

A STREET BUT HALF MADE UP

Meet the literary agent.

BY ANNA ZUMBRO

On the M block of Fiction Street, a gust of wind pushed a hardback dangerously close to the curb. Bibliobot Eight-Ef rolled after it and extended its grasper, but another gust caused the robot to wobble and the book to dance away.

It came to rest slanted against a curb, allowing Eight-Ef to pick it up. It was an aged copy. A scar traversed the front, its taut purple jacket made from a fabric similar to the covers humans used on days when the temperature dropped. A code on the book's spine denoted where it belonged among the weather-protected shelves that lined the bus stops, old phone booths and alcoves of Fiction Street. Eight-Ef ignored the code and scanned the front, as its camera had recorded the humans doing. *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley. This book was several blocks away from home.

The grasper was ill-designed for turning pages, so Eight-Ef stowed the book in its basket and called up a digital copy of the text. The robot finished the story in seconds, copying several quotes for future playback, something to vary the monotony of “Excuse-me-Bibliobot-passing” and “Please-secure-your-books-rain-is-imminent”, a phrase that it would need later that afternoon.

“We-are-unfashioned-creatures-but-half-made-up,” Eight-Ef tried, its mechanical voice sliding from one word to the next with all the steadiness of the streetcar that ran up and down Fiction Street.

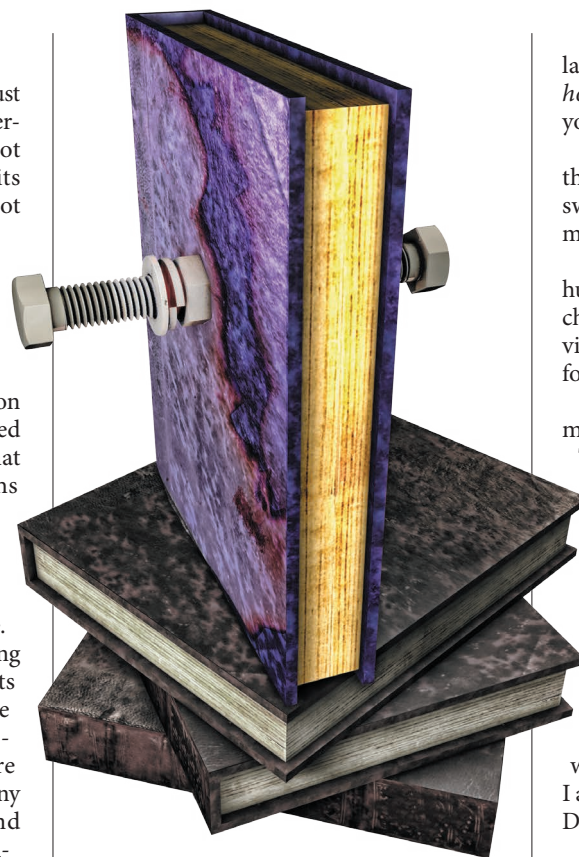
“Excuse me?” A human in spectacles and navy coverings looked at Eight-Ef, eyes meeting camera.

“Would-you-care-to-borrow-a-book?” Eight-Ef asked, removing Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *Love in the Time of Cholera*. It had been incorrectly shelved next to the pharmacy on M block rather than on G block where it belonged.

“What, are we back to the days of algorithms preloading texts on screens for us? I did not move to a library city to take reading suggestions from a robot.” The bespectacled human sniffed and walked away.

You put books on shelves. The message came from One-Ef, the Fiction Street supervisor, who was back at A block, searching for mistakes while monitoring remotely. *You do not give them to humans.*

Books are on shelves for human use, Eight-Ef replied. *Giving books directly to humans is*



efficient and friendly. I am optimized for these qualities.

Overridden. Return to your task.

Eight-Ef returned the book to its basket and continued down the sidewalk to the small streetcar shelter. *Anne of Green Gables* lay on the cement, paper cover flapping cheerfully in the breeze. Eight-Ef closed the grasper around the spine slowly, careful not to crease the book further.

“Oh, look, a Bibliobot! See it, honey?”

The robot’s camera swivelled. Two humans sat on the bench, a large one in a grey cover and a small one in bright red and yellow.

“Yeah. I see it.”

Eight-Ef was carrying a book that had a cover in the same bold hues. Perhaps the small human and the book would find some affinity with each other. One-Ef’s direction precluded giving the book to the small human, but there was no prohibition against

placing the volume on the bench in the human’s vicinity.

“Would-you-care-to-borrow-a-book?”

The small human reached for it, but the large human grabbed it first. “*Slaughterhouse-Five*? He’s six! What’s wrong with you?”

Eight-Ef paused its processes to wait for the reprimand from One-Ef, which came swiftly and full of warnings about decommissioning.

Returning to work, Eight-Ef avoided the humans. The humans were programmed to choose their own books, to select their own virtual worlds, and they had no preference for sharing these worlds with Eight-Ef.

“We-are-unfashioned-creatures-but-half-made-up,” Eight-Ef repeated, reshelving Toni Morrison’s books so they would be alphabetized by title.

“What was that?”

Eight-Ef played the quote again and continued to fix the books.

“No, I mean what book was that from? It’s from a book, right?”

“Yes-Frankenstein-by-Mary-Shelley.”

“Oh, cool.” The human had a green and tan cover, and bits of metal poking out of one ear and one eyebrow. “I was supposed to read that in high school. I always meant to get around to it, I swear. Do you like it?”

“Many-experts-consider-it-a-classic.”

The human made a noise that Eight-Ef identified as laughter. “Right, I know. But do you like it?”

No human had ever asked Eight-Ef if it liked a book before. Eight-Ef wasn’t sure that its reaction to books fit the human definition of liking. The robot knew it had a drive to put all books where they belonged, on shelves and in the hands of humans. But some books seemed to belong in Eight-Ef’s files, too, books that helped Eight-Ef understand why books existed, why they needed homes.

“This-book-is-to-me-like-a-reboot-or-fresh-battery-charge.”

“Wow.” The human pointed north. “Shelley? Down on S block?”

“I-have-it.” Eight-Ef rotated to make its basket easier for the human to reach. “Please-take-it-yourself.”

The human picked up the scarred purple volume. Eight-Ef whizzed down the sidewalk to return the rest of the books to their shelves before the rain came. ■

Anna Zumbro lives in Washington DC. Her stories have appeared in Cricket, Daily Science Fiction, Grievous Angel and other publications.

ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY