Review: Bisous de l'autre by Cheryl Penn in collaboration with Marie Wintzer

Payal Chana

Tucked away on the second floor of the Wits Art Museum, the Jack Ginsberg Centre for Book Arts (JGCBA) felt like a hidden sanctum of imagination where artworks stretched the very definition of a book. It preserves and displays a global history of artist books that reimagine what a 'book' can be. In a world of frictionless digital reading, this quiet archive reminded me that reading could still be a tactile act of preservation. The centre invited the hands to a place where holding, turning, and folding became part of reading itself.

Before visiting the JGCBA, I had barely any idea of what an artist's book might be. I had imagined a glossy exhibition catalogue with smooth pages, something between an art collection and a poetry anthology, until I saw one in person. Entering the space with freshly washed hands, the air seemed to hum with life as if the works whispered, "Read me, interact with me, feel my pages, I'm alive." Each object demanded participation, asking the reader to slow down, to touch, and to read patiently. These books refused to match the speed and disposability of digital media, reframing reading as a form of care rather than consumption.

After looking at the stacks handpicked for me to browse through, I finally understood that an artist's book was the artwork itself. The artist used the book as a medium, combining image, text, and design, and sometimes even sound and performance, to create an experiential encounter. Many of them were made with materials ranging from tactile paper, folded structures, pop-ups, collage, photography, textile and fabrics, and even sculptural elements.

Sitting on top of one of those stacks was a thick, hand-bound book called *Bisous de l'autre* (Penn and Wintzer, 2011). It was created in 2011 by South African artist Cheryl Penn as a mail art collaboration with a Japan-based artist named Marie Wintzer (Consilience, 2021). Unlike anything I had encountered before, countless threads spilled from its edges, and it contained pockets filled with envelopes and layers of papers, materials, and ephemera.

Figure 1: Cover of Bisous de l'autre.

Mail art began in the 1940s through Ray Johnson and his New York Correspondence School which transformed postal exchange into performance (Beatty, n.d.). It was only labelled as “mail art” by Edward Plunkett in the early 1960s (Canale-Parola, 2024). Johnson’s art travelled through envelopes, stamps and hands, each crease and fingerprint becoming part of the artwork. Penn’s *Bisous de l’autre* inherited that spirit, viewing correspondence not as communication, but as an intimate collaboration that recorded the movement of care across continents.

Cheryl Penn was deeply involved in this art movement, even mounting South Africa’s first mail art exhibition in 2012 (van Rensburg, 2023). She is a conceptual artist known for her one-of-a-kind, handcrafted artist books. Many of them were the results of mail art collaborations. Layering sensory paper, collage, photography, and text, she creates visual poetry and asemic writing that feel personal and universal (van Rensburg, 2023).

Figure 2: Cover untied.

This artist's book felt like receiving a gift with each page. Each fold and pocket offered something to remove, open, and unfold. It was as if we stepped into Cheryl’s position, receiving these small packages from Marie herself. The work transformed the postal network into a choreography of exchange through its giving, receiving, and unfolding across distance. Each gesture of interaction recalled the correspondence between two women nurturing a connection through the materials they shared.

As I turned the pages, I found myself slowing down. The fibres beneath my fingertips, the rustle of opening envelopes, the threads stitched onto layers of paper all asked for patience. It was the embodiment of a conversation and an archive of touch, as each reader became a co-author, leaving faint traces through the order they unfolded and repackaged the book. This subtle shift of sequence turned the book into a living archive of participation where no two readings are ever the same.

Figure 3: Pages from one envelope that shifted while interacting with it.

I became obsessed with how *Bisous de l'autre* (Penn and Wintzer, 2011) demanded something beyond mental engagement. It turned reading into craftwork that was deliberate and careful. In an era of swiping and scrolling, it was extraordinary to feel a book that insisted on time and touch. The artist's book asked for the same attentiveness one might give to sewing, weaving, or letter-writing, practices often dismissed as domestic that are rich with connection. The materiality in Penn's book honoured these feminist forms of labour, reconfiguring them as artful acts of care.

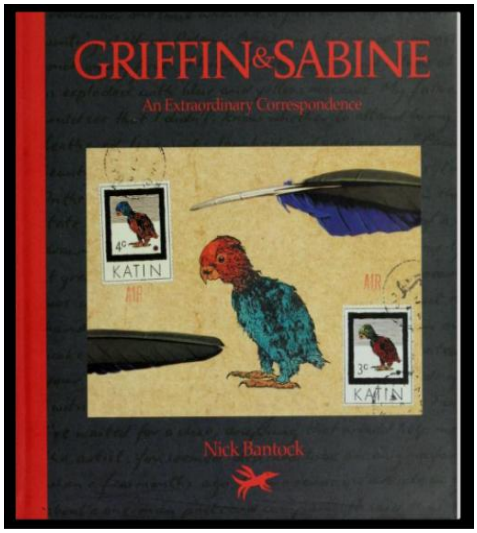

Figure 4: Cover of Griffin & Sabine (Book 1)

A few weeks later, I encountered another form of mail art intimacy in Nick Bantock's *Griffin and Sabine* (Bantock 1991). It helped me understand how differently affection could be designed. Bantock's trilogy published in the early 1990s, narrated the correspondence between two artists through letters and postcards. The reader was invited to open envelopes, read their exchanges, and witness their relationship develop. It resembled what I had first imagined an artist's book to be: glossy, narratively rich, and beautifully illustrated, with the occasional envelope to open and read.

In this review, I explore how Cheryl Penn and Marie Wintzer's *Bisous de l'autre* transforms correspondence into a deeply tactile, one-of-a-kind sensory experience that preserved tenderness through its layered materials and interactivity. By comparing it to Nick Bantock's *Griffin and Sabine*, I argue that the physicality and uniqueness of Penn's handmade artist book evokes a more personal and embodied sense of connection than Bantock's commercially and mass-produced work.

To understand what made *Bisous de l'autre* (Penn and Wintzer, 2011) so effective, it was important to look at how its physicality invited the reader into the act of correspondence. Each page demanded touch, turning the gesture of reading into participation. Every layer, stitch, and pocket pulled the reader closer into the relationship between the two artists. Their relationship unfolded through their material exchanges, rather than their words.

Before appreciating any part of the book, the cream cotton twill tape had to be untied, a small ceremonial act, like opening a loved one's necktie. It set the tone for the engagement the book required: attentive, slow, and intimate. The back cover bared handwritten addresses in black ink and an airmail sticker, stitched onto a tan cardboard. These details made the traces of travel feel real, as if it had passed through countless hands before arriving in mine.

Figure 5: Back cover.

The cover's fibrous surface was made of handmade paper, layered with torn envelopes, faint ink stamps, Japanese Kanji, and the number 12199 in bold black ink. Each piece of paper was sewn down with cotton thread in a zigzag motion, a pattern used throughout the book. These stitches felt symbolic, as if they were bridging the vast distance between Japan and South Africa, physically binding together what geography separated. A small, dried leaf was stitched beside the envelopes, perhaps used to make the paper itself, with two threads of palm fibre, adding another texture to this already layered surface. The cover alone was a sensory prologue that prepared me for the sincerity expressed through material.


Figure 6: Thickness & strings.

Figure 7: First page (Dedication)

The book was bound with exposed linen cords, their loops and knots visible along the spine, marking any imperfections with pride. Opening the first page, both sides were covered in woven fabric, with a dedication printed onto a smaller piece of fabric. Immediately, the collaboration was clear and their dialogue materialised through her referring to Marie as "Sweet Pea," marking this book "as a home for Marie Wintzer."

The next page layered four kinds of paper: a thin sheet of antique paper with handwritten Kanji, a strip of the cover's handmade paper, a contemporary yellow paper, all atop a soft, fibrous page that felt more like fabric than paper, used to make up each page of the book. Each paper carried its own temporality, from aged to contemporary and handmade to mass-produced, creating a tactile history because of their exchange. On the yellow paper, a handwritten note was signed "Bisous Marie" ("Kisses, Marie") as a small but powerful gesture of their affection (Penn and Wintzer, 2011). The tangibility of the note, with the pen's indents under my finger, made their relationship feel immediate and physical.

Figure 8: Second page (different papers)

Figure 9: Pocket with envelope.

Most of the subsequent pages were soft, white sheets sewn with a pocket. Each one invited me in to remove its contents, open, and explore it all. This included envelopes, letters, photographs, folded pages, and flat items. One envelope was addressed to Cheryl and made from a page advertising a China-Japan cultural exchange event, decorated with an image of stringed puppeteers pulling smaller puppets' strings (Penn and Wintzer, 2011).

Inside was a tourist brochure and a map of Hiroshima annotated with Marie's travel notes. Accompanying it was a scrap of fibrous paper with soil taped to it and the words "GETTING AWAY WITH IT ALL MESSED UP" stamped below (Penn and Wintzer, 2011). It startled me with its ordinariness, until I read the handwritten note alongside these two papers. Only then did I understand its gravity:

Figure 10: Envelope & back of map.

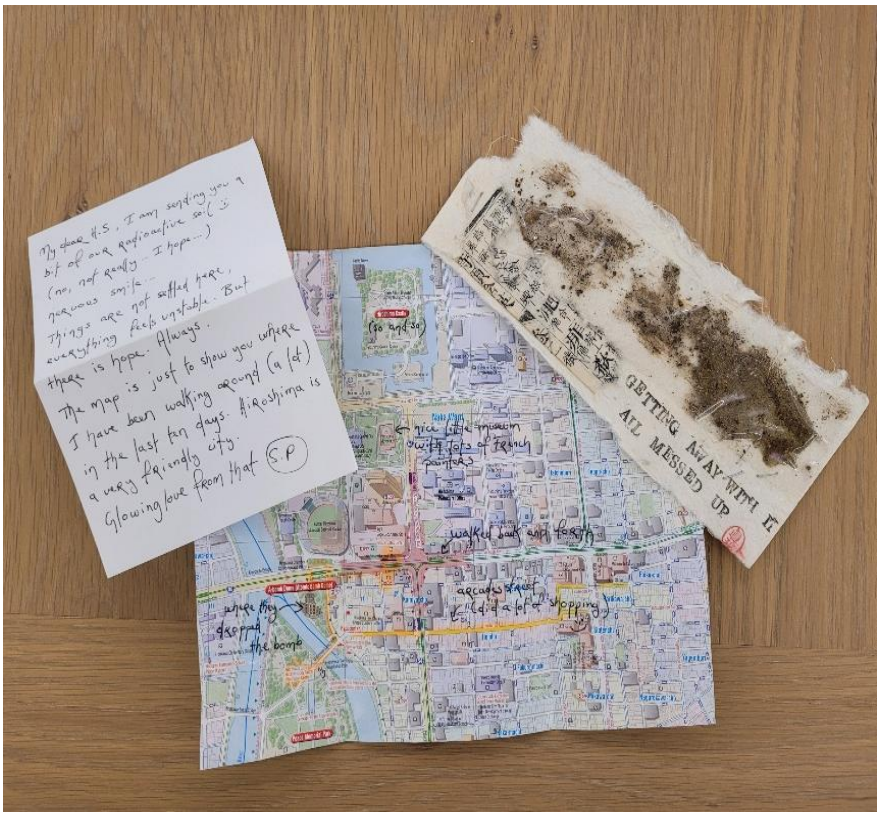

Figure 11: Contents of envelope – Handwritten note, annotated map, and soil taped to page with ephemeral details.

Learning the context behind the soil made something so ordinary feel deeply personal. I was holding onto a remnant of that sadness in my hands, thousands of kilometres away from the soil's homeland. A piece of Marie's, Cheryl's, previous readers', and the world's memories of this horrible event that impacted thousands. Experiencing the surprise and tenderness with just a bit of dirt taped to a page is something not everyone experiences through a book. Opening the letter felt so intimate through the materiality of this envelope's contents. That intimacy wasn't just represented through words or images, it felt performed by opening the envelope and experiencing the emotions all for myself.

Even within the covers and five pages I just discussed, the richness and layering in this book was already revealed. The stitching, letters, and ephemeral items made it feel like a first-hand experience of physical manifestation of intimacy. There was no conventional plot, just an exchange unfolding through materials, which managed to show the bond developing between the two artists and between creators and readers. Each page contained a different tactile element that came with prescribed gestures, untying, unfolding, pulling, and feeling, that turned correspondence into a shared, embodied ritual.

Simply comparing the number of envelopes, the reader could open only twelve envelopes compared to the forty-five illustrated postcards. It showed the limits to commercially published and mass-produced books. Even though *Griffin and Sabine* was published in the early 1990s, it remained one of the few commercially produced books for adults to use removable letters as narrative devices. Commercial books with such features existed mainly in children's or novelty publishing, such as *The Jolly Postman* (Ahlberg and Ahlberg, 1986). Bantock's work was a rare adult version of an artist's book within the last seven years (Bodman, n.d.).

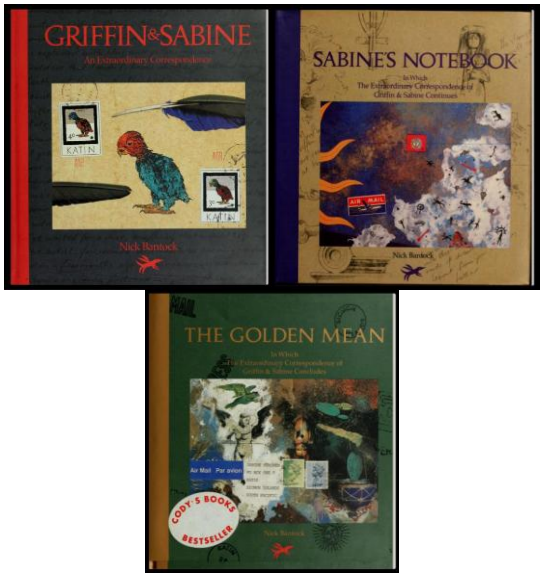

Figure 12: Griffin & Sabine Trilogy's book covers.

While *Bisous de l'autre* embodied intimacy through its handmade materiality, Nick Bantock's *Griffin and Sabine* approached mail art from a different angle. Bantock's work, though interactive, was narratively driven and commercially produced. It also invited readers to open and read personal letters, but its tenderness felt like a guided tour rather than a self-explored walkaround. Both works invited the reader into private conversations, blurring the line between reader and participant, but the kind of connection they created felt profoundly different.


Figure 13: Cover of Griffin & Sabine (Book 1)

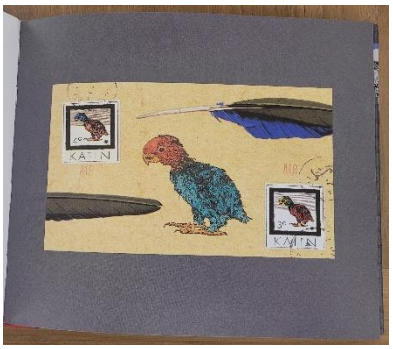

Figure 14: Envelope & back of map.

The *Griffin and Sabine Saga* followed two artists, Griffin Moss and Sabine Strohem, whose correspondence began when Sabine sent a postcard praising Griffin on his artwork (Bantock, 1991). Through postcards and letters, their relationship developed, revealing a mysterious, almost telepathic link between them (Bookey, 2024). Griffin eventually questioned whether Sabine was real or a figment of his imagination, bringing their exchanges to teeter between affection and mystery (Bantock, 1992).

To alleviate his doubts, in his last postcard to Sabine, he pleads for them to finally meet each other "at the Pharos in Alexandria." Following Sabine's agreement, the book ended with a postcard, illustrated with a baby's picture, sent to a Dr. Mathew in Kenya, signed "Sabine M. Strohem" (Bantock, 1993). Bantock described this openness as essential, saying, "Tying things up with a ribbon would be meaningless" (Bantock, 2000, pp.55–102). He wanted readers draw their own interpretation, pointing out a few hints in the last few lines before the final postcard, the handwriting, name, and stamp.

Figure 15: Griffin and Sabine's postcards agreeing to meet.

As the last piece of help he offered, he explained the final book's title, "(*The Golden Mean*) is a concept known as the harmonious point of balance that sits at the heart of aesthetic beauty. It needs neither calculator nor dividers to define its placement, for within each of us lies the ability to pinpoint its position precisely" (Bantock, 2000, pp.55–102). He suggested that every reader would know, in their hearts, what happened, regardless of how vague of concrete he had written the ending.

Figure 16: Griffin and Sabine's postcards

The magic of Bantock's book is in the narrative design and the small moments of interactivity. Reading their handwritten exchanges and seeing the illustrations and doodles accompanying it, I began to feel as though these characters truly existed. Postal and ink stamps were drawn onto the postcards and envelopes, creating the illusion that it was authentic and real. But not being able to feel the ridges and bumps of the stamps, the different textures of paper printed rather than lived, and feeling a glossy printer paper instead, removed some of that immersion (Bantock, 1991). Penn's pages, by contrast, bore the roughness of reality in layers of thread, stains, and uneven edges that testified hands at work. It contained the residue of the intimacy instead of reproducing it.

What held onto some of that immersion was how the handwritten text conveyed emotions, like frustration and desperation, through how certain words were written. It gave a sense of tone that books using standard fonts did not have. The form was why the sense of connection felt simulated through the monotonous physical experience and lack of variety. It allowed me to imagine the act of correspondence whereas Penn's allowed me to perform it.

This conversation between maker and material recalled the theory of Johanna Drucker, whose work on artists' books redefined how we think about authorship, materiality, and the reader's collaboration. As the *Books-on-Books* site explained that artist books form "a zone of activity, rather than a category into which to place works by evaluating whether they meet or fail to meet certain rigid criteria" (Bolick, 2024). Her statement suggested that the value of artists' books lay in how they invited movement, response, and engagement.

In this light, Penn's work embodied that idea almost perfectly because it wasn't a passive book-object. It was a dynamic site for exchange where meaning was layered and had to be unfolded through touch, sequence, and discovery. Everything in the book transformed it into a participatory performance between artist and reader, where the reader activated everything the artist put together. It also reframed how we can think of intimacy through that "zone of activity." The emotional connection between Penn and Wintzer was meant to be felt, handled, altered, and continued by every reader who opened the book. *Bisous de l'autre* collapsed any distance, making the act of reading a version of correspondence itself.

This difference raised a question that stayed with me: what is lost when intimacy becomes mass-produced? The more polished and perfect something is, the less it allowed the imperfections that signified touch. Penn's books, with its raw materials, refused polish,

insisting that connection is messy, layered, and unfinished. Her tactile quality made me feel part of the exchange instead of being an observer.

Penn's work also brought to mind the histories of women's labour through the stitches and knots as they recalled the work of sewing, weaving, and binding. These forms of care have always been associated with femininity and often excluded from "high" art. In *Bisous de l'autre*, those forms of care helped to make this book feel so special. The labour of the hands was not hidden, rather they were celebrated with each thread carrying the weight of time and devotion.

I realised that my fascination was as much about what the book made me do as what it made me see. Turning the pages, I felt the grain of the paper, the tension of the thread, the indentations of the handwriting and it made me aware of my own hands as part of the artwork. The sensations were what made the work unforgettable. It changed how I thought about reading as a solitary act of interpretation, now I see the possibility of a physical dialogue alongside it.

Every page felt like opening a present, a revelation with care. I thought about how correspondence, once such an ordinary act, had become so rare in the digital age. Penn and Wintzer's exchange made me long for that experience again: the patience of waiting, of sending something fragile across the seas, of knowing that different hands will hold the envelope until it reaches another pair to unfold its contents. It reminded me that art can preserve that human pace, that deliberate tenderness that resists immediacy and still forms deep connections.

Artist's books like *Bisous de l'autre* remind us that touch, texture, and presence are essential forms of communication, ones that digital and commercial reproductions can never fully capture. Just as some readers still prefer the smell and weight of a physical book in their hands over a screen, Penn's work serves as a reminder of how important the human sense of touch is. It becomes both art and archive, preserving that human connection through the physical act of handmaking and exchanging, not through mass production. Her collaboration with Wintzer showed that art can travel distances and still hold the kind of care woven into the fibres of a page.

When I first entered the JGCBA, I couldn't understand why it felt like I stepped into a sacred place. It was a sanctum because of the participation, asking me to slow down, to hold, and to listen with my fingertips. It reminded me that intimacy lingers in the marks left by hands, through the wrinkles, creases, stitches, and folds. *Bisous de l'autre* taught me that the most

lasting experiences were imprinted in the things we made with our hands and shared and that those forms of connection can still be felt long after the letters stopped arriving.

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