

Words made pulp: Why I destroy books

by [Valerie Weaver-Zercher](#) in the [May 11, 2016](#) issue



Bales of books shredded for recycling. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Beau Claar](#).

Twice a year I take a day off to undo the work I get paid to do. Wrecking what one is devoted to creating sounds batty, and depending on one's career, it is. But for me, it's becoming a spiritual practice.

Each spring and fall, my congregation volunteers with a Christian relief, development, and peace-building organization. Early in the morning we pile onto the church bus, clutching our packed lunches as we steer loud, happy kids by their shoulders to their seats. We drive an hour to a warehouse, where our tasks range from making school and health kits for children in refugee camps to knotting comforters and loading pallets of canned meat onto the back of a truck.

Our most common job, however, is ripping apart books for recycling. The organization earns money for each ton of paper it sells to a recycler. The income is used to pay shipping costs for the containers of emergency food aid and relief supplies to go to places like North Korea and Jordan. Before that can happen, the interior pages must be severed from their covers and filleted into sections that the recycler can process.

It is this task that is my vocation's inverse. Tearing up books when one is an editor must violate some publishing version of the Hippocratic Oath. My daily editorial labors include setting fractures in writers' arguments, treating the vertigo in their voices, and consulting on the neuralgia in their prose. (Then again, some days I'm more like a cosmetologist, pumping a shot of Botox into sagging marketing copy or

choosing the right shade of blurb for the back cover. Or even a personal dating consultant: What will make this book sexy enough to get picked up?) In any case, for two days a year I become an anti-editor—a laborer on the assembly line of literary deconstruction. Literally.

When we arrive, a few lucky children climb into enormous cardboard bins filled with books donated by individuals, libraries, publishers, and distributors. At first the boxes are full, and the kids have to sit and pull out books from under their bottoms to hand to adults. As the box slowly empties, the children become surfers, standing up and balancing on the receding tide of literature. Toward the end, the younger ones disappear completely for a few seconds before popping back up above the box's horizon to fork over a few more books. Then the rest of us tear apart the paperbacks and stack the hardcovers in neat piles. Those stacks then go to a covey of men who run the guillotines: cutting machines with blades that slam down and neatly slice off the books' spines.

Occasionally we do rescues, as when someone finds a Bible, which we set aside to be donated to a prisoner, or when a child pages through a book, hugs it close, and begs to keep it rather than hand it over to the executioners. Last year my sons came home with books about Ebola, the American rocket industry, and the origins of salt.

I found my first experience of altruistic book-wrecking a bit disconcerting. How could I not? My publishing colleagues and I spend hours working on the physical bodies of books: choosing titles, tweaking covers, finessing copy, arguing over trim size, pricing paper stock. Sure, returns and pulping are part of the business (although the undertakers manage to keep this gory end game invisible to those of us on the midwife and nanny end of things). And I know that recyclers are paying well for the carefully sorted tonnage of ideas, funds essential to shipping aid to war-torn places. Still, the investment of time and money into a single book is formidable, and participating in such demolition gives one pause.

A frisson of horror traveled up my spine that first day, and I found myself lingering over certain books before dismembering them. This one, about postpartum depression. That one, about the animals of East Africa. Even that one over there, about Sarah Palin. Wasn't there someone, somewhere, who would choose it out of a bin of paperbacks at the thrift store, thumb through it, and decide it was worth the grimy quarter at the bottom of their purse? Was I really going to tear these books limb from limb, remove their entrails, and pile their carcasses in mass cardboard

graves? Could I in good conscience become an equal-opportunity slayer of Danielle Steele romances, Bible commentaries, Joel Osteen motivational, and leather-bound volumes of jurisprudence alike?

Granted: I'm being a tad melodramatic. I have no problem taking out the knees of many of the books that come down the line. Some books should never be written, and even those with literary or theological merit look self-indulgent and redundant when heaped in piles and splayed under a child's heel. It doesn't take long to inure oneself to a task like this. One can learn the tricks of evisceration in short order, and there's a tangible satisfaction to mastering them: the angle at which to yank apart the pages of a book with a sewn binding, how many pages to hold between your thumb and forefinger before tugging, how to slide your thumb under a plastic jacket to pop off the tape and slough off its skin.

There's no escaping the irony. I have ripped up books published by my own company. I will neither confirm nor deny rumors that I have torn asunder books by Henri Nouwen and Chinua Achebe. And while I have yet to tear up a book I've written or contributed to, I'm waiting a bit nervously for that day. For any of us volunteers who love to read—and we are many—there's a prick of sadness and shame at this work. And should we be implicating our children, whose school librarians, were they privy to our grisly ways, might simply faint dead away?

Books are enduring carriers of memory and culture, faith and story. For many bibliophiles they are security, permanence, and a defense against loneliness. What these days at the warehouse remind me, however, is that the opposite is also true. Books are flimsy, impermanent. They die, sometimes quickly, the work of years dismantled in seconds.

At the warehouse we participate in a different kind of death of the book than the oft-discussed murder by screens or demise by distraction. Books also die in more organic, physical ways, and we'd do well to remember them. In our angst over the future of the printed book in an age of screens, we can easily forget all the natural elements that conspire against their permanence: heat, humidity, silverfish, fire, and light. Whether a book's death comes by these means or at the hands of kindly volunteers, who can heap blame on such betrayers?

Perhaps it's good, now and again, to dismantle the things we create, or at least bear witness to their death. Books we write, ideologies we craft, brands we design,

programs we administer: perhaps watching them die, and sometimes even helping them do so, isn't so much violence or craziness as an antidote to hubris. "Of making many books there is no end," the writer of Ecclesiastes sighed, "and much study is a weariness of the flesh."

All this elegiac thinking doesn't have me throwing up my hands in despair, however, just as it didn't stop the wisdom writer from making one more book. I don't often reflect on my biannual despoiling of books during the rest of the year, when I toil away at author correspondence and publication schedules and proofreader corrections. But perhaps I should. Remembering that the body of the book I edit today will someday be broken and bruised, either by time or intention, changes everything. It means I must treat my work with more devotion, and with less.

Ashes to ashes, pulp to pulp—or, in the case of the books we rend apart in the warehouse, pulp to bread and pencils. There's a loveliness to the particular transformation that occurs in that warehouse: words and sentences and paragraphs that used to carry meaning to readers now carry cans of food to the hungry, blankets to the cold, and notebooks to children fleeing war.

For the books I have tended along the way, I've come to think that such a demise would be a privilege. What more honorable end to a book's life than to have its body broken and shared? What better reminder of the Word of all words become flesh?