

The Book

by Ben Loory

The woman returns from the store with an armload of books. She reads them quickly, one by one, over the course of the next few weeks. But when she opens the last one, the woman frowns in surprise.

All the pages in the book are blank.

Every single one.

The woman takes the book back to the store, but the manager won't let her return it.

Right there on the cover, the manager says, This book has no words and is non-returnable.

The woman is angry. She wouldn't have bought the book if she'd known there were no words inside it. But the manager simply will not relent.

The woman leaves in a huff.

She throws the book in the trash.

A few days later, the woman sees a man reading the book on the subway. She gets mad; she screams across the crowded car-- There are no words inside, you can't read it!

But the man is defensive.

You can pretend, he says. There's no law against pretending.

I think there might be words if you look at it under a special light, says a woman sitting nearby.

This other woman is holding her own copy of the book.

That's so stupid! the woman yells. Don't you see how stupid that is?

Don't you see that's crazy?

At the next station, a policeman is called and has to break up the fight.

A television crew arrives on the scene.

The woman is interviewed on the news.

She complains loudly about the book for some time.

The next day, the book appears on the bestseller lists, under both fiction and nonfiction. The woman is furious, enraged, appalled. She calls into a radio show and starts to rant. She calls the next day, and the day after that, and then the day after that. She appears again on television, this time in debate with the author.

Your book is a joke! the woman says.

The author just sits there and smiles.

The woman becomes famous after a while. She even writes a book of her own. Her book cries out for the destruction of the first one.

In answer, the first book's sales jump.

The woman is frantic. She doesn't know what to do. She feels like she's going insane.

And then one day on the street a man comes up and spits in the woman's face.

The woman stands there-- shocked, paralyzed. She hadn't realized everyone hated her. She turns and runs sobbing all the way home.

She locks the door and collapses.

She crawls into the bedroom on her hands and knees and hides underneath the blankets.

All night long she lies there sobbing.

She feels like she's going to die.

In the morning, the woman unplugs her phone. She doesn't want to be invited on TV anymore. She sits on the edge of the bed for a while, and then, slowly, she rises.

The woman turns over a whole new leaf.

She turns her attention to other things.

She takes up hobbies. She goes scuba-diving.

She even makes some friends.

Without the controversy the woman's anger stirred up, the book

starts to slip from the bestseller lists. It slips and slips for weeks and weeks, until one day it just disappears.

The woman's own book disappears as well.

The woman doesn't even notice.

The years go by. The woman meets a man. She falls in love and gets married. She has children and raises them and lets them go and watches them start families of their own.

She and her husband go through some hard times, but in the end they stay together.

And then one day, late in life, the woman's husband dies.

For months, the woman is unable to sleep. She wanders through the house, feeling lost. She turns on lights, and turns them off. She sits down, gets up, sits.

One evening in the attic, going through her husband's things, the woman finds a copy of the book.

She hasn't thought of the book in years.

Slowly, she opens it up.

To her surprise, there are words inside-- lots of words, printed plain as day. She turns to page one and starts to read.

She reads all night long.

And in the morning when she gets to the very last page, the woman finds herself softly crying.

It's the most beautiful book she's ever read.

She looks up; and outside, the sun is shining.

