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Friday Book Design Blog: The Age of Wire and String, by Ben Marcus

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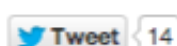
By Jonathan Gibbs

Arts

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'What is the use of a book without pictures or conversations,' is the idle thought of Alice, lying on a bank on a hot summer's day, before her trip down the rabbit hole, but of course for most grown-up books (or, let us say, novels) it's the other way round. What use are pictures, in a book? It is the words that we're here for. If the words can't do their job, how are pictures going to help? (Here's not the place for the ever-developing graphic-novel-as-literature debate, if it even still exists.)

As such, I'm not going to say that this illustrated edition of Ben Marcus's 1995 book *The Age of Wire and String* is an *improvement* on the original text – I love it too much to want to risk insulting it, and have a deep personal attachment to my old, compact Flamingo edition – but it's certainly a most interesting version of it, or response to it.

The book, for those that don't know, is a wonderful piece of experimental writing in the spirit of Borges and Barthelme. You might call it 'Stories', as it is on most editions, or 'Fictions', as on the front of the 1997 Flamingo one, but it's best thought of a piece of errant non-fiction, a manual or encyclopaedia to understanding a non-existent world, rather as you get explanatory guides to Narnia or Middle Earth. Only here the original text is missing, and has to be inferred.



To give you an idea, the book's section titles include 'The Food Costumes of Montana', 'Dog, Mode of Heat Transfer in Barking' and 'Hidden Ball Inside a Song', while helpfully defined terms include 'String theory of fatigue' ("System or technique of diagnosing the level of exhaustion in a member by covering it with medical ropes") and 'Maronies' ("Thickly structured boys, raised on storm seeds and raw bulk to deflect winds during the house wars"). It's nonsense, but highly charged, persuasive nonsense.

The book's closeness to a manual opens it up to the possibility of visual components. After all,

Illustration to 'Ethics of listening when visiting an area that contains him' - click to expand

if you wanted to learn about 'Intercourse with Resuscitated Wife' or 'Hidden Food, From Above', then surely diagrams, illustrations, maps and the like would be a useful addition.

The illustrations in this new edition are by Catrin Morgan, who first came across the book while a student at the Royal College of Art, where it was handed out as a source text for an exercise, along, she remembers, with Italo Calvino's *The Baron in the Trees* and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*.

She chose Marcus, and then continued the project in her own time. Max Porter, an editor at Granta, caught wind of her work and got in touch. (Granta published Marcus's most recent novel, *The Flame Alphabet* - which itself features my favourite cover of last year, but had never published *The Age of Wire and String*. Presumably a bells-and-whistles illustrated edition was more appealing than a bog-standard re-issue. Good thing, too.)



Illustration to 'Views from the first house' - click to expand



So what we get, set amongst Marcus's words, are a whole range of diagrams and schematics that reflect the fictions they tell, and steal terms from them, but never go so far as to pretend they're actually *explaining* them. You'll recognise visual tropes from weather maps, electrical manuals, geography textbooks. (If you like this kind of thing, I thoroughly recommend *The Diagram*, a web journal that mixes experimental fiction with lovingly decontextualized diagrams and schematics.)

There are also a few pencil sketches, that give a more personal feel to the whole thing. After all, even if Marcus's fictions don't exactly

constitute a story, they have the feel, and the resonance of one. It's a book that affects you through unlikely avenues. Morgan points out that her more 'illustrative' illustrations are all in the chapter, or section, called 'The Animal Husband', which is the only part of the book written in the first person. "When I first read *The Age of Wire and String* I found this change in register very impactful and I wanted the images to mirror that. I suppose that I think of the diagrams as third person images and the more photographic ones in 'The Animal Husband' as first person images, it's a change in tense."

It's a good conceit, to give us Marcus in this fashion, and it's well produced, but I'll tell you what I really want: a tiny, pocket-sized hardback of this book, on Bible-thin paper, so it can be carried everywhere and consulted whenever necessary - and in fact just writing this has reminded me of what I'm probably thinking: David Byrne's 2001 book, from McSweeney's, *The New Sins*, which comes in the same small format you see New Testaments in, in red fake leather. It's a beautiful little thing, full of charts and diagrams, courtesy of Dave Eggers' (he was a graphic designer before he was everything else), perhaps inspired by Marcus, or by the same people that inspired him - but frankly it's not a patch on Marcus's book.



Dalla Rosa Gallery, in London, is exhibiting Morgan's work towards, around and after this edition of The Age of Wire and String until 24 May 2013.