

It Was The Way She Said It

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Anne Spencer is an adopted child, a mother, and a grandmother. She has been married and divorced, has four children, is very religious, and has already planned her funeral. She spends most of her days cooking and gardening unless she is at church, talking to the farmers at the farmer's market or spending time with her family. Anne is eighty years old and has a lifetime of accomplishments and hardships that several people can relate to.

Anne Spencer is my grandmother, but in the five artist books I made she is an ambiguous, unnamed character whose relation to me is not revealed to the audience. In the books are written, poetic stories about her life she has told me, accompanied with photographs I have taken and old photographs of her own. She is never seen in the photographs used. I focus on detailed objects in her life and also details of the people in the old photos by ways of cropping. This indirectness is meant to create tensions between the text and images — she becomes an absent subject. Even though this absence, and the fact that she goes unnamed in these stories, might seem to generalize her, the stories themselves are very detailed and specific. It is through these details, over the course of five stories, that I seek to capture an essence of a life that others can relate to.

### **Contextual Background**

Carrie Mae Weems is an American artist who is well known for her photography. She addresses issues of gender, race, and relationship equality. In The Kitchen Table Series she photographs several scenes of herself at a kitchen table. In these scenes, she sits at the table with her husband for the first few photographs, but as the series progresses, the husband is no longer present. As the series continues further her friends and her daughter sit at the table with her. In addition to the change of characters, the objects placed in the scene change as well. Certain posters hang on the walls, different drinks are set on the table, and her position at the table shifts

too. These changes illustrate the struggle she faces as a woman, a wife and a mother. Along with the photographs, she includes a long, fictional narrative based on her life. She writes, “She insisted that what he called domineering was a jacket being forced on her because he couldn’t stand the thought of the inevitable shift in the balance of power.” This series had the greatest influence on my own work. Weems uses photography to tell this narrative, but she also accompanies it with a written story. The first time I looked at this work I focused on the relationship between text and image. I realized both elements can stand alone, but when paired together, a more detailed narrative emerges.<sup>1</sup>

I stepped back from this series for about a month or so. When I returned to it, I focused solely on the story. I looked for narrative devices she used and even though she photographed herself, she wrote this story in the third person. I realized this was a very successful way of relating her audience to the series. Writing in the first person makes a story very personal, almost too personal. In my series of five artist books, I write about my grandmother in the third person. It was the most powerful choice I made in my process and contributed to how my readers related to my grandmother’s story.<sup>1</sup>



Three photos from *The Kitchen Table Series*. Notice the different character and objects from photo to photo. Source: carriemaeweems.net

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1 Weems, Carrie Mae. “The Kitchen Table Series.” 1990.

In the early months during the development of my thesis, I looked at the photographer and storyteller of *Humans of New York*, Brandon Stanton. He walks the streets of New York and asks people if he can photograph them. While interacting with these people, he gains quick access to their personal stories. Stanton then pairs a quote from their conversation with a photograph he took and posts it on Instagram, Facebook, and his website. The variety of people he meets and photographs gives his audience a glimpse into hundreds of stranger's lives.<sup>2</sup> As I thought about his work more, though, I wasn't convinced his method and platform was successful. The content posted on social media comes and goes very quickly. I typically read the first few sentences of a quote he posted, glance at the photograph, and if it is of no interest to me, I don't read the rest. Reading direct quotes from strangers doesn't resonate with me. Stanton's work tells me about people, but he doesn't push me to think through the stories I read. I made a conscientious decision to find a way to push my reader's thinking. I knew using direct quotes from my grandmother wouldn't be as influential. Even though Stanton didn't inspire me in the same way Weems did, through research, he helped me decide what was the most appropriate method for the story I was telling.



"We've been together for ten months now so we're trying to keep the passion alive."

A photo from *Humans of New York* by Brandon Stanton.  
Source: [humansofnewyork.com](http://humansofnewyork.com)

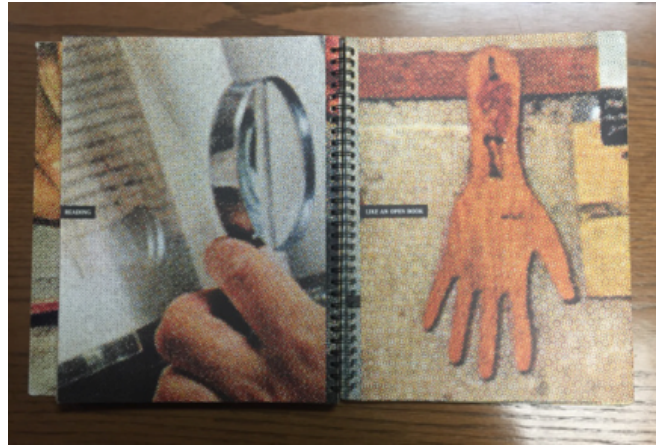
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2 Stanton, Brandon. "Humans of New York." 2016.

Nearing the end of the first semester I looked at an artist book called, *Long Story Short*, created by Philip Zimmerman. My main focus was learning about how he told this story rather than what the story was actually about. This book pushes the boundaries of the traditional way of reading a story. Most of the 8.5x11 inch pages fold out to 17x11 inch pages. Before opening the folds, a sentence is read across both pages. When opening the left page into the larger spread, a new sentence forms. New text can be read with the old text from the first, right page. Zimmerman plays with this idea throughout the whole book. The sentences that are first read change as the pages open out. In addition to playing with text, he makes his readers look at his imagery more than once. When I first looked at his book I wasn't sure what I was looking at. Up close, they are pixelated photos that are hard to interpret. I took photos of the spreads so I could refer back to them later. When I took the photos I realized how clear they were from afar. It's obvious this was a purposeful choice.<sup>3</sup> Zimmerman makes his readers work. He didn't give me the answers on a platter, he made me think and rethink several times throughout my experience. The majority of old photographs in my books are cropped. Normally people look at old family photos and see a complete picture. Like Zimmerman, I push the reader to think about what they are looking at. Instead of a photo of my grandmother's middle school class, I cropped it so you can only see the girls' legs and shoes. They are all wearing the same thing and look the same. It changes the meaning and context of the photo, but it is still not obvious what I mean by the crop. Zimmerman pushed me to think about the material I planned on using in my artist books.

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3 Zimmerman, Philip. "Long Story Short." 1999.



Two photos of book spreads in *Long Story Short* by Philip Zimmerman.  
Source: Special collections at The University of Michigan Library



My grandmother's class photo before and after I cropped it.

The next book I looked at was *Vision Shifts*, by book artist Carol Barton. This artist book is very different from *Long Story Short*. Barton's story is one continuous sentence from beginning to end. Barton had to choose her pacing wisely because of this decision. By the time I reached the end I had to go back to the beginning and remind myself how it began. She also uses photographs, but two distinct types. One set of imagery is used for the background of the book. They are photos from a foggy walk she took one day. The other photographs are of people whose identities are unknown until the story ends. Once these details are explained, the story is given new meaning and when it is read a second time, perspective changes.<sup>4</sup> Her book was a resource for me for understanding the importance of pacing. I spent a lot of time deciding how much text there should be on each page of my books and also what sentences needed to stand-alone or be grouped together.



A spread from *Vision Shifts* by Carol Barton.  
Source: Special collections at The University of Michigan Library

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4 Barton, Carol. "Vision Shifts." 1998.

The discoveries I found within each of their bodies of work led me to add or leave out aspects in my books. I use Weems' choice of using the third person in my five stories. This choice pushed the meaning of my work much further. Brandon Stanton's choice of using direct quotes led to me not using direct quotes in my artist books. He has a certain way of reaching his audience and I learned that choice was not fitting for the experience I wanted to create. Zimmerman and Barton pushed me to think about the choices of where to place text in relation to an image. The research I did prior to making my books was extremely helpful. These four artists informed me and pushed my creative process.

### **Methodology**

Starting this creative process was very difficult. I struggled finding material that I would be passionate about and inspired by. The first experiment I did was place text behind photos of places that had personal meaning to me. The point of this was to prompt a reader to have a first impression of the photo. Once he or she looked behind the photo and read the personal story about the place, his or her impression would change. The reader would learn it was more than just a place to me. The change of impressions was successful after showing my classmates. The content I used wasn't necessarily what I wanted to work with, but the interaction between text and image was.

This first experiment led to taking different content and doing something similar with it. I explored topics of parenting, something that was personal to me. I took old photos of my family and I and wrote text below the image. I wrote about being a child and what the relationship between my parents and I was like in that moment. The result presented very detailed content that revealed personal feelings and tensions. I thought the next step was hearing from my friends about their parents.



I interviewed friends to hear their stories on their parent's parenting. I asked a series of questions and attempted taking photographs during the conversation. After each interview I took quotes from my recordings and arranged the text and photographs just like my first experiment. The portrait was seen first and behind the image was a quote from our conversation. During this entire experiment I quickly learned I was doing too much at once. Talking to people about their parents was a personal conversation and interrupting that intimate time by taking photos was intrusive and distracting. While they were willing to share personal feelings, they were also very hesitant. My next goal was to start talking to people I didn't necessarily know as well, but I realized the difficulty I had with my friends would have grown with strangers.

This was a point where I hit a brick wall. My experiments had "failed," or so I thought, and so my teachers and I had a conversation about it. Somehow my grandmother and her unique life came up in conversation and they told me to go photograph her and see what happens. This was difficult for many reasons. The first was that it was my grandmother. As her granddaughter I thought I was too close to create a project about her. The second was beginning to photograph her without a concrete motive. I went to her house anyways and started focusing on particular details of her personality, her tastes in clothing, furniture, decorations, etc. My photographs were not interesting, they did not resonate with people, and they were all encompassing without a particular focus.

While photographing her I was also recording our conversations. I began asking her about planning her funeral, what her life is like now versus fifty years ago and other introductory questions that could lead to interesting details. She can talk for hours, so asking general questions opened many doors. I knew her stories were more interesting than the photographs I was taking so I stopped photographing. I kept going back to her house with follow up questions that led to

many more interesting things about her. As a twenty-two year old, I'm old enough to hear how my grandmother raised four children as a single mother and how difficult it was getting divorced. As I recorded more and more conversations I started looking at the topics my grandmother was talking about to see how I could push my direction further. At my house back at home in a hallway are three photographs. The first is of my grandmother, the second is my mom, and the third is of myself. We were all toddlers in these photos and we looked very similar at the same age. I grasped on to this idea and I thought having conversations with my mom would lead to something interesting. I asked her the same questions I already asked my grandmother. I also asked questions about certain parts of her life to hear my mom's side of the story. It was interesting hearing how my mom remembered leaving for college and then how my grandmother remembered sending my mom to college. Both responses were very different from each other. I was interested in this idea of perspective, which relates back to some of my earlier experiments. I talked to my mom a few more times and then had another in-class critique.

This creative process had already taught me a lot up to this point. I learned I tend to get stuck in my ways and that I think I have to keep doing what I've started instead of veering in another direction. After my critique, my teachers reminded me just because I had three generational photos of the women in my family, didn't mean I had to make a project about it. I took a step back and started focusing solely on my grandmother again.

That choice was pivotal for me. I kept recording more material, but started asking myself what I could do differently with these quotes. At this point I realized I wanted to shape my material in a way that moved beyond just quotes and images. I knew using direct quotes, like Stanton's style, was unfitting for this material, but I didn't know what the alternative would be. Instead of using direct quotes I started writing short stories about my grandmother and all the

experiences and feelings she told me about up to that point. I typically do not write, especially creatively, but the words I was writing had more meaning than the direct quotes. I decided to not use her name in the first story I wrote and only use the word “she”. Keeping her name and relation to me anonymous made the stories more powerful too. I felt that letting the reader know she was my grandmother could’ve given my reader preconceived notions. Grandmothers have many stereotypes and I wanted to separate those from the powerful experiences she had.

From here my project took off. I started writing several stories about different moments in her life. I also began photographing again. I did not take photos of her, but rather things in her house that speak to her personality and items that give new meaning to the words in my stories. A month into the second semester I discovered hundreds of old photos at my grandmother’s house. She kept everything from her childhood and on. She has old photos of her first communion, her wedding days, portraits, and other photos of her friends and boyfriends as a young woman. They were incredible and the details in them spoke to my stories. After looking through them, I chose a handful to scan onto my computer and I cropped them. This was exciting and interesting because cropping the images to focus on certain details changed the meaning of each photograph. Instead of using an entire photo of my grandmother and her prom date, I cropped the photo so only their arms and the gestures they made are seen.

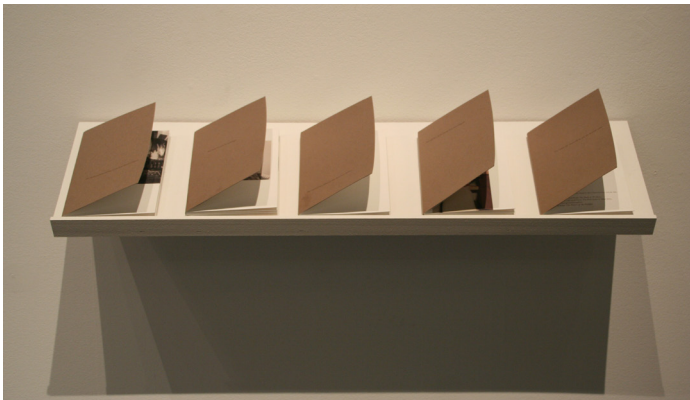


A cropped photo of my grandmother and her prom date.

It was difficult choosing what to write about because I can say a lot about my grandmother's life. I narrowed my stories down to five. The first story is about her childhood, the second is about her being married and getting divorced, the third is about being a single mother, the fourth is about her life now and the fifth is about planning her funeral. I chose these five topics because they are the most pivotal to me. They were big moments in her life with a lot of detail. They are also representative of big moments in other people's lives. I continued refining the five stories, scanning and cropping more photos, taking my own photos and finally laying out the five books. The combination of these elements created interesting interactions for the readers to interpret themselves.

### **Creative Work**

My books, titled *It Was The Way She Said It*, were displayed in Slusser Gallery. In the gallery space I placed the five books on a white slanted shelf to match the color of the wall. The artist books speak for themselves and didn't need any furniture or props to help the experience. I wanted my audience to focus on the books and nothing else.



*It Was The Way She Said It*. Five books displayed in Slusser Gallery.



*It Was The Way She Said It*. Book three.

One of the strongest aspects of my work is the way I've written my stories. I do not mention my grandmother's name once, I do not infer I am her granddaughter, and I never name her ex-husband or children either. It is a powerful decision that makes my grandmother very real to people even though they have never met Anne Spencer. She could be the woman someone lives to next door, she could be someone's sister or she could be someone's mother who they saw go through something similar. My grandmother and other family members are much more relatable to others because of that narrative decision.

I've also made the decision to not show my grandmother's face in the photographs. This aspect of my work goes hand in hand with the way I've written my stories. I am leaving it up to my audience to decide who this woman is and how she looks. I use photos of my grandmother's objects and old photographs she's kept all her life. The details in those photos are necessary and authentic; something I could not find elsewhere. In the old photographs I cropped them so details like clothing, gestures and interactions between people are emphasized. Throughout my creative process of choosing photos, I have found a huge difference in looking at the original old photographs and the cropped version. The photos became stronger and were given new meaning.



Cropped photograph of my grandmother posing in front of her house.

The decision to make artist books was important. The stories I've written are intimate, detailed, and meant to be experienced. Books are held in people's hands leaving it up to the reader to determine the pace at which he or she reads. A person can and will look at a photo longer or shorter than the next person. There is a lot of freedom and opportunity for reflection with an artist book. Each time a different person reads these books, a different experience could be had.

In terms of layout, I carefully chose what words went on each page. Some were paired with a photo and some were not. The sentences without a photo didn't need one. The sentence "She would leave feet first" in book four refers to her refusal of moving out of her house. She wants to die in it; she loves her house that much. It is a loaded sentence that doesn't need a photograph. The reader can picture that moment him or herself. In terms of photographs, some of them directly relate to the words on the page and some don't. My goal was for the reader to make connections themselves. In book four, I talk about how she is getting old and how difficult it is to wake up in the morning. On the following page I have a cropped photo of her as a young woman in a bathing suit. Her body looks young and healthy. My intention was to have the reader think about what she looks and feels like now in comparison to how she looked then. Each sentence and photo was carefully chosen and paired to make several connections like this. Some of those connections are obvious and others are left for interpretation.

## **Conclusion**

At my exhibition I found that many people were relating to my grandmother's experiences. Individuals have their own experiences throughout life and no experience is the same, but the meaning and lessons that come from people's experiences are sometimes similar.

That is where the specific details met the universal themes in my books. The personal story I wrote became personal for others.

I was working with the stories and materials for so long that I distanced myself from the true meaning of the words I wrote. I had different types of viewers read my books - my grandmother, my mother, my aunt, my friend, and a stranger. Everyone had a different experience, which was my goal. My grandmother thought I successfully captured her spirit. My mother and aunt cried after reading them. Up to that point in their lives, they never heard how my grandmother felt about her own parenting choices. My grandmother never discussed those things with them, and I don't think she ever will. My mother and aunt were able to find truth in an unexpected way, though. My friend also cried after reading the books. She only knows my mother, so it was interesting seeing her cry. She mentioned how it was a very sad story to read. An older man came up to me during the exhibition and prefaced the conversation with how he is Catholic like my grandmother. He read the five stories with a Catholic perspective and talked about how the photographs reminded him of earlier times. That was completely unexpected, but exciting that the stories provoked something new. These five perspectives made me reflect on my books. Like I mentioned before, I was working with this material for so long that it temporarily blinded me of what the words and photos could mean to different types of people.

After seeing people's reactions, I want more people to read them. I plan to enter a competition called, "The Art of the Book" at Sebastopol Center for the Arts in California this summer. I have never felt more confident about a project of mine than this. I accomplished something I am proud of. The seven months this project took to create are the best seven months of school I've ever had. I learned more than I could have ever imagined and I will be unpacking this experience for myself in many years to come.

## Bibliography

1. Weems, Carrie Mae. "The Kitchen Table Series." 1990.
2. Stanton, Brandon. "Humans of New York." 2016.
3. Zimmerman, Philip. "Long Story Short." 1999.
4. Barton, Carol. "Vision Shifts." 1998.