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The study of book history

The history of the book is a way of thinking about how people have given material form to knowledge and stories. Knowledge and stories are intangible; it is their material forms that make them accessible across the barriers created by time and space. But those forms vary. It is difficult to find two old books that are exactly alike, while new media too are remarkably unstable in their ways of capturing texts. The variations among copies and editions, and among conventions and practices, are the result of human agency: of political and personal choices, of belief and aesthetics, of economics and marketing. Studies in the history of the book discover and analyse the connections between the people who used books as readers, and those who wrote or compiled them. These relationships are often revealed indirectly, by focusing upon the contribution of the mediators between reader and author. Those who make, sell and save books – the scribes, printers, editors, publishers and retailers, the librarians and collectors – are essential figures in what is sometimes called a book culture. Their interactions make up a web of connections, each person influenced knowingly or unknowingly by the actions of the others. Commerce becomes involved; so does state authority, and so might literary art, entertainment, scholarship, piety, polemic or instruction. Thinking about old books gives us access to traces of the past, and reminds us that new books embody concrete evidence of the practices of our own time.

The history of the book is a field of study with extraordinary academic and popular energy. Many readers, aware of the changes occurring in contemporary publishing and bookselling and of the digital reading experience, are newly intrigued by the Gutenberg moment and the ways in which print and writing were disseminated in earlier times. Undergraduates find book history an accessible introduction to literary and historical approaches to knowledge and culture. Scholars are discovering, or rediscovering, its specialized skills of paleography and bibliographical analysis. This *Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book* is addressed to general readers, to scholars seeking an overview and to university-level students. The aim is to offer a good

high-quality, wide-ranging coverage of the topic, with up-to-date further reading ideas. Readers will learn that the history of the book is an interdisciplinary field of study. Some of the disciplines in question are: literatures in various languages; history and its sub-disciplines; bibliography (which may connect both to literatures and to rare-book librarianship); communication studies; cultural studies; digital humanities; publishing studies; library and information studies. Scholarship in these fields, as in most humanities and social science disciplines, has been challenged to interrogate its Eurocentric biases and aspire to be transnational and transcultural. While this *Companion* includes extensive discussion of western literatures, historiographies and bibliographies, the ambition has been to show the book, and people of the book, in global perspective. Chapters address the traditional European questions and methods, while demonstrating their particularity and difference from practices that have developed in other parts of the world, and the chronology and glossary address key events and complexities of terminology.

What is the book?

Despite its undisputed materiality, 'the book' is a more flexible and abstract conceptual category than many people imagine, and it is this very quality that makes it interesting. There were books before printing, and the manuscript practices that reproduced texts before the use of printing still flourish generations after Gutenberg. There were scrolls before codex volumes, and the scroll form, too, persisted in some cultures (it has metaphorically taken on a new life in the way we respond to digital texts on computer screens). Before there was paper, there were animal skins, papyrus rolls and clay tablets, and these and other surfaces continue to serve as the base, or substrate, to carry texts across the limits of time and space. The history of the book extends beyond the western alphabet, to many different kinds of marks on a material base, used in various cultures as a means of communicating knowledge or stories. *The book* is an awkward and ambiguous term by which to convey all this diversity, but it is the only one we have. Most dictionary definitions of 'the book' are, moreover, unabashedly Eurocentric and modern. The *Oxford Dictionaries Online*, for example, refers to 'a written or printed work, consisting of pages glued or sewn together along one side and bound in covers'. For the book historian, such a definition presents several problems. Not every book is a 'work', whether of literature or of some non-literary genre. Some of those pages glued or sewn together contain writing that does not fall within the purposeful-sounding parameters of the term, while other 'works' appear on pages (or on non-page supports) which are neither glued nor sewn, and which may be bound or bundled together, rolled or gathered up, in a

bewildering range of ways. Unbound, its pages wrenched one from the others, its words spoken aloud or repurposed in digital form, a book is still a book – but what is that?

For the book historian, then, the dictionary definitions (which tend also to be the definitions commonly used in journalism and the popular culture) can be problematic. They refer only to the codex, a specific form of the book introduced in Europe in about the second century CE, which began to be challenged (although not defeated) in the second decade of the second millennium CE. When a text is loaded on a digital reading device, it remains a book, although not a codex. There were books before Gutenberg started printing with moveable type in central Europe – manuscript books where he lived and printed books in China and Korea. Since the eighteenth century, a magazine or journal, if not exactly a book because of its periodicity and hybridity, has been very much part of the book culture in which it is published. So has a pamphlet, a comic, a blank form or an edition of the sacred text of any one of the world's religions. In ancient India, a palm leaf could carry the text of a poem and the same poem can be published, collected and read in print. In central Canada, the wampum belt used by First Nations people to communicate memory and story was a book of sorts.[1] In Mesopotamia, the clay tablets that have survived (where other more fragile forms of writing got lost) are books too. And so are the papyrus sheets of the Nile Valley, the sheepskin vellum that made sense in Europe, and the rag-based paper first used in China. In one sense, the mission of the history of the book is to unsettle conventional definitions of its very subject.

The objective of the present volume is to help readers recognize the lineaments of book history. To that end, definitions in terms of research practice and scholarly findings may be of more utility than sketching the range of possible book forms and formats. In one sense, 'the history of the book' is a narrative constructed to emphasize change over historical time and hence an argument about the past. But the history of the book is also something more abstract: a way of thinking about how forces within the media culture of any era have acted upon the authors and compilers who produced the works that became books and periodicals during that era. The approach includes consideration of how those works were reshaped to make new books and periodicals for succeeding generations of readers. The history of the book is also a field of academic study, although it is not an autonomous academic discipline. It draws upon a range of literary, historical, bibliographical and social science approaches to do its work. Although none of the four aspects analysed below can be separated from any of the others, it is nevertheless useful to think of the book (and the periodical) as a text, an object, a transaction and an experience.

The book is a *text*, which may or may not be a literary work. Texts are the business of both authors and readers, and scholars have shown that the same text was interpreted differently by different readers. Literary criticism considers texts without necessarily assessing their social and economic context, but the history of the book makes a vital contribution to criticism. Scholars investigate what can be found about an author's intentions and about how those intentions were thwarted – or enhanced – by the actions of those who were involved in its production, multiplication and preservation. Editors interpolate; typesetters misprint; publishers consult the bottom line; and authors respond. Charles Dickens, for example, was once disparaged because he wrote for money, not for literary art. Robert L. Patten has shown, however, that Dickens's art was to create his own persona *as* the author, using (and modifying) the tools of the print culture emerging around him in early Victorian England.[2]

The book is a *material object*. From the literary and historical perspectives, the materiality of books is often overlooked, so powerful are their texts and the impacts of those texts upon their times. But bibliographical scholarship demonstrates that the book-as-object holds the evidence of its own making; it carries not only the obvious text on its pages but a further 'text' in its format, materials, design and impression. The periodical is also an object, whose material text reappears, repeatedly and systematically, bearing a different written text each time. Such design elements are sometimes called the 'paratext', a useful concept introduced by the literary theorist Gérard Genette. Paratextual elements (bindings, blurbs, design and so forth) supplied by editors and publishers can affect the meaning of the text they embellish. Moreover, since books are reprinted, reissued, edited and excerpted, pirated or plagiarized, they also contain the evidence of their remaking, and point to the agents of revision. It is the combination of textuality and materiality, perhaps unique among human-made artefacts, that gives the book its power to convey a sense of its past. The New Zealand and Oxford scholar D. F. McKenzie showed how a playwright's typographic disposition of his plays crucially affected the way in which eighteenth-century readers understood them. McKenzie spoke of bibliography as a kind of 'sociology of texts' – a way to embed the study of material texts in the human and social contexts from which those texts emerged and within which they circulated.[3] Bibliographical scholarship in practice is highly specialized, like the knowledge of physicists. But (like the knowledge of physicists) its findings can be interpreted for a lay audience; and (unlike most scientific knowledge) bibliographical scholarship is accessible to new practitioners in the form of workshops and master classes.

The book is a *cultural transaction* – a relationship of communication and exchange (often commercial exchange) that operates within a culture and a political economy. The concept of the book as a transaction includes the nexus

between one reader and another, as well as the interplay between reader and writer implied in every act of reading.[4] It includes the agency of the book trades, a complex set of practices that can easily be overlooked because the names and roles of the agents have changed with shifts in materials and technologies. In Europe's middle ages, for example, the key figures in book culture were the stationer (who controlled the trade in materials and whose shop was an intellectual centre) and the scribe (whose scriptorium was set up to reproduce texts needed by the major institution of his time, the Church). For three centuries after Gutenberg, that key agent was the master printer, an entrepreneur and intellectual as well as a craftsman. A scientific, medical or literary author who wanted to ensure accurate reproduction of a text was careful to work closely with a trustworthy printer. In Britain and early America, the term 'bookseller' referred to a dominant entrepreneurial figure in the eighteenth century, but to a less powerful retailer later on. In the nineteenth century, when printing and papermaking were made cheaper and faster by new technologies, the key agent became the publisher; printers and booksellers were less influential, and the gateway was controlled by this new figure. The roles of both entrepreneurial publisher and retail bookseller are being challenged in the twenty-first century and it is unclear which agent has become the more powerful.

Another element in the concept of the book as a cultural transaction is the agency of librarians and other collectors, including the power of institutions such as libraries and archives to shape a tradition or define a heritage. Many more books and periodicals were published than have survived, and survival has often depended upon the decision to put something in a library – and keep it there.

Some scholars have adopted methodologies addressing a wide-ranging or 'macro' analysis to capture the role of books in social and cultural transactions. The Annales school of historians in mid-twentieth-century France introduced methodologies for tracking the numbers of titles, editions and copies in circulation of certain books. Aspects of this methodology for quantifying and visualizing the penetration of significant works into their cultures (sometimes called 'historical bibliometrics') have been adopted by scholars using database methodologies and continue to be remarkably fruitful.

The book is an *experience* – the reader, the collector and the scholar, in their different ways, all react emotionally as well as intellectually to the books in their purview. Such responses are based on material and commercial factors as well as factors associated with content and genre. Although reading is a private activity, leaving little trace on the historical record, its importance has led scholars to investigate the evidence that remains. Letters and diaries sometimes yield valuable insights into the response of actual readers. Another source for the responses of early-modern readers is the commonplace

book and more generally the copying practice known as 'commonplacing'. H. J. Jackson has demonstrated how scholars can use the notes made by readers who used the margins of a book to converse with the author and (as it happens) with posterity.[5] To collect books can be a passion. Collectors range from the wealthy investor in incunables or first editions, to the Book-of-the-Month-Club member, to the adolescent 'book geek' who is keen to gather a full set of graphic novels. What collectors have in common is a response to books *as* books, with all their materiality, multiplicity and variability. They are moved by the replication of some specific, idiosyncratic amalgamation of text and object and respond by seeking to possess a complete set. Some aspects of the scholarship in the history of the book attempt to capture this elusive phenomenon, recognizing that intangible emotional responses may be part of the reason why the book form has survived for millennia as a medium of communication. And some of the new scholarship in the history of the emotions has used as evidence the sentimentality of literary genres arising in the eighteenth century.[6]

That the history of the book draws upon all four of these approaches may go some way to explain how difficult it has been clearly to define 'the book' in a few words. But people who think in terms of book history share two key principles: the book is mutable (both text and material format keep changing, and much of our scholarship serves to document those changes); and the book is the product of human agency (despite the importance of technological innovations and impersonal forces, what we are interested in is the way human beings have used those innovations and responded to those forces).

What is the history of the book?

The opening paragraph of this chapter defined the history of the book as 'a way of thinking about how people have given material form to knowledge and stories' in the past and in our own time. At least five aspects of this way of thinking can be identified, and serve to illustrate what these words really mean in everyday practice.

Chronology

The most conventional and straightforward approach to the history of the book might be to start at the beginning, continue to present time, and then stop – on either an up beat or a down beat according to one's level of optimism about the future. In Europe-based scholarship, that chronology most often begins with clay tablets in Mesopotamia and moves on to writing on papyrus, then parchment, then paper. The focus switches from writing surfaces to

book formats, citing the transition from scroll to codex about the second century CE. Rather than unrolling a papyrus scroll, readers turned a parchment or paper page, and scribes began to leave spaces between the words. Scholars of premodern Europe regard this turning point as even more significant than the next one, from manuscript codex to printed codex, about 1450 in Mainz, Germany, personified in the compelling figure of Johannes Gutenberg.[7] For the next three and a half centuries, printing and publishing were adopted enthusiastically throughout Europe and the world, but with virtually no change to the mechanism of the hand press. That technology was robust enough to support 'the birth of the novel' in eighteenth-century Europe as well as a vast output of newspapers and other periodicals. A further transformation occurred in the first half of the nineteenth century, beginning in Britain, where printing and related trades became industrialized – paper was cheaper, and machine-made; bookbinding was mechanized; steam power was applied to the press, and publishers made use of steam-powered shipping by rail and sea to distribute their products worldwide.[8] Further technological innovations were introduced throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most notably linotype and photocomposition. In the mid-twentieth-century decades the innovations applied to marketing, when paperback binding and mail-order book clubs acted to further commodify books that were aimed at a new 'middlebrow' readership.[9] In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, it is the e-book that seems to be a significantly different way of delivering words on the page. The page, however, remains virtually the same as it has been since the codex was introduced a millennium ago.

Whether oriented to substrates, materials or genres, these compelling and coherent (though oversimplified) chronologies highlight similarities as well as differences. But they are all Eurocentric. They do not allow for the history of the book in Asia, where pictographic writing systems have meant different developments in relation to printing and to genre. Nor do they apply to any situation where scholars want to take into account the writing or notation systems used by indigenous peoples.[10] And there is an inherent problem in the teleological notion of progress, which might seem to imply that something called 'the book' has 'evolved' from a primitive to a more sophisticated way of preserving knowledge and stories. Fortunately, the study of the history and culture of books complicates this sort of developmental paradigm, because it embeds changes in book form, technology and practice in the cultures where they were used.

A circuit of composition, mediation and production

Perhaps the most influential piece of writing in the study of book history is a 1982 article by the historian Robert Darnton, where he sketched out a

'communication circuit'. Impressed by the range of methodologies for approaching book history, but troubled by the tendency of interdisciplinarity to 'run riot', Darnton offered a tentative model. It showed the book moving around on an oval track from author, to publisher, to printer, then on to the shipper, then the bookseller (both wholesale and retail) and on to the reader. The reader, he argued, 'completes the circuit' because the writer is also a reader. It was a compelling way to capture the complexity of a book's trajectory through space and time, and to demonstrate the influence of the book trades on the way in which readers interpret the work of authors. Darnton's own research has focused on eighteenth-century France, and the circuit he drew reflected that time and place, but the circuit can be modified to illustrate the processes in use elsewhere.[11]

A number of scholars have critiqued Darnton's circuit diagram, recognizing that it still captures only a narrow slice of the life of a book. It fails, for example, to demonstrate the movement of a single text through decades and centuries, and among various textual and material forms. There is no way to show the interplay in a literary culture, between purists and profiteers, perhaps characterized in gender terms as men of letters and women who are mere 'scribblers'. Scholars who focus primarily on the book as a material object have criticized the abstract nature of the 'book' characterized by Darnton, substituting a 'map' that identified the five events in the life of a material book – publishing, manufacturing, distribution, reception and survival. Darnton himself, in a 2007 article, recognized this shortcoming, and also admitted that he hadn't left a space for the survival of the book as an object, collected and collectible, enduring in libraries.[12] But the strength of the original model remains its emphasis on human agency in the making and use of books, and its potential for showing the relationships between those two functions.

Disciplinary boundaries and interdisciplinary opportunities

Another way of characterizing the history of the book is by identifying the intellectual formation of the people who research and write about it. Many scholars in this field can be located in one of three disciplines and related perspectives. As delineated above, but now from the perspective of disciplines: bibliographers look at the book primarily as an object; literary scholars think of it in terms of text; while historians conceptualize the book as a cultural transaction. It can be difficult to integrate the circuit of authorship, publishing and reading with the three core disciplines, since each process can be approached through several disciplinary perspectives, and each discipline prioritizes the various processes in different ways. In any case, it is impossible

to separate any of these three aspects of the book from either of the others. The bibliographical object and the literary text are two sides of the same coin, and when the book is conceptualized as is a transaction, the biblio-coin becomes a currency, used for exchange.[13] Every scholar whose work includes book history uses all three of these approaches, but the set of assumptions drawn from each person's core discipline is likely to dominate.

The contemporary culture of the book, however, is not the purview of those disciplines looking into the distant, or even the recent, past. Plenty of people want to know more about the authorship, publishing and reading of the books we read today. Certainly the insights of book history are relevant to the study of contemporary publishing, where the mutability of texts in contemporary society, and global media, is a dominant theme. The marketing of a phenomenon like J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books is a case in point: a biographical narrative of the author made her an attractive figure; titles and stories were widely known to have been revised for a transatlantic audience; and the popularity of the series became inextricable for a time from pedagogical and parenting discourse about boys as readers. The disciplines looking at contemporary culture and communications have found the interplay of production and reception inherent in book history useful for studying such phenomena as the adaptation industry, and transmedial authorship.[14]

Categories, genres, formats

Another useful way to structure the history of the book is to think in terms of how works are categorized – by the trade, by librarians and by scholars. Such designations affect the way books are written, made public, received and preserved. From a literary perspective, the term 'genre' addresses some, but not all, of the variables. The original, classical, genres are poetry, drama and prose (the latter subdivided into numerous sub-genres). In the contemporary publishing business, however, 'genre' has become a term for categorizing books for the purposes of marketing. 'Genre fiction', for example, differentiates mystery, sci-fi, romance, fantasy and horror, while 'self help' and 'biography' are two of several forms of 'non-fiction'. For book historians, however, it is often more interesting to work with subject categories, looser groupings such as literature, science, history, philosophy etc. These subdivisions might perhaps be characterized as *genres of the material book*. The disciplinary proclivities of people who embrace the history of the book are often reflected in the categories of the books on which they work. In Anglo-North American book history concentrated on the modern period, the overwhelming majority of studies are about works of literature, by literary scholars; there is a substantial minority of impressive monographs about

scientific books and periodicals, by historians of science; a handful of studies, by historians, discuss the publishing history of history books, but few scholars have focused as yet on philosophy or mathematics as book-historical categories. Another category, again sometimes called a genre, is the material format in which a text appears. Such labels may relate to the anticipated readership or target market of the book: some of the distinctions include hardcover (versus paperback) edition; trade (as opposed to mass-market) paperback; comic book (versus graphic novel); various kinds of periodical (as opposed to monographs); and manuscript book (versus print-book or e-book). Scholarship in the history of the book is attentive to the ways in which historical actors, both producers and consumers, thought in their time about how books were categorized.

National and transnational approaches

To scholars oriented to national canons of literature in particular languages, and to national historical narratives, it has been of compelling interest to study the history of the book from the perspective of one country. Following the lead of the history of publishing in France appearing in 1986, national libraries, major publishers and prominent scholars initiated ambitious projects to chart the trajectories of the book in Britain, the US, Ireland, Scotland, Canada and Australia, to name a few. In most cases, a combination of chronological and thematic approaches was adopted, and strenuous efforts were made to fill lacunae in the research record. The bibliographical record associated with each national library was a key source document, as were the archives of publishers and the records left by authors and readers, libraries and booksellers. The similarities revealed by this new canon of book historiography are striking; but the differences are more interesting. The practices of composing, making, distributing and reading books have differed from one place to another and those variations derive from differences of geography, population and economy. Still, the national approach forced researchers to ask a new question. In an industry where the raw materials, the producers, the products and the customers all routinely cross national boundaries constantly, why should 'nation' be the paradigm in any case? Transnational and postcolonial approaches began to yield rich results, such as Isabel Hofmeyr's study of how that quintessentially English book, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, attained its status in England as a result of how it was read and used in Africa. It became apparent that the nation state approach is also about theory, a theory of nationalism. Many scholars, both within and outside the history of the book world, have been strongly influenced by Benedict Anderson's idea, that readers form an 'imagined community'