



Book from the Ground

Xu Bing

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Twenty years ago I made "Book from the Sky," a book of illegible Chinese characters that no one could read. Now I have created "Book from the Ground," a book that anyone can read.--Xu Bing

Following his classic work "Book from the Sky," the Chinese artist Xu Bing presents a new graphic novel -- one composed entirely of symbols and icons that are universally understood. Xu Bing spent seven years gathering materials, experimenting, revising, and arranging thousands of pictograms to construct the narrative of "Book from the Ground." The result is a readable story without words, an account of twenty-four hours in the life of "Mr. Black," a typical urban white-collar worker. Our protagonist's day begins with wake-up calls from a nearby bird and his bedside alarm clock; it continues through tooth-brushing, coffee-making, TV-watching, and cat-feeding. He commutes to his job on the subway, works in his office, ponders various fast-food options for lunch, waits in line for the bathroom, daydreams, sends flowers, socializes after work, goes home, kills a mosquito, goes to bed, sleeps, and gets up the next morning to do it all over again. His day is recounted with meticulous and intimate detail, and reads like a postmodern, post-textual riff on James Joyce's account of Bloom's peregrinations in "Ulysses." But Xu Bing's narrative, using an exclusively visual language, could be published anywhere, without translation or explication; anyone with experience in contemporary life--anyone who has internalized the icons and logos of modernity, from smiley faces to transit maps to menus--can understand it.

Book from the Ground Details

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Author : Xu Bing

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From Reader Review Book from the Ground for online ebook

Alice says

Fascinating concept and brilliant execution! But the story itself was rather mundane--which, I guess, was the intention.

Jennifer says

I'll give the author one star for what is a clever idea... a book with no words, only symbols and images telling the story. Except, there is no story. The main "character" (there aren't really characters, either) gets out of bed and then he takes a shower, and then he goes into his closet and decides between the blue shirt and the green shirt. And then he drives to the office, and then he gets on the elevator, and then he goes to his bosses office. There are entire pages where the character plays video games and you see the little symbol of Super Mario doing the stuff Super Mario does. There are entire pages where he's looking at a menu deciding what to eat. Nothing interesting ever happens in this book, and once the novelty of reading symbols wears off, there is nothing left here of interest. No plot, no story, no characters. I "read" the whole thing hoping there would be something. There is nothing.

oliviasbooks says

This "novel", which is completely devoid of the written word, shows - in painstaking detail - a typical work day (including the sleepless night that follows) of a nameless single, male office guy in China.

We see him having digestion problems, fixing his breakfast (popcorn and milk, after the toast burns to ash, because an Amazon delivery distracts him), commuting to work, reading and answering a lot of private mail, searching the web for a mate, going for coffee, going for lunch, doing a presentation, reading the news (on CNN), having a romantic date, caring for a sick friend and spending a long night with strange dreams and classic video games.

Although the chapters only consist of emoticons, pictograms, logos and punctuation marks, you soon get a firm grip on the hero's character, his preferences, his quirks, his faults. It's a really, really fascinating thing to experience.

This is a sample page somebody uploaded to Pinterest:

Scott says

Such an innovative book. This book is the 2014 version of Esperanto--a universal language that all can understand. They don't need any specialized training either, because they already know how to read

everything in here.

Xu Bing's *Book from the Ground* is composed entirely of symbols, emojis, emoticons, whatever you want to call them. It's fascinating, though, because symbols have traditionally been quite arbitrary, but in this case they generally are clear in their meaning. This is somewhat troubling too because it demonstrates how we've been so socialized by the symbols of a media-saturated world that surround us.

The book is a phenomenal feat on its own because it is able to portray a coherent narrative with no words. If I recall correctly, it also took Xu seven years to collect and organize the many symbols with his team. This alone makes the book worth it.

It's a quick read, though it takes some time to get the hang of it. Some of the aspects of the narrative are quite funny and somewhat absurd at times. Overall, it's somewhat mind-blowing that this book even exists. It seems appropriate that an artist like Xu would be the one responsible for creating it. After all, a previous work, *Book From the Sky*, was composed only of characters that nobody would understand. It seems fitting that we would receive this book now, at the height of the smart phone-enabled symbol language that all of us already seem to know.

I would also highly recommend that you read this book concurrently with a companion volume also from MIT Press, *The Book About Xu Bing's Book From The Ground*. Its additional insights make for the reading experience even more robust and thought-provoking.

Moses says

This book is not that interesting, but in a sort of interesting way. Perhaps a universal book is of limited interest, because the kinds of stories that can be told are not very rich—indeed, many of the jokes required quite a lot of context, and perhaps stories without sufficient context are not terribly interesting. However, my guess is that it's less interesting because the pictographs had to be simple, and it was difficult to explain complex ideas, and because it was difficult to introduce a new symbol, especially an abstract one—it required significant context to make sense of a complicated symbol, so new ideas were few and far between.

In a way, this book is a defense of context-sensitive literature, even as it explores (mostly) context-free literature.

Bob Hartley says

I got this in Belgium, with the title *Histoire Sans Mots*. I did a bit of semiotics in uni so this is up my alley. The story itself's nothing to write home about; it's a day in the life of someone with an easy life. Most of the humour is Peter Kay-style observational humour, like deleting an email from a charity or committing a faux pas. There's no words, and no conflict/resolution setup. It's a piece of design more than a novel, and as such I think the best purpose for it is to set the stage for more books like it.

CHERRY says

I like strange books, so I bought a copy of this after reading about it on the Internet.

Instead of symbols or icons, I'd say this book is written in pictures. After all, many of the 'icons' are mini-sized pictures, although the majority is emojis. Whatever it is, there are no words; but the book is still very easy to understand.

Quite to my surprise, the story is not plain. It's rather humorous, and can be understood by anyone who lives in the city and knows about work life. Recommended for an unusual reading experience.

Emmy says

Interesting artistic approach; An original way of writing and nice lay-out and choice of paper. I loved the huge presence of Chinese culture in this book, even though it's not described, I can really feel it. Personally I would have liked a more in depth story instead of the 'description' of 24 hours in the life of a man.

??????? says

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Mugren Ohaly says

I was skeptical at first, thinking it would be difficult to understand the story as it's a book written only using symbols and emojis. However, it's really easy to read. I also laughed a few times.

Lee says

Absolutely original graphic novel composed entirely of emojis and/wingdings or whatever. A very simple day in the life of a young white collar worker waking up, going to the bathroom -- oh damn it looks like all the emoticons I embedded in a quick little review of this didn't come through and the whole thing was truncated. Anyway, a charming little tale told in a new way that can probably be read by anyone regardless of language -- the author is Chinese. I only failed to catch the drift of something once or twice. I'm sure there will be more of this sort of thing as the emoji options evolve.

Eric says

Very interesting read. Felt like I experienced a new kind of thing. I recommend this simply for it's unique,

and strangely engaging story. It's a simple plot, but I kept turning the pages. Read it all in one sitting.

Mariana says

No sé si cuenta como "leído", pero me encantó.

Eloise Mcallister says

I liked it but I think the premise doesn't make sense, and isn't necessarily that desirable. A book that everyone understands in the exact same way probably doesn't say that much

Melaslithos says

The author narrates here 24 hours in the life of a white collar. From one morning to the next. The story in itself is very basic, but not without humour.

What is really interesting about this book is not the story itself, but how it is told. Not a single word, only pictures. It brings us back to the roots of writting.

I am not surprised that it is a Chinese who wrote this book. After all, it is exactly like this that the Chinese written language started, with pictures representing ideas. These pictures than got more and more complex, representing more and more complex ideas, in order to give Chinese as we know it. Therefore I am wondering what level of complexity and abstraction we can reach, but at the same time keeping the language understandable by all, even those who never studied it? What pictures are understandable by all? What ideas are really universal?
