

## Looking at Books

At the Freer Museum I looked at 200-year-old books. Some were richly coloured or flecked with gold. But the one I loved the most was bag-bound, made of soft, thick grey paper like a layer you might pull off the abandoned nest of paper wasps.

The book was printed with woodblocks. The text was in cursive, carved into the blocks wherever it would fit around illustrations of straddling actors, beautiful women, mountains and willows. It was a slim but very full book, teeming, actually; there wasn't a quarter inch of space without word or picture. For those who couldn't follow, an arrow led you through the tale.

Such a light and small object is personal, almost shockingly so, made by hand and held close to the heart. It felt like a living thing, or better, like one that had very recently died, with that sadness about it. I held it open. Down at the bottom outside corners of both pages were smudges. If you looked closely you could see some tiny bits of rolled, worn paper. These were the thumbprints of readers in Edo, Japan, in 1800, our teacher told us. There were twelve of us in the class. We all tried holding the book, our thumbs in the prints.

These long-gone readers borrowed the books from lending libraries in Edo. The borrowers were poor townspeople, mostly, without enough money to buy this inexpensive thing. It was the form for trashy novels and theatre programs, written in simple, phonetic characters that even women could read.

Everything in the book was beautiful. The world was curved and gentle—oarsmen's arabesques, ladies' kimonos, umbrellas in the snow. Figures mated under the table, tumbling like puppies, and their maids spied on them. The

only straight lines in the whole business composed the frame, a strict black line that went around the edges of each page, and down the join in the middle to keep the excitement inside.

But the frame did not hold. A sandaled foot stepped over it. A blossom opened beyond it, and then a sword hilt severed it. Rape and revenge and death by passion almost fit the page. But here and there, figures overpowered lines. This was an Edo thing. The nod and wink, the nudge. Nobody stayed in role.

There was no signature on this very old, soft book. But the writer, "Old Kyoden", stepped out of the narrative, calling himself by name and apologizing for his silly story. It was all he could think of when the publisher came to his door.

By the end of a day of devilry and bliss it was as if we'd been travelling for a long time and had just come back to the table. I walked to the subway and got a train to Metro Center where I joined the rush hour crowd, not rushing, being jostled.

A space opened in the crowd and I saw a man heading toward me. It was Andrew. He'd been in the classroom but now we were crossing paths as if coming from other ends of the city. He must have come on a different train; now we were crossing. Andrew was a collector; he owned a thousand of these books and prints. I had spoken to him, earlier. I wondered if he was rich and lived in a tower. But no. He had a house beyond the Beltline. Did he keep his books in a climate-controlled room, in the dark? No, they were on shelves, stacked horizontally. (Having no spine, they couldn't stand on end like our books.) Locked away? He looked at them whenever he wanted, he said.

In the subway he appeared very ordinary, and also not at all ordinary, neither standing out in the crowd, nor blending in.

I raised my hand but he didn't look up. We passed wordlessly on the platform. I took the escalator up to the Red Line and he went along on the level toward the Orange Line, in his cap and his trench coat with his thick glasses. Home to all that. Imagine.