

How I Made This Book

Composing The Man Who Sold the Listserv with Claude Opus 4.8

An account of the archive search, the invention of the editor, and the run of instructions that shaped the volume.

This book gathers every mention of David Bowie I could find in ten years of the UB Poetics List and presents them as a small edited volume, wrapped in the commentary of an invented editor named Kristen M. Fabians. I made it in conversation with Claude — the model Claude Opus 4.8 — in the desktop app’s Cowork mode, over roughly sixteen exchanges. What follows is how it came together: how the passages were dug out of the archive, how Fabians was built up piece by piece, and what I asked for at each stage.

Digging the Bowie posts out of the list

The raw material is the UB Poetics List archive that sits on my own computer — a plain-text file for each month from 1993 to 2014. Claude reached those files through the desktop connection and searched the whole run for “david bowie,” turning up matches in about thirty months. Because a listserv archive is really hundreds of emails glued together inside each file, Claude wrote a short program to split them into separate messages, read each one’s date, sender, and subject, and decode the mail encoding that garbles apostrophes and quotation marks. That produced forty-two candidate posts. Claude then sorted the genuine David Bowie references from the look-alikes — Lester Bowie the jazz trumpeter, Ash Bowie of Polvo, a Malcolm Bowie, a Bowie High School — and I settled on nineteen.

From the start the rules were fixed and applied to every post: quote it word for word, keeping the writer’s own spelling; mark anywhere I trimmed with a bracketed ellipsis; black out private email addresses and phone numbers; and keep any forwarded material exactly as the member had passed it on. Later I had Claude restore everything it had trimmed, so the quotations now run at full length.

Inventing Kristen M. Fabians

The editor is a fiction, and most of the work went into her. She is a Bowie obsessive who takes offense at statements about him that are perfectly true, defends his lyrics though no one has attacked them, and insists that his cut-up writing method

makes him a Language poet the list should have claimed as one of its own. Her life is never stated outright; it leaks through the notes — born in 1959 (which the reader works out from “thirteen when Ziggy reached Oklahoma”), a strait-laced Oklahoma upbringing, a few dim siblings, a childhood humiliation the day she wore a homemade Ziggy costume to school, an unfinished graduate degree in the north of England, and a long history of following Bowie’s tours that shades into stalking.

As the book proceeds her composure gives way in bursts: clipped and abject like Beckett, then a single runaway sentence like Pynchon, then a hallucination out of *Naked Lunch*, then lists that begin sensibly and derail, a slip into addressing her dead mother that she catches, a confession about her body and sex life that she strikes out. Underneath it all runs a quarrel with her assistant editor — me, turned into a character she nicknames “Bucket” — who keeps asking her to soften what she has written; she refuses him five times and gives in once. The whole design is borrowed from Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, in which an editor named Kinbote annotates a poem until his notes crowd the poem out and become the real book. Fabians is a Kinbote for a mailing list.

The instructions, in order

Here is the run of prompts as I sent them, each followed by what Claude did. Messages marked *mid-build* were sent while Claude was still working on the previous request.

1.

Just for fun, can you see if we can make a PDF on the mentions or allusions to David Bowie on the listserv?

Claude searched the archive, found nineteen genuine Bowie sightings, and built a seven-page chapbook, opening on the Kevin Killian material and the story of Bowie stopping to pet a carriage horse in Milwaukee.

2.

Great. Let's give this file the same apparatus we have been using but no reader's guide or links in the bios. Also, have Kristen M. Fabians write really intricate notes to each email and give the introduction some real obsessive flavor. She is a Bowie fanatic and is insulted by anything said about Bowie even if it's factually correct. She continues to argue that Bowie is underestimated, especially by the poets. She defends his lyrics despite no one having criticized them. She argues that Bowie's lyrics have a lot to do with language poetry. She recounts her own life meeting Bowie, going to his concerts, etc. Let's have Kristen being born in 1959 though she never says that — we just learn that from her accounts. She was raised in Oklahoma, didn't know much about her sexuality, comes from a strait-laced background, compares encountering Bowie with her first reading of Nabokov and other authors. She continues to denigrate her stupid assistant editor, Brian Kim Stefans, who didn't know anything, being a Jersey kid born in 1969. She also doesn't think the quality of his music fell off in the 1980s but vigorously defends his production during the period covered by this collection of scattered writings.

Claude built the full apparatus and gave Fabians a headnote on every post, seeded the persona (born 1959, Oklahoma, the Language-poetry argument, the contempt for the assistant), and added a "heavy smoker" post as a fresh target — sixteen pages.

3.

Isn't there already a book about Bowie called "Fascination"?

Claude found David Buckley's *Strange Fascination*, flagged the clash, and traced the bare word to Bowie's 1975 song and to Killian's 2002 art show — which later gave the title an in-world defense.

4.

This is good. Let's add some biographical details. Let her let slip excessive reminiscences about her life. She was a struggling, possibly substance-abusing graduate student somewhere. It might make sense for her to have studied in England or Canada since she uses English spelling. She had a few dense siblings who never understood Bowie. We could make her truly irrational, like a stalker. She didn't know anything about fashion until she was roundly criticized by her friends and the public when she started dressing like Ziggy when walking to school. Add as many particular details as you can imagine, including quotes from her arguments with her sisters and her parents, etc. These notes should have a digressive feel — she constantly has to reset and say something like “well, anyway.” She is constantly revising herself. You can make the intro notes to the emails even longer. She does ad hominem attacks on people she doesn't admit she's never met. Be elaborate and baroque.

Claude wrote in the England years and “the Fish,” the sisters and their breakfast-table lines, the Ziggy-walk in full, the tour-following, the “well, anyway” resets and the ad hominem — a twenty-two-page baroque draft.

5.

Let's make the introduction way shorter. I want to have her biographical details come out in the notes she gives to the posts. In the introduction she is professional like she has been with the other items in this series. She only really loses her mind in the notes. Make her notes get longer and longer as the document progresses. The first can be quite short with hints of her insanity, but as she goes on she can't help herself. Let's have a different title for the collection. I like the subtitle.

Claude pulled the autobiography out of the introduction and back into the notes, set the intro in a composed scholarly register, re-sequenced the notes so they physically lengthen down the book, and retitled it *The Man Who Sold the Listserv*.

6. (mid-build)

why aren't there links in the TOC

Claude wired each contents entry to an internal link that jumps to its passage.

7. (mid-build)

let's also include commentary by Kristen in the bio notes. just a quick dismissive quip or stinting praise in a comment or sentence.

Claude gave each contributor's life a one-line Fabians verdict ("Got the horse. I do not, on most days, forgive him the horse").

8. (mid-build)

Let's have her entire prose style break down at points. She gets so irate she starts to write like Samuel Beckett — minimal, abject, absurd. She occasionally shoots out a long, unwieldy sentence in the style of Pynchon. She starts to have weird hallucinations like *Naked Lunch*. This happens in spurts, but they are serious spurts. She starts to spit out lists that make sense at first but then go off the rails, like a malfunctioning program. She starts addressing her dead mother in a confessional tone but then catches herself. She starts to expose details about her bodily dysfunctions or sex life, finally seeing that it's TMI. The arc is that she seems in control at first but then unwinds.

Claude threaded all five modes into the later notes as escalating spurts, ending on a note that comes fully apart and then gathers itself to finish one sentence.

9. (mid-build)

we don't need to edit anything from the emails since they are rather short. No mechanical limit on email size here. For example, give us all of this sentence — STAR. [...] Then Bowie goes

Claude restored every excerpt to its complete sent text, recovering the lines it had trimmed, including the pageant's full synopsis and cast list.

10.

One last thing! Can we also see a growing struggle with her administrative assistant, me, whom she increasingly denigrates with a nickname. The BKS character is essentially a real editor who just doesn't like what she just wrote and petitions her to change it, but she refuses each time, maybe giving in once.

Claude added six gray "Editorial" skirmishes, coined the nickname "Bucket" from her own image of the assistant lowering a bucket into his laptop, and scored it five refusals to one capitulation.

11.

I asked earlier: is there another book about Bowie called *Fascination*

Claude searched again and confirmed that nothing is titled simply *Fascination* — the nearest is still Buckley's *Strange Fascination*.

12.

why is this email repeated: You'll be watching this play, with its strange echoes of CITIZEN KANE and THE SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS, and asking yourself, "Wait a second! Didn't I see this before?" Sure you did, it's the life of David Bowie, written up in pageant form by San Francisco writers Kevin Killian and Wayne Smith. ——— also, give me ten more book title options in the chat. Let's have some of the standard boilerplate stuff on the front page as we have been used to. The introduction is now a little too short, draw it out a bit, make it the same length you have been using for other introductions.

Claude found and removed a paragraph an earlier restoration had duplicated, added the series' front-page boilerplate, expanded the introduction to full length, and offered ten titles.

13.

get rid of the bio notes. use the title *Waiting for the Gift* and maybe quote from the Sound and Vision epigraph. make the intro shorter ending on the phrase my least trustworthy. Cut anything on the first page that already appears in the introduction.

Claude deleted the biographical-notes section, retitled the book *Waiting for the Gift* from the epigraph, trimmed the introduction to close on "my least trustworthy," and cut the title-page blurb that repeated the intro.

14.

I don't want to prep the reader for the zaniness ahead. Maybe one really out of place sentence at the bottom of the first page of the intro could signal a little madness to come, but no reason to signpost it. I think I like the old title, *The Man Who Sold the Listserv*, or whatever it was.

Claude restored the earlier title and planted one unexplained sentence at the foot of the introduction's first page.

15.

I have not, whatever the office may have told you, been sleeping in the archive. — this is funny but could be weirder. And don't give it its own paragraph, just make it the last of the previous.

Claude made the sentence stranger and folded it onto the end of the preceding scholarly paragraph, so the register snaps mid-thought.

16.

This is too long. Make it a pretty short sentence just coming out of nowhere. Give me 10 examples.

Claude offered ten short candidates.

17.

I like this. There is a second chair, and it is not for guests.

Claude set that as the planted line. The finished book runs twenty-two pages.

The one word that kept shifting under us was *notes* — sometimes the per-email headnotes, sometimes the whole annotating habit, and “bio notes” meant the biographical section one moment and the quips inside it the next; each had to be settled by context. Everything else was mechanical and quiet: the pages were laid out by a small Node program using the docx library and converted to PDF with LibreOffice, and Claude checked each draft by rendering the pages to images and reading them back. Model throughout: Claude Opus 4.8, in Cowork.