



Online NewsHour

a NewsHour with Jim Lehrer Transcript  
ONLINE FOCUS

## CONVERSATION: A BOOK OF BOOKS

December 30, 2002



Paul Solman talks to photographer Abelardo Morell about his latest book, a collection of his photographs of books entitled A Book of Books.

[Click here to listen to this segment in RealAudio](#)

### NewsHour Links

*Online Special Report:*

[Children's Story Book Art](#)

*Dec. 25, 2002:*  
A look at architecture designs for [ground zero](#)

*Oct. 24, 2002:*  
the influential works of [photographer Richard Avedon](#)

*Oct. 10, 2002:*  
A discussion on the work of [Hungarian writer Imre Kertesz, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature](#)

*July 19, 2002:*  
A photography exhibit that [captures life in the streets](#)

Browse the NewsHour's coverage of [Arts and Entertainment](#) and [Essays & Dialogues](#)

**PAUL SOLMAN:** Abe Morell has a thing for books and cameras.

For years, he's used large-scale pinhole contraptions of his own devising, camera obscuras, to photograph the seemingly mundane.

Morell, who also teaches at the Massachusetts College of Art, has risen to prominence with three published books and a one-man show that toured the country. His work has been purchased by major museums throughout the world.

Now, a striking new collection of images -- A Book of Books -- is getting rave reviews for its images of books, many from the Boston Public Library, where we interviewed him recently.

We began by asking Abe Morell how the book obsession began.



[ENLARGE PHOTO](#)

**ABELARDO MORELL:** In 1993 I was looking through a book of paintings by El Greco and flipping through the pages and this funny reflection came off the page. And I sort of said to myself as an artist, wouldn't it be nice to make a picture of that effect. And I did it and it became really this beautiful photograph. And I thought okay, let's do more.



**Outside Links**

[MFA Exhibition on Morell's Work](#)

[Massachusetts College of Art](#)

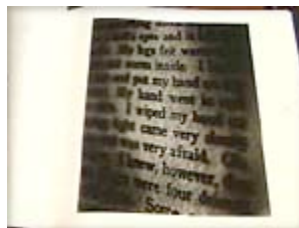
## Finding beauty in books

PAUL SOLMAN: In the last decade, Morell has shot a vast variety of volumes: from the laughably large, Audubon's Birds of America, to the stunningly small, a hymnal by Rudyard Kipling... from a blank book dappled in daylight, to the starry juxtaposition of "two books of astronomy"...from a peeping monk (by Raphael) to this autobiographical close-up of Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms.

**I really wanted to make a book feel very big. And it just knocked me out when I saw it because it felt like all the stories of the world... are right there.**

ABELARDO MORELL  
Photographer

ABELARDO MORELL: When I came to this country in '62 from Cuba, I didn't speak English. In high school in New York City, I had this wonderful teacher. And one of the first things he did was to suggest that I start reading A Farewell to Arms. I think because Hemingway, he's a complex writer but his words are simple. And it's this really almost perverse attempt to get so physically connected to the words that maybe I'm hoping for them to provide some other illumination of their meanings. It's also an informal thanks to Hemingway.



PAUL SOLMAN: Morell gives thanks to Hemingway. And the dictionary.

ABELARDO MORELL: I really wanted to make a book feel very big. And it just knocked me out when I saw it because it felt like all the stories of the world you know are right there.




PAUL SOLMAN: That is, as French artist Jean Cocteau once said: "The greatest masterpiece in literature is only a dictionary out of order."

But the stories that books tell Abe Morell are not just those within the binding. Damaged Book with Dirt tells a different sort of tale, as does Detail of Book Damaged by Water from the Boston Public Library.

ABELARDO MORELL: A while ago they had a flood in the basement. And a lot of books were actually destroyed by water.



PAUL SOLMAN: But to  Morell, in the destruction was a kind of beauty.

ABELARDO MORELL: The idea that water may still be kind of frozen in the patterns of this book. It's a book almost taken to its very limit.

## Finding and saving old books

PAUL SOLMAN: Morell also became immersed in the look of letters, from this aquatic alphabet photographed in 1998, to an old book of proverbs for the blind from 1841.



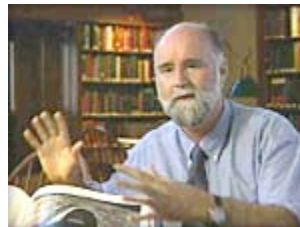
ABELARDO MORELL: This is an interesting book, it's from before Braille had caught on as a system so what we're seeing is actually embossed letters. Blind people would touch these letters and read for

inspiration. In this case, some sunlight was actually coming into the room. And I just thought, OK, blindness, sunlight, let's see what they have to do with each other.

NICHOLSON BAKER: Crackpots like me say that that's, that -- that's the valuable thing about books, their oldness is part of their beauty.

PAUL SOLMAN: Novelist Nicholson Baker, a former neighbor of Morell's, has been on a high-profile crusade to salvage and store huge, 25-pound bound volumes of original newspapers. When he found out that Morell's art was now devoted to books, he enlisted the photographer to help chronicle his cause. But it was Morell's biblio-mania that Baker really shared. A master of what might be called "micro-fiction," Baker built his first book, *The Mezzanine*, around one lone escalator ride. So he's especially drawn to the discoveries that close-ups provide, like this one from *A Tale of Two Cities*.

NICHOLSON BAKER: I love to go in tight, and the type has just slammed into this mat of fibers and squashed into them, leaving behind a little freight of ink. But then you're getting the same percussion of type coming in from the other side and the two are kind of at odds with each other.



## Discovering and sharing surprises



PAUL SOLMAN: Morell found a different kind of discovery in this 1851 English volume, which taught young girls to sew a shirt, for example, by example.

ABELARDO MORELL: Every other page has a sample, a miniature sample of the thing that they were learning to sew or knit. So in the next page can be a little sock, a pair of pants, it's wonderful.

PAUL SOLOMAN: Is that what art is about, finding surprises?

ABELARDO MORELL: Totally. I made several pictures of this book and this one where the arm becomes this narrow thin line, it felt kind of grotesque but I thought it spoke to the idea of this book being locked up in there for many years, as if it were a prisoner and maybe had lost an arm. I mean this is a kind of -- I mean at least in my case -- how imagination leads to making photographs.

PAUL SOLMAN: Sometimes, the role of Morrell's imagination is more direct, as in his Alice-in-Wonderland series... with cutouts of the original John Tenniel illustrations. One night, Morrell dreamed of this image.

ABELARDO MORELL: And so the next week, I had a friend come over with his drill and we made a very large hole through the book. My own take on Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. That the book itself is the imagination. It's the hole that she goes down into is a book.



PAUL SOLMAN: Or, it's the shadow she casts, as an 18-inch high cutout.

## Meaning and power of books

ABELARDO MORELL: There's all kinds of weird stuff that once you start reading books, you know it's like the apple, you know. Books have this double

**A book from the outside is just a block of nothing. It's just a big\_**

edge. And I think this shadow sort of is about that. This -- the crooked path of knowledge.

PAUL SOLMAN: Nicholson Baker puts it differently.

NICHOLSON BAKER: A book from the outside is just a block of nothing. It's just a big heavy thing. The only reason that they have this strange power is that we know that there's a long linear experience in there. There are all those words and it would take a long time to read all those words. He's saying I'm showing you why these things are interesting to look at.

heavy thing. The only reason that they have this strange power is that we know that there's a long linear experience in there.

NICHOLSON BAKER, Author

PAUL SOLMAN: Like this dictionary that reminded Baker of the one at home when he was a kid.



⊕ ENLARGE PHOTO

ABELARDO MORELL: It was those thick ones, Webster's Third or whatever, given by my grandparents and I never looked anything up in it really. But there it was open with a kind of Holland Tunnel running

through it. And Abe caught that kind of grandeur of, of the architectural feeling of a book, a reference book.

PAUL SOLMAN: Architecture also inspired this final image, one of Morell's most recent.

ABELARDO MORELL: The first thing that came to my mind was 9-11. My job as an artist and I was very conscious of it, was to make a beautiful picture of these two books without being heavy handed with it.



⊕ ENLARGE PHOTO

PAUL SOLMAN: And you don't care or you do that someone actually has the conscious thought of 9-11 when they look at this.

ABELARDO MORELL: Not at all. I think that most people will acknowledge subconsciously that this is 9-11. But I, I think it's also two books. And that's the way I like to work. Equal parts, discovery and maybe something that's common that we all share.

PAUL SOLMAN: Both discovery... and something

## we all share: A fitting epitaph for Abe Morrell's new A Book of Books.

[REGIONS](#) | [TOPICS](#) | [RECENT PROGRAMS](#) | [ABOUT US](#) | [FEEDBACK](#) | [SUBSCRIPTIONS / FEEDS:](#) [POD](#) [RSS](#)

[GO](#)

Funded, in part, by:



Support the kind of journalism done by the NewsHour...Become a member of your local PBS station.

[PBS Online Privacy Policy](#)

Copyright ©1996-2008 MacNeil/Lehrer Productions. All Rights Reserved.