



Books: A Living History

Martyn Lyons

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From the first scribbling on papyrus to the emergence of the e-book, this wide-ranging overview of the history of the book provides a fascinating look at one of the most efficient, versatile, and enduring technologies ever developed. The author traces the evolution of the book from the rarefied world of the hand-copied and illuminated volume in ancient and medieval times, through the revolutionary impact of Gutenberg's invention of the printing press, to the rise of a publishing culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the subsequent impact of new technologies on this culture.

Many of the great individual titles of the past two millennia are discussed as well as the range of book types and formats that have emerged in the last few hundred years, from serial and dime novels to paperbacks, children's books, and Japanese manga. The volume ends with a discussion of the digital revolution in book production and distribution and the ramifications for book lovers, who can't help but wonder whether the book will thrive—or even survive—in a form they recognize.

Books: A Living History Details

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From Reader Review Books: A Living History for online ebook

Igor says

I wanted to know more about the history of the books and this book gave me that. It explains all the bigger millstones in the development of the book from the beginnings to the e-book. There are some great quality pictures to accompany that explanations which is making this book more interesting and informative for me. I would recommend this book.

Aaron says

Even as digital e-books take on a larger role in what libraries do, there can be no question that books of all types are still at the core of our mission. With this work, Lyons skillfully presents an overview of the history of books from their earliest development with ancient cultures such as the Sumerians and the Egyptians to current questions and concerns relating to mobile devices and e-books.

Lyon's book is set up in chronological order with sections dedicated to ancient and Medieval times, the eighteenth century, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the future. Each chapter is built with entries focusing on specific topics such as materials used to make books, their format, major works and authors from the period, the methods and business of publishing, and the role books played in the literacy/education levels of the cultures. These entries don't have great depth, but each tends to provide a good amount of detail to introduce the topic thoroughly to the reader. The result is a strong sense of the evolution of books, literature, and printing. Libraries are also often highlighted throughout.

Each of the entries ranges from one to three pages and is accompanied by high quality images. The images are really used wonderfully to help tell the story. Some are simply sample pages or book covers of works that are being highlighted in the section. Photographs or other forms of art are often used to share with the reader what authors and publishers looked like. One of the most interesting types of images included are representations from the art world throughout the timeline covered that show average people reading. The inclusions of the images really add another dimension to the presentation.

One of the things that is most impressive about the book about the book is the fact that it does not focus solely on the use of books in the Western or English-speaking World. There are a number of references to works and publishing information from China, Japan, the Arab World, Africa, and South America. This global approach provides stronger balance, particularly since a number of inventions and trends pre-date their arrival in Europe or North America.

This really is a thoroughly enjoyable read. Due to its format, you can pick it up and read an article or two before moving on without being overwhelmed, though you might find its large size and the use of glossy paper a bit heavy to hold for long periods of time. This "coffee table" style format does speak to the quality of the book's publication.

Books: A Living History is definitely worth a read, though don't be surprised if your friends and family turn to you and laugh that you are reading a book ... about books. I know that some of mine did. Just tell them that they should expect no different. You are a librarian!

Claudia says

A beautiful journey through the world of books since their appearance - how they appeared, materials used, trends followed. It contains many interesting details about publishers and editors, writers, also about the types of paper and inventions in the field. And the illustrations are wonderful - a delight for eyes. Recommended to all book lovers :)

Rubi says

Excelenta. Atat ca continut, cat si ca carte fizica.
Recomand.

Rebecca says

Excellent review of the history of the book. It included a great cross-cultural review. I was fascinated by the review of the Mayan texts as well as the insight that the location of the printhouses during the age of enlightenment coincided with the development of science and technology. One forgets that knowledge once could be more easily controlled and that ideas travelled only as fast as a book could be carried. I can now look at my 3100 plus book collection (spanning from the mid 1700s on) from a new perspective.

Justine says

Really interesting to discover the history of the book, to see how it evolved and what it involves. I learnt many things; this book is kind of an introduction, and raises some questions about history, but also about today's books, and our way to handle the situation. I think I could find books about each little chapter for more explanation, so if you already know the history of the book, maybe it will be boring for you! I didn't know everything, and it was a good résumé.

There were some mistakes in my edition - I felt that it was translated, too bad! But it was still a good way to learn some things.

Pam says

Very interesting book about the history of books, printing and publishing - from stone tablets to e-books. Many beautiful photos of ancient books of all kinds. Nothing in depth but a very good overview over many years of books.

Emily says

Today books are seen as merely entertainment to most and an arduous task to others, but overall they are seen as an item everyone has access to. This was not true for much of history. They started out as texts for the scholarly religious and the extremely rich; in other words, the extreme upper echelon of society. Literacy

and books were seen as a weapon in the hands of the peasantry. Knowledge was power and with the skill to read came societal demands of equality.

Journeying through the timeline of the book was AMAZING! Books: A Living History provides a concise, but expansive look at the printed word. For most of history I, as a middle class woman, would not have access to literacy, books, and learning. It was also very interesting to see how the form of books took place and how technological advances in paper making and moveable type developed to make print available to the masses. Lastly, I have always been intrigued by the concept of banned books (meaning that as soon as someone tells me I shouldn't read something because it is profane or impure I HAVE to read it) and how even when the peons of society learned to read, those in charge tried to keep them down by banning books. Overall, GO BOOKS!

The only reason this lost a star is because of the lack of bibliographic information. I want to know where the information came from.

Andres says

Lavishly illustrated book about the history of books.

Half pictures and half text, this is an interesting and informative overview of books from ancient stone tablets to the modern e-books and everything in between. The overall narrative follows the development of book technology, how it affects the society of the time, and how it in turn affects the technology, which leads to more societal changes, etc etc. Fascinating to see how recognizable publishers of today started out hundreds of years ago, and how far we as people have come along and how much is owed to the information these books have imparted.

The text is sometimes a little light and fluffy, with some editing gremlins here and there, but for being essentially an informative coffee table book this can't be beat. Roughly every page spread covers another aspect of book history, and there are a lot of factual tidbits to chew on and mull over, nothing new for book history enthusiasts but plenty of shiny new nuggets for neophytes like me.

A definite read for anyone interested in the history of the book, for both the text and the pictures.

["Books" is a little more refined than the similarly styled library "counterpart" of this book---but not surprising since "Books" is a Getty publication.]

Sara says

As you might expect, the design of this book was great and it just felt nice to hold. It was a pretty basic overview of the history of print and books, so if you already know about this it probably wouldn't offer much - but if not, this is good for a quick browse. I found the chapters about the very earliest forms of books the most interesting; I had never really considered how rare and precious books used to be. After reading this I feel true gratitude for the abundance and ease of access to information that we enjoy today. It also makes you think about the implications of that - how does it affect our society and culture that practically anyone can publish just about anything they want to say?

Joan says

Puts everything on your bookshelf into perspective.

Edward Sullivan says

An excellent introduction to the history of books, lavishly illustrated and handsomely designed.

Elizabeth says

This a more or less straight history with very little bias, but the book deserves praise for both its beauty and its sweeping thoroughness. This last bit may sound like an oxymoron, but this is exactly the effect Lyons achieves. He manages to look at book history across time and space, structuring it around several evolutions (scroll to codex, manuscript to print, illiterate/exclusive to literate/accessible, expensive/rare to cheap/ubiquitous, and now print to digital). In each phase he talks about exemplary elements as well as outliers. Finally, the illustrations are lavish and evocative, depicting a print history that (however ironically) is mostly about words. I'm looking forward to adding it to my bookshelf.

Jenny says

52 book challenge - a non fiction book

Alicia says

A comprehensive look at books, but it's dryness was its downfall. Maybe I'm spoiled by YA nonfiction that tends to be informational and entertaining, this was just informational and not so much true entertainment.

It contains a lot of interesting material on a variety of subjects including history but also manga, romance, paperbacks, but feels a bit dated.
