

Title	Laurie Anderson's 'Stories from the Nerve Bible'
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Publication date	1995-06
Original Citation	Gilson-Ellis, J. (1995) Laurie Anderson's 'Stories from the Nerve Bible', <i>Over Here: Reviews in American Studies</i> , Vol 15 summer & winter, pp. 217-219.
Type of publication	Review
Download date	2025-03-28 08:49:58
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/11450



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Laurie Anderson, *Stories From the Nerve Bible*, New York: Harper Perennial, 1994.

Jools Gilson-Ellis

For those of us starved of Laurie Anderson's presence and output over the last five years or so, this autobiographical retrospective (1972-1992) is a hungry find. *Stories From the Nerve Bible* is the result of several years of meticulous research, by Anderson, into her work up to 1993. The structure of the book is refreshingly un-chronological; texts, photographs, installations and performances are juxtaposed across the twenty year span of Anderson's working life. Despite this, the book is organised fluidly into titled sections, beginning with Anderson's earliest work, and ending with her most recent stage performance. Between the two, the range and volume of Anderson's work grows increasingly remarkable.

In the UK Anderson is mainly known for her music; her No. 2 in 1981, *O Superman*, her albums; *Big Science* (1982), *Mister Heartbreak* (1984) and *Strange Angels* (1989) and her 1983 UK performance, *United States*. What becomes quickly clear, after reading *Stories from the Nerve Bible*, is that this is only a fragment of this extraordinary woman's output. The book documents her shifts between sculpture, large scale choreography of sound/image/gesture, and the simplicity of her solo performances. Despite the use of quite disparate media, it is original or found

written texts which are at the centre of her work. *Windbook* (1975), for example, is a two-hundred page book of handwritten stories, printed on onion skin paper, and placed in a glass case with fans concealed at both ends. As the fans alternate, the pages of the book turn back and forth. *Like a Stream* from 1978 is a set of texts for five speakers. *Dark Dogs, American Dreams* (1980) is a collection of 'dream stories' recorded on audio tape and accompanied by twelve large soft-focus portraits. These works repeatedly interrogate acts of reading, listening, seeing and writing.

Many of the texts have the ring of autobiographical anecdote; they are simply and sparsely written, but conceal a resonant connection to the zeitgeist. Anderson uses her own experience of travelling, eavesdropping, and observing, as source material, and her understatement is reinforced by her gentle, quirky manner in performance. These texts document the clash of the domestic and the technological in modern North America. In *Like a Stream* (1978), Anderson tells of getting the night flight from Houston, and sitting next to a fifty-two-year-old woman who has never flown before. The woman keeps talking about the Big Dipper and pointing. Anderson realises that she thinks they are in Outer Space, and gently says 'I think those lights down there are the lights from little towns'. Although these stories often have something odd about them, as if they were contemporary parables without an obvious moral, they also offer recognition. They make you 'sort of tilt' as John Howell once said of Anderson's audiences (in his recent book on Laurie Anderson). And that, as Anderson replied, is because one side of their brain is getting heavier'. With some of Anderson's performances lasting up to eight hours, you can understand why.

Anderson has collaborated with a whole range of artists (film makers, writers, musicians, among others) and this is well-documented here. These include Wim Wenders, William S. Burroughs and Peter Gabriel. The connection with Burroughs is particularly important, and the two have worked together on

several occasions. He and John Giorno toured with Anderson in 1980, and he later performed in the film *Home of the Brave* (1986). Anderson's commentary on this connection, offers a curious insight into the collaboration.

Stories From the Nerve Bible contains the largest range of Anderson's performance texts yet in print. The only frustration is that there is no index, although there is a detailed chronology. The book is precisely and thoughtfully put together, and documents well the range of media and electronic wizardry that Anderson employs to 'perform' her written compositions. There is now little excuse for these texts not to be taught and written about in the same way as more conventional writers of literature. There are also interviews, commentaries and a wide ranging collection of visual documentation; most curiously, several photographs of Anderson in *The Human Face*, a BBC documentary from 1991. It is under this guise that she peers at us from the back cover, as a pig-like creature, bald, and a little crusty; no glamorous head-shot for Anderson. *Stories From the Nerve Bible* is an important addition to the Anderson public archive and should dispel some of the complicated mythologies about accessing the writing of someone who is most often referred to as a 'Performance Artist'.

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