

Frøydís Árhús

NON-MATERIAL LITERATURE

Frøydís Árhús is a theater scholar, critic and writer. In this essay she writes about *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine* – a *Library of Living Books* as an opportunity to look at the world of literature in a new way.

Books are read so that one can remember, and books are written so that one can forget. Mette Edvardsen's *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine* is a project that allows us to turn this around. Here, books are remembered so that they can be read, and rewritten to see how one has forgotten.

With *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine*, a group of performers have each memorized a book they themselves have chosen. Together, they make up a library of living books. The books walk around the room, they sit on chairs, read the paper books on the shelves, talk to one another, look out of the window, ready to meet their readers. The guests choose a book they want to read and the book takes the reader to a vacant corner or outside in the open air while they recite the contents of the book.

If you had to memorize an entire book or parts of it, one that was to become part of your mental and physical memory, which one would you choose? Memorizing a book sounds more poetic in the English phrase *learning by heart*. In purely practical terms this is still a task for the brain and the memory. And indeed committing yourself to learning a book that will more or less be with you for the rest of your life is a choice you make with certain promptings from the heart. Being able to memorize an entire book depends both on personal ability and the length of the book you choose. Theoretically, you could pick Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, a work in seven volumes and over 3000 pages, or the world's shortest novel, *The Dinosaur* by Augusto Monterroso, which in its full length reads: "When he woke up, the dinosaur was still there." The temporal aspects of memorizing these two novels are rather different.



Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine — A library of living books, project space in Myntgata 2

Memorization is an ongoing activity. There is nothing final or material to be gained and the result is impossible to sell as a product. There is thus something utopian in such a venture. Since her art project started in 2010, Mette Edvardsen has invited people to memorize books so they can pass them on later to an audience through a series of events in libraries all over the world. The idea came from Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451*, about a group of people who, because of censorship, feel the need to preserve knowledge by memorizing books. *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine* is, as in a public library, accessible to everyone who wants to come and read.

"Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine" was the sentence that made Guy Montag, the main character in *Fahrenheit 451*, stop and ask questions. The novel describes a future dystopia, a book in the science-fiction genre about a society in deep crisis where the authorities forbid the people to read books. Montag lives in a time when the citizens' collective happiness is thought to be attained through the absence of intellectual stimuli, knowledge or independent thought. Montag is a fireman and his job is to burn illegal books. He follows the orders he has been given, and can be read as a symbol of pragmatism and ignorance in the encounter with or as the product of a fascist regime.

"Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine" is a quote from the book *Dreamthorp: Essays written in the Country* by the Scottish author Alexander Smith. This book, in addition to being a tribute to nature, is an examination of the relationship between writer and reader. He grapples with the idea that there is an elusive but intimate bond between the sender and the receiver of all literature. It is this sentence, "Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine", that awakens something in Montag, the fireman whose job is not to put out fires, but to start them. The simple line is revealed to the fireman just before the flames swallow the book. This makes him question his own role in the regime, and at a more personal and existential level ask whether he is actually doing the best he can with his life. It is as if he has an irrational sympathy with the book, this dead object that simply asks us to make the best use of the time we are given. The title *Fahrenheit 451* refers to the temperature at which paper burns. In the story of Montag, it can also be interpreted as the point where self-criticism sets in and where he asks what he is actually achieving. This is not just a dissident book; it is also a book that encourages reflection on the times, and on one's own existence.

Reading is a solitary affair. Visual art can be experienced collectively. Theatrical art addresses its audience, and music and film appealingly let us choose whether we want to be together or alone in our art experience. Only books insist on solitude, by engaging us one by one. Literature's negation of the collective is relentless and books will always require time and focus in exchange for their content. The inaccessible nature of literature puts it in a special place in the hierarchy as something exalted. *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine* as an idea and as an art project plays, among other things, on the implicit exclusivity of literature, as each reading takes place in a one-to-one meeting between two individuals. At the same time, this situation will also carry with it an element of performance and thus come close to more collective art forms.

By memorizing the content, these human, non-material books have taken power from the book as an object and emancipated the reader. Books have been uncoupled from their physical function and the content is at the mercy of the oral delivery. The time aspect of such a practice is possibly far more extreme than that of reading. It approaches the irrational but, as the title insinuates, opens up a different experience of time.

At present, over 80 books are floating around more or less word for word in the minds of those who have memorized them. The project has been realized at libraries in several places in the world. In the places where English is not the first language, the need for local books had arisen. The living books therefore exist in German, Italian, Arabic, English, Norwegian, French, Dutch and more. Some are in the original language, others in translation. All are hand-picked by the memorizer, freely and without guidelines. Some of the memorizers have since written down their recollection of their chosen book as it exists in their memory. Today this collection, with the subtitle *Rewriting*, amounts to nine editions. These rewritten texts are variations on the original books filtered through the selective memories that subtract and the autonomous imaginations that add or replace. *Second generation* is another branch of the project that builds on textual transmission, only in oral form from a living book to a reader who wants to memorize the book. Many books have been important in the selection processes. Some of these have been considered for memorization, others are books that will perhaps be learned in the future or in other ways relate to the selected books. These are collected in a separate *Shadow Library*. In the years since the project began in 2010, Edvardsen has invited writers, artists, theoreticians and academics to write about the project. Some of these texts are collected in the publication *Afternoon Editions*, and others will come out in a new publication that will be available during the biennial.

In this small world of non-material literature, which today consists of about 80 living books, we find layer upon layer of fictional and historical figures and literary greats. In the collection we find *Bartleby the Scrivener*, the copyist who refuses to copy, created by Herman Melville. We also find Goethe and the story of Faust, he who refuses to realize his own limitations as a human being and is therefore tempted to bargain with the Devil. A nameless cat is also in the collection. The cat was created by the Japanese author Sōseki Natsume, and was his mouthpiece in the novel *I am a Cat*, depicting the upper middle class in Meiji-period Japan. We also find another nameless protagonist, the 15-year-old girl from *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras, who talks about love in Indo-China. Erika from *The Piano Teacher* by Elfriede Jelinek describes what it is like to be controlled by your own mother, and Gibreel and Saladin from *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie depict migration and identity. Since the first book appeared in 2010 until today, nine years have passed. Today, the aforementioned Guy Montag from *Fahrenheit 451* is also part of the collection.

The narrators from the books, fictional or historical, are a diverse and curious gang who live dangerously there in memory. Memorizing a book is a Sisyphean task. When you have learned the sixth chapter, the third chapter is about to fade from memory. Without continuous maintenance the nuances will disappear; with the nuances the intention will disappear; and with that the motivation; and slowly but surely the story will collapse before it fades from memory completely.

osloBIENNALEN has given *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine* the opportunity to take root for an extended period. In the biennial premises at Myntgata, Oslo, a circulating selection of books will be constantly present so that you and I or whoever may drop in can encounter world literature – and perhaps also time itself – in a new way.

