



Leanne Shapton's painted wooden books.

## About the Author

Peter Terzian is a *Print* contributing editor. His most recent book is *Heavy Rotation: Twenty Writers on the Albums that Changed their Lives*. His *Print* article "[Kill Your Darlings](#)" featured book designers talking about their favorite cover designs that never made it to the shelf. He also recently interviewed [David Pearson](#) and the designers behind the Vladimir Nabokov [series](#) as part of his ongoing series on book cover design for [printmag.com](#).

## The Painted Book

by Peter Terzian

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Lately, a handful of well-read visual artists have looked to book design—specifically, the classic covers of the 20th century—as a source of raw material and inspiration. Some paint book covers straight up, carefully replicating type and illustration, as well as the marks of wear and tear on particular copies. Others alter existing designs or invent their own jackets and titles. It's surely no coincidence that artists are choosing the book as a subject in this era of new reading technologies. But these paintings are too joyous and affectionate to be memento mori for the printed word. "I think books as objects are beginning to mean more to people," says artist and designer Leanne Shapton. "Their covers and the way they *look*—not just their contents—are part of our collective histories, with references, moods, and personal implications all their own."

### Roula Partheniou

[Roula Partheniou](#) calls her book paintings "decoys." The Toronto artist recreates the covers of works as diverse as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Heidegger's *The Question of Being* on small, pre-stretched canvases. She then exhibits them sculpturally, in a stack on a coffee table or in a row on a bookshelf. "Frequently," she says, "people think the books are real and actually pick them up."

Partheniou began the series—which she calls "Handmade Readymade," a nod to Duchamp—by collecting books with intriguing titles or graphic imagery and hoarding them in her studio. She soon began to make associations between them. For a work that she named "Nothing to Infinity," for instance, she created a pile of painted books with titles like "Infinity in Your Pocket" and "The Theory of Absence." "I have stacks and stacks of books that I have bought but have yet to paint because I am still hoping to find their mates," she says. In a recent installation, she repurposed a library's new release display case with her own trompe-l'oeil paintings; each was a copy of a book with an arrow as part of the cover art. She arranged the books so that the arrows form a pattern that directs the viewer's eye around the case. Almost exclusively Partheniou paints books that she hasn't read. "I think it's key to the project that I judge a book by its cover," she says. "Occasionally, I get drawn in, of course."



*Nothing to Infinity*, 2008



*Art and Sociology*, 2009