



The Prose Dispatch

Bringing you news from my writing desk and drawing table

Summer: Shining My Light

We are at the time of sweetest midsummer, the sky lavish with light, sun and moon in their faithful dance. I pick a basketful of plums in my California garden, my heart already halfway to England.

In a couple of weeks, my artist book, *The First Writing*, will be on display in the [Alphabets Alive!](#) exhibit opening at Oxford University in the Bodleian Library. It is the oldest library in Britain, familiar to me from the days long ago when I studied medieval manuscript illumination.



Now this granny is going to England to savor the plum so beautifully ripened by the tree of life.

While I'm there, I'll not only enjoy the scholastic wonderland of Oxford, but also delve into some family roots serendipitously revealed to be Oxford connected.

In the spirit of shining my light, I've spiffed up a few dusty corners of my website. In the [Gallery](#) you'll find brighter images of my artist books. And in the [Library](#), I've added a page called [What is an Artist Book?](#) to clarify questions that arise around this altogether wonderful and unique art form.



In the Journal

3 July 2023



Bound for the Bodleian

This recognition of my work is exceedingly sweet.

The mere name of the Bodleian Library kindles a shimmer of magic for me. In my years of studying calligraphy and illumination, it seemed that nearly every glossy art reproduction I studied was held in the Bodleian collection. And in fact, such manuscripts were the genesis of this library, when the Duke of Humfrey, son of King Henry IV, bequeathed his precious collection of illuminated books in 1447. Glimpses of the Duke's Library appear in the Harry Potter movies as a stand-in for the Hogwart's library.

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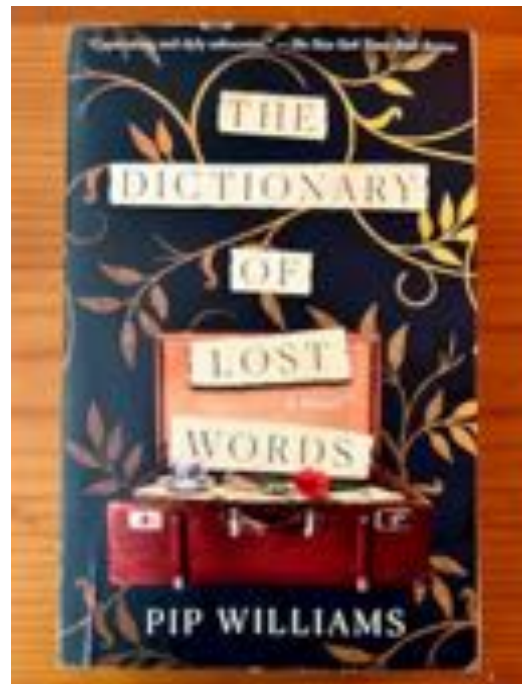
A Good Book

In *The Dictionary of Lost Words*, set in England a century ago, the making of the Oxford English Dictionary is interwoven with women's stories. This book was like catnip for me.

A motherless girl is raised by her father, who works in the Scriptorium under the direction of the famous James Murray. Beneath the sorting table where she sits, words drift down from the important work above. She begins to collect the slips, beginning with "bondmaid," a word that was jettisoned from the dictionary at the time, but which perfectly describes the role of the servant Lizzie, who effectively raises Esme in the ways of a woman.

I'm sure I would have loved this book even if the Bodleian Library had not had a starring role. The author, Pip Williams, puts it this way in her Author's Note:

"This book began as two simple questions: Do words mean different things to men and women?"



And if they do, is it possible that we have lost something in the process of defining them?"

How indeed would women's words enter the revered dictionary if not for the women who spoke them?

Eleanor, a daughter of one of the principal male characters, tells Esme, "Half the books in England might be printed here at the Press, but copies of all the books in England are stored in the Bodleian."

Soon Esme is invited into the sacred archive, a richer prize for its rarity.

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I had no idea why we were going to the Bodleian library, and I was too stunned to ask. When we turned onto Broad Street Dr Murray dismounted. Town, gown and visitor all seemed to fall back as he made his way toward the Sheldonian Theatre. As he passed into the courtyard, I imagined the guard of stone emperors along the perimeter nodding to acknowledge the Editor's presence. I followed like a disciple until we came to a halt at the entrance to the bottom of the Bodleian.

"Ordinarily it would not be possible for you to become a reader, Esme. You are neither a scholar nor a student. But it is my intention to convince Mr. Nicholson that the dictionary will be realized far sooner if you are permitted to come here and check quotations on our behalf."

"We can't just borrow the books, Dr Murray?"

He turned and looked at me above his spectacles. "Not even the Queen is permitted to borrow from the Bodleian. Now come."

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A Note to my Subscribers

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Thank you for reading!

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