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## On The Making 'The Flame Alphabet' Book Trailer (VIDEO)

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The first film I saw by Erin Cosgrove, the artist who made the book trailer for [my novel "The Flame Alphabet."](#) was called "What Manner of Person Art Thou?" It's an animated feature about two men who go on a spree across the countryside--violent but comic, disturbing but funny--trying to eradicate anyone who might be connected to them. The animation is palsied, as jerky as puppets pushed by popsicle sticks. But the drawing itself is lush and primary, a kind of Justice League of America color palette. There's a spare beauty to her characters, at queasy odds with the drastic deeds they perform. The story is a cross between Cormac McCarthy and Samuel Beckett. The dialogue is Biblical, Southern, Gothic: shitbird crazy and funny.

I didn't just want to work with Erin, I wanted to be one of the animated characters in her film. I wanted to live in that world. Her sensibility just killed me, and I thought maybe things would improve for me if I talked her into a collaboration.

When I asked Erin if she might want to make a standalone short film that could pass as a book trailer for me, she sent me [a link](#) to a trailer by Glenn Beck, wanting to know if this was what I had in mind.

It kind of wasn't, although it's an amazing, uh, document. Of something. And that style would be pretty funny for a strange novel about a toxic language flowing from the mouths of children. Erin has actually gone on record saying that this really is one of her favorite trailers. [Really.](#)

The other trailer we looked at was "[Decision Points.](#)" by a little-known memoirist named George W. Bush. A direct address to the camera, describing the book. So intimate, so personal, so potentially insane. We thought that my villain, a character named Murphy, might deliver a monologue to the camera. A bit of doomsday theory about religious technology, language, and the End Times. The usual. In retrospect, with the right know-how, it might have been interesting to hijack the ex-president's mouth and have him deliver this speech. Or maybe this has already been done?

But this all seemed too jokey, and it wouldn't capture the atmosphere of the novel (not that jokey, a bit sad, a bit odd). There are some brilliant, comic trailers, by Gary Shteyngart and John Wray, among others, that have little to do with their respective books, but still capture the humor and sensibility of their authors. More importantly, they are fun to watch, whereas some more serious trailers are, uh, less fun... But I'm not as funny as those guys, and I sensed that something different might be possible with Erin, something pretty weird and dark.

This all led to a good exchange about what a book trailer is for. Book trailers arose because we're afraid that books on their own are not enough, they need help, they need a visual push. They are so minor and tiny without something cinematic asserting their importance. Right? And do trailers work? Does anyone actually buy a book because of them?

Who knows and, excuse me, who cares?

To us it seemed foolish, and also dull, to think the trailer was just to promote the book. It should be a standalone thing, interesting in its own right, and as we were talking we realized that book trailers, despite their name, are not very much like movie trailers, which are usually made from actual scenes of the movies they advertise. So we thought a traditional trailer, like a movie preview, would be the most interesting thing to do--Erin would illustrate a few scenes from the book and we'd add some Klezmer music and then we'd be done. Standard stuff. Because she was using animation, we could actually just create literal versions of some scenes, some moments, of the book. We'd need no real human beings. No acting would be required. Thank god.

We tried to keep in mind [the usual cautions.](#) Thou shalt not be boring. Thou shalt not be explicitly advertorial. Thou shalt not send large chrome letters of blurbage through the sky, only to thud at the bottom of the screen with a puff of dust. Thou shalt not use a Charlton Heston voiceover (we slipped a little on this one). Thou shalt not, despite the title of the book, set any letters aflame. It is bad luck to burn the alphabet.

For me what was nice, in the end, was getting to work with an artist whose films I admire. Because there's no evidence that trailers really accomplish anything (just like books!), one might as well do them for the same reason we write books. Insert your reason here.

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