

A magazine for the Book as a Work of Art
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Micro to Macro: the cosmos in a coffee

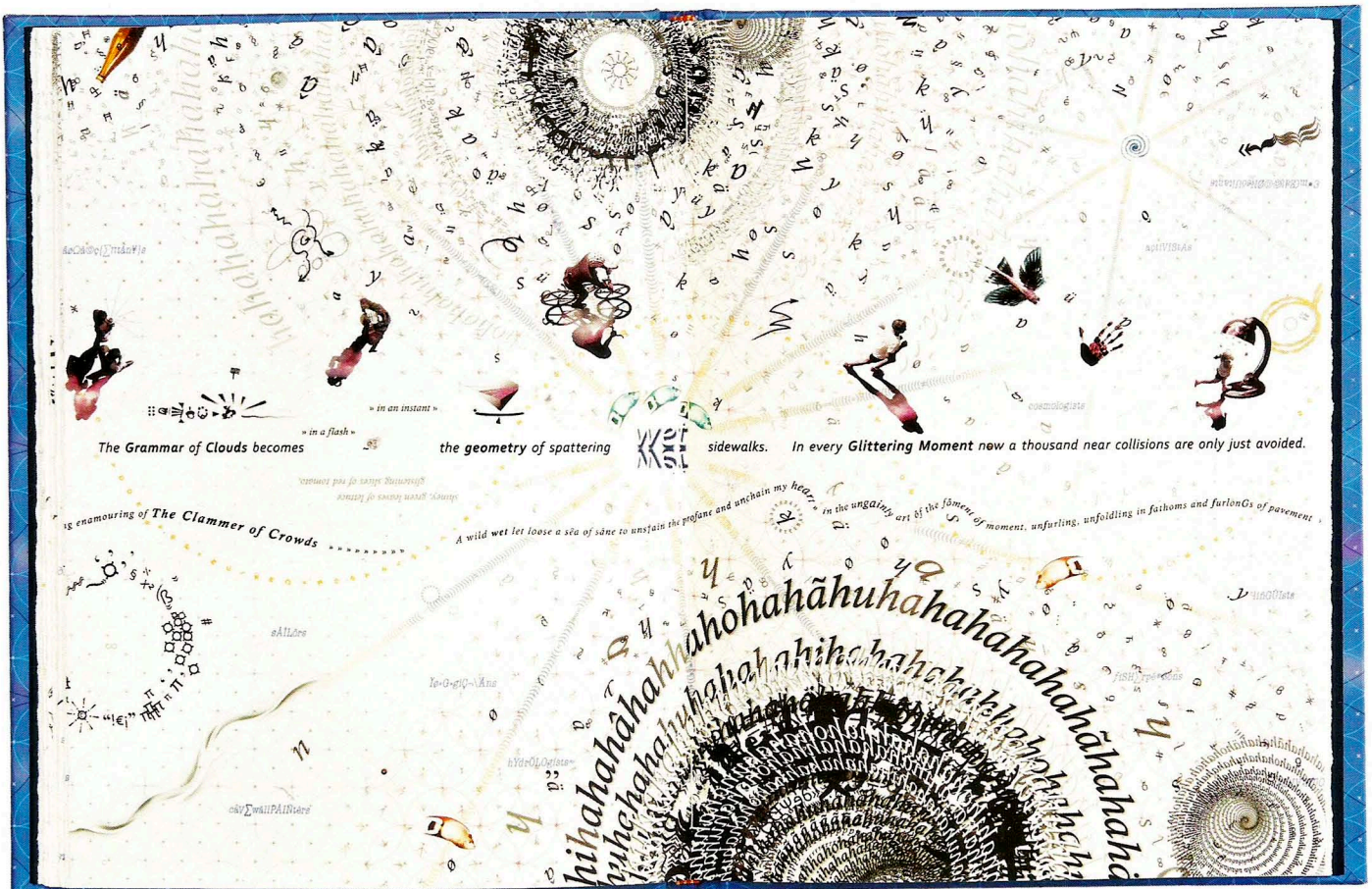
Marian Crawford

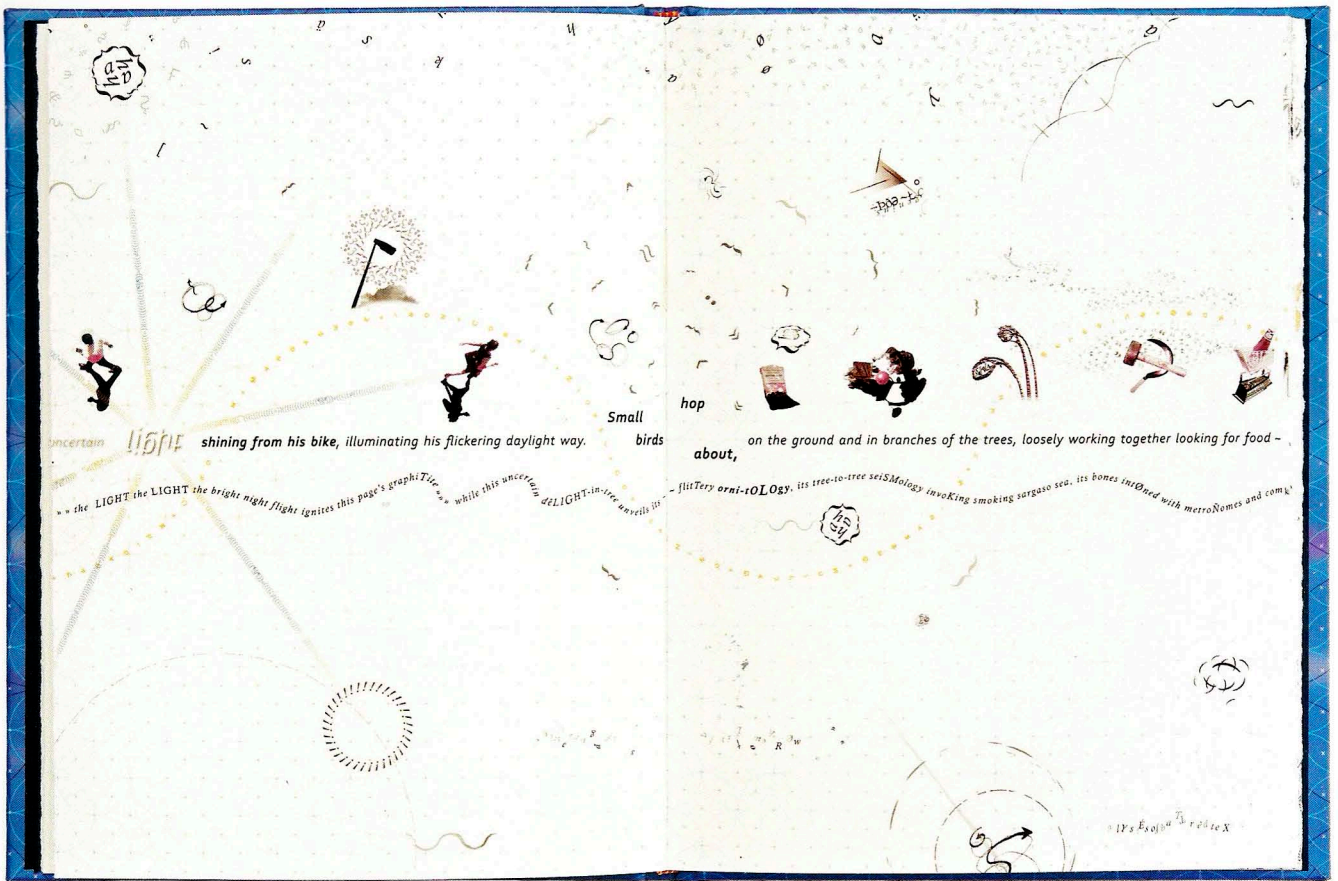
A MORNING IN MAY, a book by Lyn Ashby at Thistoo Press, Melbourne, 2015.

This book presents an everyday experience as a transformative illumination. As its pages turn, an intimate and privileged entrée into the subjective world and work of a poet and artist is granted.

The month of May in Ashby's work might suggest autumn or spring, depending on your hemisphere, and that hint of the change in temperatures-to-come that these transit seasons promise. At first glance, the cover of his book insinu-

ates something stellar and celestial. It is patterned, perhaps, with a suggestion of the night sky. But looking closer, it's all geometry. Those maybe-stars are tiny crosses, the symbol that was once perhaps the signifier of a star on a celestial map. Overlapping circles, that perfectly regular form, create a grid that flips between tiny fragments and larger circles. Still, although the mistiness of a starry night has been transformed into mathematic planes and vectors, there is something undeniably cosmic about the streaks of morning-sun-streaked soft cloud shapes (or is it dusk) that sit in horizontal bands across the sky of the cover.





The end papers are very deep blue, and after this denseness the pattern of the cover is found on every page, its delicate repetitive inter-locking geometry printed ever-so-subtly on the almost white pages. Although printed and produced in a detailed negotiation with the algorithms of the digital realm, the history of this work lies in the hand-made and the analogue: maps engraved into copper and printed onto rag papers, the daily diary, the stitched and glued sections of the codex.

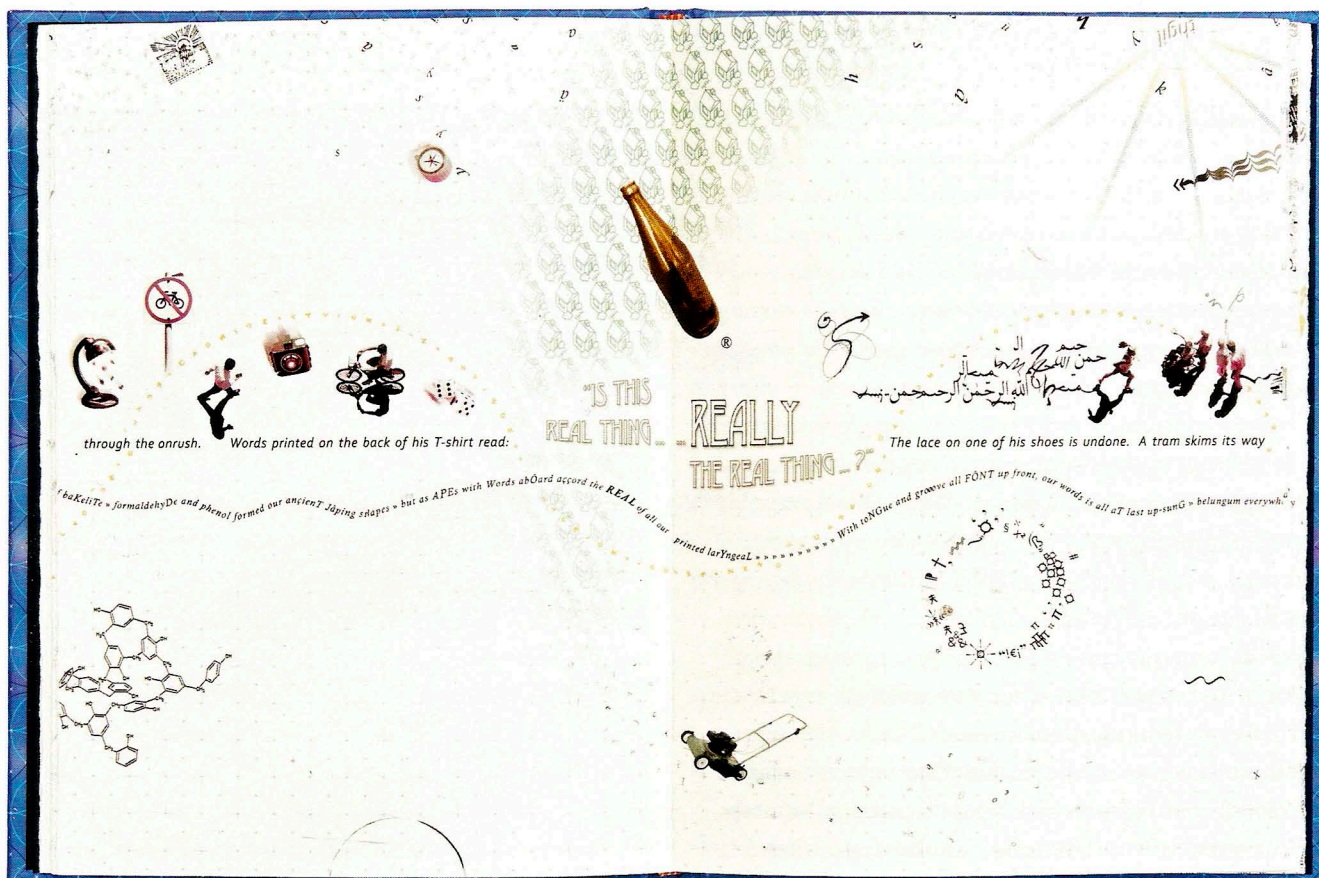
The book's first piece of text reads 'Everything waves, the story goes, twice every instant...' & on the following page '...once going this way, and once on the wayback'. This concise reference to the laws of physics & mathematics, wavelengths, harmonics and the frequency of sound, creates a resonance that suffuses the image, this oscillating pattern that is the foundation of all of the pages of Ashby's book. From this suggestion, the field of algebra with its language of equations is summoned, and the reminder that it is the laws of physics and their forces that govern the universe. And of course, the daily commute from home to work and back again, the rotation of the Earth as sunrise proceeds relentlessly to sunset in those endless diurnal routines of the physical world, and more, are also signified in these few words.

A text then introduces '**the Coffee**—arrives first, delivered around the tables'. A visual rule is established, as this determining narrative is positioned across the centre of the page, an imperious horizon through the entire book. And this

Coffee, it seems, is served outdoors in the May morning light, a light that is '**streaming through space...pinning down everywhere patterns, leaving its marks, like the markings across the pages of a Book**'. Equations, text and language, and the letters of the Roman and Greek alphabets that we assemble to construct them, now scatter and disperse as images across the pages after this discovery of the spread of light. The rule and order of the horizontal left-to-right, beginning-to-end narrative is challenged. Each page spread becomes a picture.

By the fifth page, we're really inside this world of choices and the visual. The line of text that forms the narrative horizon, now well established, has around it other phrases or words that float and arrange themselves, cut loose from the formalism of the sentence. Upside-down, arranged into a wave, liberated and decorated, letters become images in this abundance of imaginative & unexpected adjustments to the typographer's vocabulary of kerning & spacing. Words fall apart and float, their signification detached from familiar sounding, becoming only themselves, pure signs, abstractions. Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés*,¹ written in 1897 and published in May of the same year, is clearly one of Ashby's references.

Ashby's multi-vocal narrative, visual and textual, is a grand repast that circles around a morning meal, a breakfast, 'a lonely wedge of cucumber', 'half a slice of tomato', 'small shards of bread', 'scattered yellow crumbs...', 'of the yolk of an egg'. But around that circling there are other circlings—a cyclist winds his way through the field of activity, birds



look for food, a delivery man re-ties his laces, a tram stops to collect passengers. While each detail is crisp in the texts and small images that start to fill the pages, there is still the sense of the bigger world, of the forces that keep these patterns of activity in motion. Is there a hint of the disorder of entropy here, where entropy is understood as 'a measure of the efficiency of a system, such as code or language, in transmitting information'?

On its busiest pages, the dancing texts are accompanied by images, small & iconographic. People are photographed from above, and from this bird's eye view the shadows cast by the May sun echo their activities. There's a runner or two, the delivery man with his trolley, a person in a hat takes a photograph, and a cyclist. People stand in groups, stationary and alone, striding or running towards their destinations. A lawn mower stands unused, street signs and desk lamps act as signposts, and pair of dice rest waiting. Geometric forms are origami in waiting, and equations morph into mock Arabic. And look—there's a beer bottle, a fish, the inky print of a hand.

Text and letter forms are arranged to create spiralling structures, and these spiky images sit above and below the horizon of the narrative, the waves of sub-text, the scatterings of letters and stray words, and the emblematic images. These texty spirals are galactic, and like the wormholes³ posited by theoretical physicists as gateways through to other spaces and times, they spiral down to tiny points. Texts accompany these images: 'the **geometry** of splattering

wet sidewalks. In every **Glittering Moment** now a thousand near collisions are only just avoided'. Texts do collide in this work, and in this battle of sound with meaning, Ashby's wavy unreliable threads of alliteration & rhymes test acquired reading skills: 'lâva lamps with **luscious lumps** & languid humps that pulse the pumps in springtime months', 'and from the tube a mood of love **above** çasCading trading push and shöve', 'as if these waves were staves on shEets of Keats' code to Urn a tUrn in cYçlic mode -'.

In the same testing script, proper nouns nominate professions & imagined careers for the commuters who travel past the breakfast table heading to work: 'stoRMçhâfers', 'fâKêrs', 'epİSTEMølóGists', 'täXIDermists'.

The book maintains its own rules: '...once going this way, and once on the way back', as these gatherings are at their busiest in the centre of the book, while at the entry and exit points the activity subsides until the pages return almost to mere pattern, waiting for another moment of occupation and action to be observed.

Amidst all this, there is still one thread of text to be followed: the horizontal line of text that is meandering through the breakfast and the coffee while people pass and a shower of rain freshens the air. But the passage of this narrative could also be ignored, as this book can be read in more ways than one. The play of the images can be read variously—individually, together, grouped; as can the patterns, letters, & typographic forms that arrange and reconfigure themselves in a seemingly endless variety of shapes and forms.

This is how our world is, many things happen at once: the tram's 'small electric FIZZ glisters' while the rain splatters, the breakfast is eaten, the birds search. Ashby observes the morning poetically, as a texture, a text, a surface that is dissembling as it is read and experienced. And as for the coffee: 'Its winking crests and troughs are scattered about the morning space like **typographic debris** across the paper face of some illuminated page'.

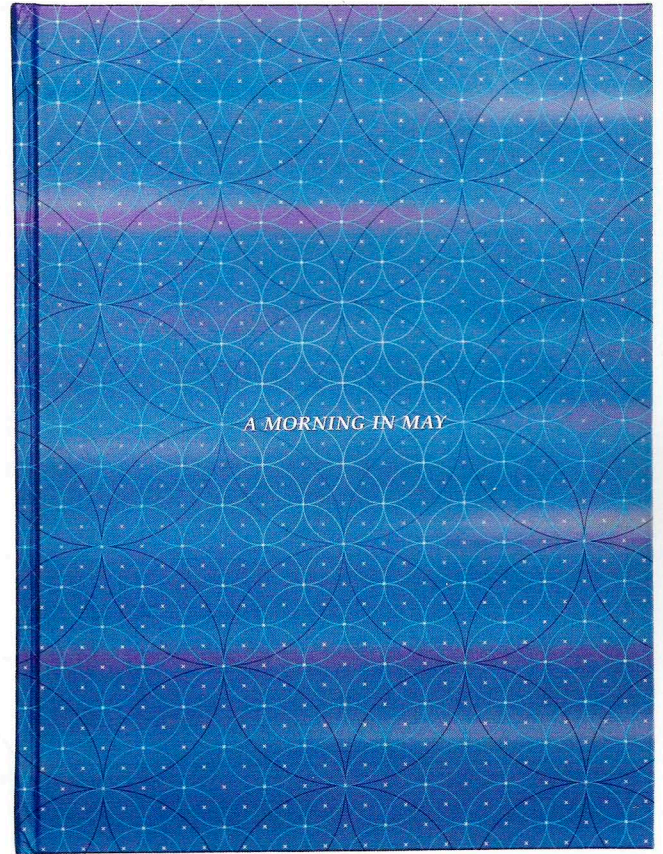
As a child, neurologist Oliver Sacks took special pleasure in the writings of H G Wells, particularly his short stories *The Time Machine* and *The Accelerator*.⁴ Wells's Time Traveller relates: 'As I put on pace, night followed day like the flapping of a black wing...I saw the sun hopping swiftly across the sky, leaping it every minute, and every minute marking a day...the whole surface of the earth seemed changed — melting and flowing under my eyes'.⁵

Sacks finds that it is the speed with which we experience and perceive events that most interests him, and he suggests that these thoughts about speed implicate cinema, which can record events in slow and super-fast motion, slowing time or speeding it up. His focus is also on the activity of the brain in these perceptions. He writes: 'One level of brain activity may be working automatically, while another, the conscious level, is fashioning a perception of time, a perception which is elastic and can be compressed or expanded'.⁶

Our powers of observation are perhaps determined by the speed with which we observe events as they unfold around us. Ashby has condensed the time of a café breakfast into a book, and the labour of the construction of this work would without a doubt have taken much longer than the consumption of the breakfast it describes. Within his work, however, he posits various senses of time, & these perceptions are, as Sacks suggests, elastic, variable, expandable and collapsing.

Ashby's visual language, while complex and articulate, is also 'reactive, pre-conscious and impulsive' having eluded the 'monitoring of the frontal lobes, of consciousness, and of ego, ... (and escaping) from the mouth before it can be inhibited'.⁷ *A MORNING IN MAY* presents us with material proof that the book is a world unto itself, and a model of the world in all this complexity, unexpectedness, irregularity and consistency.

And, most importantly, it is in the powerful material form of a book that Ashby expounds on these observations about time and duration, space and experience. The undeniably material form of this book with its firmly bound and glued spine and covers, and the layers of ink resting faintly perfumed on its textured pages, speaks to us about stasis, a still point in the midst of this blending of perceptions.⁸ Ashby unblends the experience of his cosmic breakfast, if you like, presenting it frame by frame. His awareness of the laws of



physics accompanies his attentiveness to the scattering of drops of rain over the breakfast table in a marriage of the theoretical and the prosaic. This is one of the powerful qualities of the book as an art form. It is durational, it can be read at the reader's pace, the reader and viewer construct their own spacetime as they turn those noisily physical real-time pages.

NOTES

1. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un Coup de Des Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard (A Throw of the Dice will Never Abolish Chance)*, translated by Daisy Aldan, Tiber Press: New York, 1956.
2. *The Collins English Dictionary*, 1986. Australian Edition edited by G A Wilkes.
3. 'A wormhole is a concept that represents a solution of the Einstein field equations: a non-trivial structure linking separate points in spacetime. A wormhole can be visualized as a tunnel with two ends, each at separate points in spacetime (i.e. different locations and/or different points of time), or by a transcendental bijection of the spacetime continuum.'
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wormhole>. Accessed 8/2/18
4. Oliver Sacks, *The River of Consciousness*. New York: Picador, 2017. Sack's citations of Wells are from Wells, H G, *The Short Stories of H. G. Wells*. London: Ernest Benn, 1927.
5. Sacks. *Ibid.* p 29.
6. *Ibid.* p 37.
7. *Ibid.* p 50.
8. Sacks also comments that there 'is much to suggest that conscious perception (at least visual perception) is not continuous but consists of discrete moments, like the frames of a movie, which are then blended to give an appearance of continuity'. *Ibid* p 38.