

Writing Muscle Workout 7

Sun July 12th 2026 – 7-8pm

Materials

This is Love Episode 102 The Manuscript

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LISA FAGIN I first laid eyes on this manuscript in a class at Yale in the fall of 1988, when I was beginning my PhD studies there. And as part of the class, the instructor brought out the Voynich Manuscript to show us mostly as an example of just something totally bizarre and inexplicable.

PHOEBE JUDGE: Medievalist and manuscript expert Lisa Fagin Davis.

LISA FAGIN And as soon as I laid eyes on it, I was totally enchanted by it and really felt that magic that comes from encountering something that's so old, but that has this mysterious aura about it.

PHOEBE JUDGE: The Voynich Manuscript is a book, 234 pages. It's named after one of its last owners, a rare books dealer named Wilfrid Voynich. It now belongs to the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Yale.

LISA FAGIN So it's a handwritten book from the later Middle Ages, and it's illustrated with fascinating pictures of plants and star charts and women bathing in these green and blue pools with pipes and tubes. It's very unique.

PHOEBE JUDGE: It looks pretty cool.

LISA FAGIN Yes. [LAUGHS] Yes, it does.

PHOEBE JUDGE: I would like to just have this up on my wall. It's visually very attractive.

LISA FAGIN It is. It's really stunning. And Yale has made all of the images of the manuscript available through open access. Anyone can do anything they want with it. So there are t-shirts, there are blankets, there are posters, there are coasters-- pretty much anything you can think of has Voynich plastered on it.

PHOEBE JUDGE: The book is full of hand-drawn illustrations. In the first part of the book, there's a drawing of a plant on almost every page. Then there's a section with round charts, kind of like star charts or astrological charts. Sometimes there's people or animals in the charts. And some of them are foldouts. They expand across long sheets of parchment. There's a section with many rows of naked women. Sometimes they seem to be connected by tubes, and they often seem to be bathing or swimming in pools of water. Some people have suggested it looks like illustrations of something called "balneology," using baths and water to cure illnesses, which was popular in the Middle Ages. There's also illustrations of bottles and plant roots. But it's not just the drawings that make the manuscript stand out.

LISA FAGIN The reason that it is so special is because it is written using an alphabet or a lettering system that's completely unattested anywhere else. It's totally unique. No one knows how to read

it. Whether it's a lost language or just made-up nonsense or a code, we still don't know. You look at it and you can almost make sense out of the letters. They look tantalizingly familiar, which is one of the things that's so frustrating about this manuscript. There are some that look very much like letters in the Roman alphabet that we use to write English. So there's an O, there's one that looks like an A, there's an I, and an M, and there are symbols that look like numbers, but they don't actually represent those letters and numbers. They're just symbols.

And then there are other symbols that are completely unique and look almost like shorthand or some kind of personal system for writing quickly. And after more than a hundred years of hard work from some of the greatest cryptological and linguistic minds on the planet, really, we still don't quite know exactly what this object is. There's really nothing like it in the world.

There is a discussion board called The Voynich Ninja, where there are hundreds of regular users who are constantly online, posting ideas and discussing things and taking apart other theories, sometimes arguing with me and disagreeing with me, which is fine. Anyone is welcome to their opinion. And I would say there probably are hundreds of people who are really seriously digging into this manuscript and thinking about it.

<https://www.voynich.ninja/>

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PHOEBE JUDGE: After years of reading about other people's theories, Lisa Fagin Davis says she had an idea. She wouldn't try to crack the code. She would focus instead on what she knew best--paleography: analyzing old handwriting.

LISA FAGIN I kept seeing various scholars say things like, it looks like there might be more than one hand at work here, so more than one person doing the writing. But we just don't really know. We need a paleographer to look at this problem. And so that's what I started doing. I started doing a very, very close investigation of the letter forms, the different symbols in the manuscript. It's almost like forensic handwriting analysis.

And I'll give you an example of how this would work. So if I've got 10 people in front of me and I ask everybody to write the alphabet, or even better, write how you abbreviate the word "and," like how do you write the ampersand, those are the kind of fingerprints for people's handwriting. And so I had to figure out for "Voynichese," which is what we call it, what are the fingerprints that help distinguish one person's handwriting from another.

PHOEBE JUDGE: She started looking closely at individual letters. There's one that almost looks like an H, but then it does a funny loop on the right side. And Lisa found that sometimes that loop was a perfect circle. Other times, it was almost oval. Sometimes the symbol had a little foot at the bottom. Sometimes it appeared to be written in one stroke or in two. The verticals could be straight or at a slight angle. LISA FAGIN And I was able to discern particular differences that suggested that there were, in fact, five different scribes who wrote this. And I was able to figure out what those fingerprints were and assign particular pages as the work of scribe 1, or scribe 2, or scribe 3, 4, or 5. And the implications of that are, first of all, that if we've got five people who know how to use this writing system and are writing it in roughly the same way, that, to me at least, argues for meaning underlying the manuscript. And that it's a communal project, it's not just one person who's sort of unstable or deranged writing down nonsense.

But when you've got five people, suddenly it's a community of practice. And then you start to think, what kind of community would have this knowledge about plants and the stars? And the bathing almost looks like balneology, or the science of bathing. Hot water with this herb, cold water with that mineral in it to help with different medical ailments.

Then it starts to feel like a medical compendium, perhaps women's knowledge of community, of practice passing on this knowledge from one generation to the next. There are those who argue that it's written by scientific men trying to hide knowledge from women. I think that's not likely.

In my head, what I see is a community of wise women recording their knowledge for future generations, which I think is a really beautiful idea. I cannot say that it's true, but that's what it is starting to feel like to me.

PHOEBE JUDGE: The wear and tear of the pages suggests that this was a book that was frequently used. It wasn't just sitting on a shelf. And it doesn't have gold or clasps or very expensive leather like some other manuscripts from the time. Lisa says no one person will have all the skills to figure out what the Voynich is about, but maybe a group of people can do it.

Images of the Voynich Manuscript

<https://beinecke.library.yale.edu/collections/highlights/voynich-manuscript>

<https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2002046>



