

WHAT WE SEE WHEN WE READ

Peter Mendelsund
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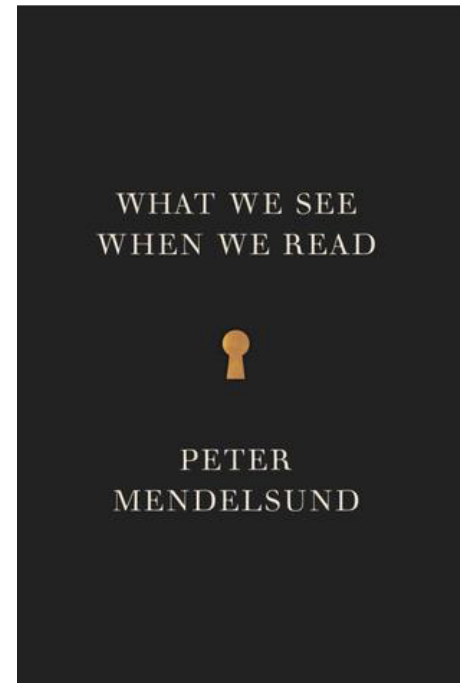
*Review by Jocelyn Webb Pedersen
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WHAT WE SEE WHEN WE READ by Peter Mendelsund is a remarkable book about the phenomenology of reading, made all the more vivid because it was created by a graphic designer. Mendelsund is an acclaimed book-cover designer and the creative director at Knopf. His examination of how we make meaning from words printed on the page is a visual feast, filled with drawings, maps, engravings, cartoons, photographs, and experimental typography. Mendelsund's book is a rich amalgam of philosophy, psychology, literary theory, and visual art, making it not just a provocative and unusual investigation into the act of reading but, I'd argue, an innovative teaching manual for the field of book art.

Mendelsund uses his favorite authors, among them Tolstoy, Woolf, Faulkner, Joyce, and Calvino, to illustrate his arguments. In one of his most compelling points, he references two authors to underscore the shift that happens when we see past mere letterforms on the page, when these words, these signifiers, become like arrows: they *are* something, and they also point *toward* something. For this, he quotes Samuel Beckett on James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*: "It is not written at all. It is not to be read—or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not about something, it is that something itself."

Mendelsund devotes several chapters to breaking down just how we generate images from words. He shows us how when we read we imagine what we see, and quotes Oliver Sacks, who reminds us, "One does not see with the eyes; one sees with the mind." And it is with these minds, as we read, that we collaborate with the writer to bring settings, characters, whole narratives alive. For Mendelsund, when an authors describe characters, they do so with a few linguistic brushstrokes. As readers, we fill in the details with our own memories, associations, predispositions, desires, and expectations. He writes, "Characters are ciphers, and narratives are made richer by omission," explaining, "It is precisely what the text does not elucidate that becomes an invitation to our imaginations. So I ask myself: Is it that we imagine the most, or the most vividly, when an author is most elliptical or withholding? (In music, notes and chords define ideas, but so do *rests*.)"

Inspired by, and looking to test out, Mendelsund's theories, I used this book last semester as a springboard for my advanced students at Occidental College, to create a limited-edition book exploring the dynamic collaboration between writer and reader (fig. 1). *What We See When We Read* became much more than our textbook. I started each class with a ten-minute writing exercise, and many of my prompts came from ideas gleaned from the pages of this book. My students took turns tossing their dog-eared and marked-up copies onto the worktable, proposing experiments like testing how we experience a narrative differently when we read it silently to ourselves or listen to it read aloud, and how we really



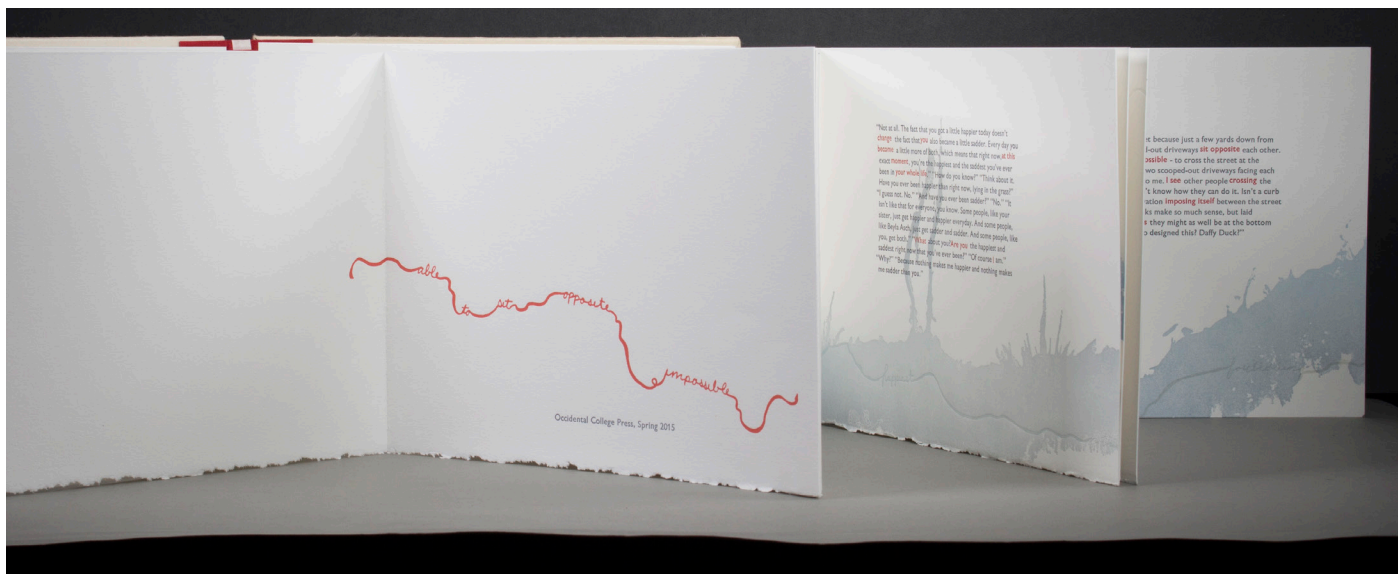


Figure 1. “Able to Sit Opposite Impossible,” printed by the Occidental College Press, 2015.

perform a book, and then attend that performance. Mendelsund writes, “As readers, we are the conductor and the orchestra, as well as the audience.”

But we are also inventors, re-creating, as individuals, a world that writers put on the page in their own vision. Working from this notion, my students each selected a passage from a favorite novel, set that passage in type, and then in a synesthetic experiment assigned color and shape and gestural marks to each passage, comparing how different their individual interpretations of the same passages were. Finally, they collaborated to create a new text using only the words available in all seven passages strung together. This new poem, titled “Able to Sit Opposite Impossible,” became the centerpiece of their book.

Mendelsund asks provocative questions throughout *What We See When We Read*, inviting us to find our own answers. Questions like: Does the speed at which we read affect the vividness of our imagination? Can we practice imagining—as we practice drawing—in order to imagine *better*? Are the muscles we use to imagine growing weaker as our culture ages? In our visually overstimulated lives, it has been argued, our imaginations are dying. But Mendelsund points out that whatever the relative health of our imaginations, we still read: “The rapid proliferation of the image has not kept us from the written word.” My book-reading, book-loving, book-making students remind me of that all the time.

One of my dear mentors, the late James Robertson of the Yolla Bolly Press, wrote in his seminal essay *Making Books in the Woods*: “The printed word is the playing field of the human imagination. And books are the instruments of play.” So, what do I see when I read this remarkable book? A fascinating argument for the continuing power of the physical book, an object whose meaning is changing in our digital world but whose infinite abilities to astonish assure us that this centuries-old technology is not yet ready to give up the ghost. ■