesn't support the academic convention of citation or reference, declares: "The novel is dead. Long live the antinovel, built from scrap." Towards the beginning Shields also quotes: "The etymology of 'fiction' is from 'fingere'...meaning to "shape, fashion, form, or mold". In my opinion, and I can't speak for Foer, *Tree of Codes* affirms both of these sentiments to some extent.

The novel isn't dead, it has just been trimmed.

Tree of Codes by Jonathan Safran Foer is out now in paperback (Visual Editions, £25.00)