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What Exactly Do We Mean By a Book?

Is It Purpose? Portability? James Raven Has Some Questions

By James Raven — October 1, 2020

Although we think we know what we mean by a "book," new digital texts and reading devices are making us reconsider. A book has characters, letters and words and sometimes images. It can be read, but does it need to have a cover and a spine—and does it need to have what we think of as "pages"?

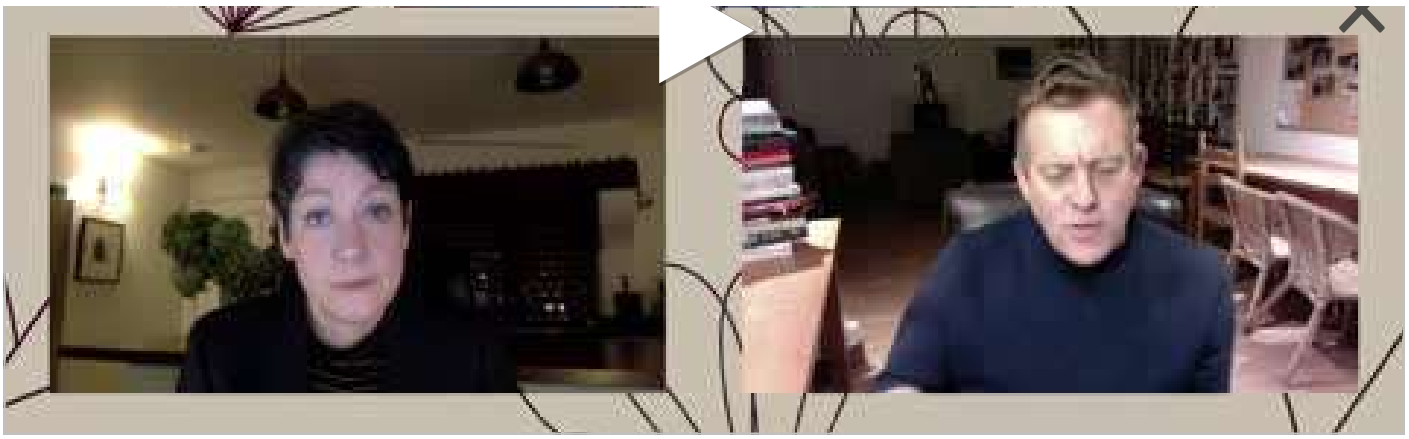
We instinctively think that it will be printed, but that might not be so intrinsic to a book when we reflect upon its long and pre-printed history—or of the many different material forms of the book in different parts of the world, and their very different intended uses, whether instructional, devotional, as the vehicles of knowledge or entertainment, or sometimes simply as ritualistic.

All books can be read and most will be—in some fashion by different people with different skills, interests, and motivations—and under very different conditions. But a reader might never be found for some books—and not just those unsold copies currently sent in their millions to be pulped. Unopened books remain sardined on the shelves of great and historic mansions and institutions and even age neglected in a dusty corner of our own homes.

The appearance of portable computers, smartphones, and scrollable texts challenges assumptions about the make-up, effect, and purpose of books. We can reflect anew upon cuneiform tablets and ancient Assyrian libraries of books made of clay tablets, just as we do about books made not simply from paper or parchment but from bone or shell or bamboo or papyrus or leaves or micro-processors and LCD screens.

VIDEO FROM LIT HUB:

Helen Macdonald and James Rebanks talk to Andy Fryers at the Hay Festival Winter Weekend



Book marterial has ranged from tortoise shells and deer bones to lengthy scrolls in the ancient world to concertina codices in Central America, bamboo and silk books in east Asia and palm leaf manuscripts in south Asia and elsewhere. And in early South America and early Africa in particular, our understanding of book forms has to combat an historical condescension that has marginalized the intellectual, political and technological achievements of successive communities.

> In considering the function and purpose of books, is the nature or absence of "publication" determinate?

In addition to this great variety of materials and uses that define books over some 5,000 years and in every part of the globe, hugely different technologies were used to enable books to transmit meaning, ranging from inscribing, impressing and imprinting to engraving, painting, photography, and an astonishing variety of ancient and modern printing techniques. But how adventurous can we be in attributing to material objects —from clay to digital tablets—the characteristics which make them books?

Given that animal skin parchment (such as vellum made from calf skin), silk, and plant fibers (such as papyrus, hemp and early paper), are integral book components, should we unquestioningly include tree barks, leaves, untreated animal hides, mineral clays and terracottas?

Some artifacts tantalize. Khipus (or quipus), the knotted string records of the Andean Incas, for example, apparently dating from about the 10th century CE, are more recent than the elaborate Mayan and Olmec recording systems and vessels, but offer a greater challenge to designations of the book and its various materialities, given that these also comprised portable, durable, replicable and legible means of recording and disseminating information.

In considering the function and purpose of books, is the nature or absence of "publication" determinate? And as forms of print and print in conjunction with script and illustration increased in complexity, how catholic does our definition of "book" become? Do we include maps and sheets of music, fold-out panoramas, and gathered-together illustrations and prints?

Newspapers, periodicals and gazettes, in all their physical and portable profusion, have long been established as fundamental to the study of the history of books, but are single sheet printed productions to be included as "books," even when many are simple jobbing pieces such as posters, tickets or commercial and legal agreements? Are the embroidered texts of samplers, often significant classroom exercises, or the roughly printed words on sacks or other containers admissible?

The answer for almost all of those pursuing the fuller history of books is yes. And the reason for that is that however unfamiliar material "book" forms might be, the central concern is one of communication, of the creation and dissemination of meaning originating from a graphic and legible as well as a portable and replicable form. Whether made of a clay, a skin or a natural fiber, or enabled by a digital screen, central processing unit, random access memory or a graphics card, books function as portable objects.

This makes a book different from an inscribed monument. Books might travel over very short or very long distances and serve, in varying degrees, as resilient transmitters of knowledge, information and entertainment. Such a definition with its reliance on transportability, might exclude posters fixed on walls and inscriptions on immovable entities, and yet again, there is an undeniable connection between such texts and books, especially when a book might be created by multiples of small and otherwise non-book items.

The contents and "texts" of books remain reproducible and capable of being shared, stored and conserved even if later publishers and readers find their meaning obscure or even unfathomable.

We know that books are found all over the world and that revisions to the material form of books are often radical, effecting new meaning. New editions are reset, reprinted, and repackaged, and might be translated, given new critical apparatus or accompanying images, and be much traveled. All contribute to re-making a text among new communities, internationally, even globally and over many centuries and in very different cultural contexts.

At each level, the intervention of manufacturers, publishers or editors might create multiple time-specific relationships between types of text, the work of the same or similar authors and other communities of books and readers, but it is also possible to chart this broader, cultural history over time and space in a single work (from a Christian Bible to a popular storybook like Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty*).

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Such questions also challenge our certainty about the definition of a book's "text" in relation to its material form and conveyance, and about the parameters of its design elements. In assessing a text and its influence how important is the material form that hosts the ideographic system and how much attention should we give to questions of relative affordability and portability (such as with the introduction of paperbacks) and (where paperbacks can suffer) of the potential for preservation and re-reading?

And reading, self-evidently fundamental to the cultural transactions epitomized by the history of books, offers a history in its own right and one that entails numerous epistemological, methodological, interpretative and archival challenges. Such a history is notoriously problematic, where the very act of reading often eschews recording.

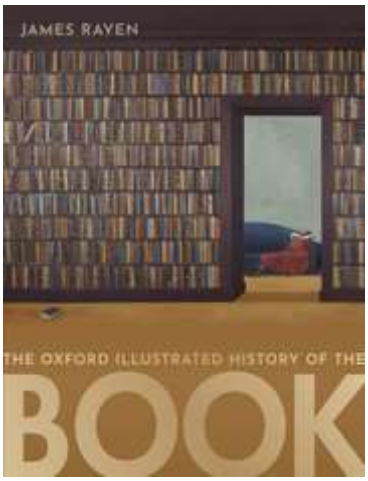
Few readers record their reading practice. Some readers make marginal notes or doodles, some recall their reading to others or in a diary of reading, but evidence of the precise effect of the text upon its individual recipient is essentially limited.

The history of types of reading and literacies involves consideration of motivations, experiences, skills, aptitudes, places and consequences, yet the history of reading practices in the reception of texts can also diverge from the history of the engagement with books, where the material object might have been collected, displayed or otherwise used for symbolic, speculative, aesthetic, spiritual, emotional, sexual, pathological or other reasons. In certain circumstances and in very different places, ownership of books need not involve conventional reading.

A distinctive contribution of the history of books, therefore, is the re-evaluation of what makes a text but one that engages with the material interrogation of what defines a book and where form actually *effects* meaning. Changing valorizations of our own time offer further insights into how that relationship between book form and the signs conveyed by and within it have changed and are described differently in different ages.

Current, popular reference to "text," for example, is now given new meaning by the sending of a "text" message (moving "text" from noun to verb), just as worldwide word-processing and text messaging has brought about the rejuvenation and

reconfiguration of the word “font,” a word that only 30 years ago needed explanation to those introduced to typography. It is the very versatility and adaptability of the book form that guarantees its future.



The Oxford Illustrated History of the Book, *edited by James Raven, is available now.*

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