

THE

CHANGE

OF THE

BOOK

ALBERTO
MANGUEL



My hands, choosing a book to take to bed or to the reading-desk, for the train or for a gift, consider the form as much as the content. Depending on the occasion, depending on the place where I've chosen to read, I prefer something small and cozy or ample and substantial. Books declare themselves through their titles, their authors, their places in a catalogue or on a bookshelf, the illustrations on their jackets; books also declare themselves through their size. At different times and in different places I have come to expect certain books to look a certain way, and, as in all fashions, these changing features fix a precise quality onto a book's definition

I judge a book by its cover;
I judge a book by its shape.





CRAFTING

a book, whether the elephantine volumes chained to the lecterns or the dainty booklets made for a child's hand, was a long, laborious process. A change that took place in mid-fifteenth-century Europe not only reduced the number of working-hours needed to produce a book, but dramatically increased the output of books, altering forever the reader's relationship to what was no longer an exclusive and unique object crafted by the hands of the scribe. The change, of course, was the invention of printing.



Sometime in the 1440s, a young engraver and gem-cutter from the Archbishopric of Mainz, whose full name was Johannes Gensfleisch zur Laden zum Gutenberg (which the practicalities of the business world trimmed down to Johann Gutenberg), realized that much could be gained in speed and efficiency if the letters of the alphabet were cut in the form of reusable type rather than as the woodcut blocks which were then being used occasionally for printing illustrations. Gutenberg experimented over several years, borrowing large sums of money to finance his enterprise. He succeeded in devising all the essentials of printing as they were employed until the twentieth century: metal prisms for molding the faces of the letters, a press that combined features of those used in wine-making and bookbinding, and an oil-based ink—none of which had previously existed. Finally, between 1450 and 1455, Gutenberg produced a bible with forty-two lines to each page—the first book ever printed from type—and took the printed pages with him to the Frankfurt Trade Fair.

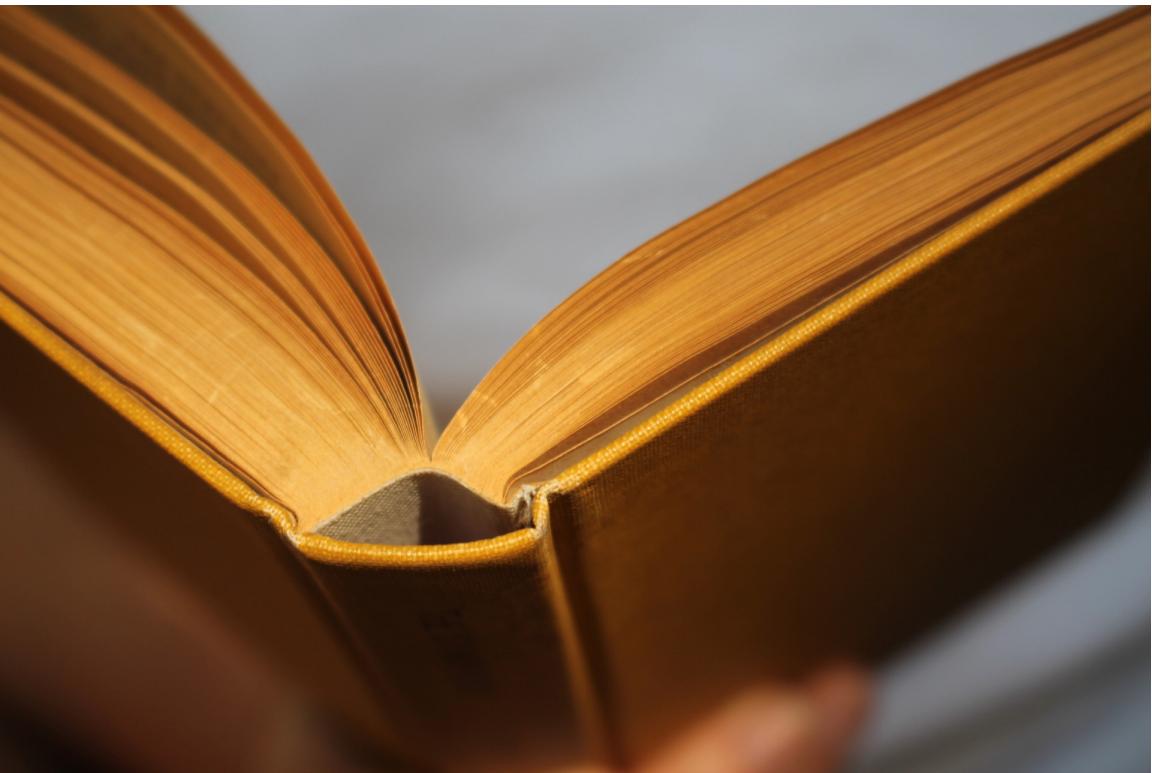


The effects of Gutenberg's invention were immediate and extraordinarily far-reaching, for almost at once many readers realized its great advantages: speed, uniformity of texts and relative cheapness. Barely a few years after the first bible had been printed, printing presses were set up all over Europe: in 1465 in Italy, 1470 in France, 1472 in Spain, 1475 in Holland and England, 1489 in Denmark.

It has been calculated that more than 30,000 *incunabula* (a seventeenth-century Latin word meaning "related to the cradle" and used to describe books printed before 1500) were produced on these presses. Suddenly, for the first time since the invention of writing, it was possible to produce reading material quickly and in vast quantities.

It may be useful to bear in mind that printing did not, in spite of the obvious “end-of-the-world” predictions, eradicate the taste for handwritten text. On the contrary, Gutenberg and his followers attempted to emulate the scribe’s craft, and most *incunabula* have a manuscript appearance. At the end of the fifteenth century, even though printing was by then well established, care for the elegant hand had not died out, and some of the most memorable examples of calligraphy still lay in the future. While books were becoming more easily available and more people were learning to read, more were also learning to write, often stylishly and with great distinction, and the sixteenth century became not only the age of the printed word but also the century of the great manuals of handwriting.

It is interesting to note how often a technological development—such as Gutenberg's—promotes rather than eliminates that which it is supposed to supersede, making us aware of old-fashioned virtues we might otherwise have either overlooked or dismissed as of negligible importance. In our day, computer technology and the proliferation of books on CD-ROM have not affected—as far as statistics show—the production and sale of books in their old-fashioned codex form.





The sudden increase in book production after Gutenberg emphasized the relation between the contents of a book and its physical form. For instance, since Gutenberg's bible was intended to imitate the expensive handmade volumes of the time, it was bought in gathered sheets and bound by its purchasers into large, imposing tomes—usually quartos measuring about 12 by 16 inches, meant to be displayed on a lectern.

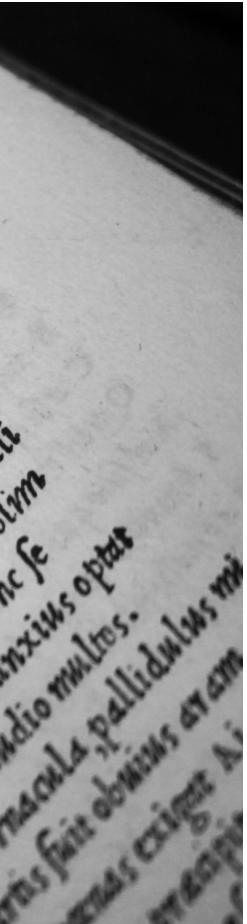


A bible of this size in vellum would have required the skins of more than two hundred sheep ("a sure cure for insomnia," commented the antiquarian bookseller Alan G. Thomas). But cheap and quick production led to a larger market of people who could afford copies and read privately, and who therefore did not require books in large type and format, and Gutenberg's successors eventually began producing smaller, pocketable volumes. successors eventually began

MILLET

Paris
Via Novia 18 Paris France

...lione merito, deinde ex perula impone et caput regnes
una domi Lauros, duce in orbem secunda
renumq; bouem, Sciarus ducit uia magna.
peclandus. gaudent omnes, que labra? quis illi
ultus erat? nunquam, sed quo cecidit sub crimine? quis nam
elator? quibus indicis? quo teſe probauit?
Nil horum, uerboſa, et grandis epifola uenit
A Capreis, bene habet, turba tremens? sequitur fortunam, ut semper, sed quid
T urbata, idem populus si Noria thusco
Damnatos, si opprelta foret secura senectus
E auiffet, principis, hac ipsa Seianum diceret hora
ouium, iam pridem, ex quo suffraga nulli
fases, legiones, omnia, qui dabat, nunc
que diuis tentum res aliis, perituros alii



AS PRIVATE LIBRARIES

producing smaller, pocketable volumes. grew, readers began to find larger volumes not only difficult to handle and uncomfortable to carry, but inconvenient to store. In 1501, confident in the success of his first editions, Aldus Manutius responded to readers' demands and brought out a series of pocket-sized books in octavo—half the size of quarto—elegantly printed and meticulously edited. To keep down the production costs he decided to print a thousand copies at a time, and to use the page more economically he employed a newly designed type, "italic", created by the Bolognese punch-cutter Francesco Griffo, who also cut the first roman type in which the capitals were shorter than the ascending (full-height) letters of the lower case to ensure a better-balanced line. The result was a book that appeared much plainer than the ornate manuscript editions popular throughout the Middle Ages, a volume of elegant sobriety. What counted above all, for the owner of an Aldine pocket-book, was the text, clearly and eruditely printed—not a preciously decorated object. Griffo's italic type (first used in a woodcut illustrating a collection of letters of Saint Catherine of Siena, printed in 1500) gracefully drew the reader's attention to the delicate relationship between letters; according to the modern English critic Sir Francis Meynell, italics slowed down the reader's eye, "increasing his capacity to absorb the beauty of the text".

The example of Aldus and others like him set the standard for at least a hundred years of printing in Europe. But in the next couple of centuries the readers' demands once again changed. The numerous editions of books of every kind offered too large a choice; competition between publishers, which up to then had merely encouraged better editions and greater public interest, began producing books of vastly impoverished quality. In the mid-sixteenth century, a reader would have been able to choose from well over eight million printed books, "more perhaps than all the scribes of Europe had produced since Constantine founded his city in AD 330." Obviously these changes were neither sudden nor all-pervasive, but in general, from the end of the sixteenth century, "publisher-booksellers were no longer concerned with patronizing the world of letters, but merely sought to publish books whose sale was guaranteed. The richest made their fortune on books with a guaranteed market, reprints of old best-sellers, traditional religious works and, above all, the Church Fathers." Others cornered the school market with glosses of scholarly lectures, grammar manuals and sheets for hornbooks.

The hornbook, in use from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, was generally the first book put in a student's hand. Very few have survived to our time. The hornbook consisted of a thin board of wood, usually oak, about nine inches long and five or six inches wide, bearing a sheet on which were printed the alphabet, and sometimes the nine digits and the Lord's Prayer. It had a handle, and was covered in front by a transparent layer of horn to prevent it from becoming dirty; the board and the sheet of horn were then held together by a thin brass frame. Similar books, known as "prayer boards", were used in Nigeria in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to teach the Koran. They were made of polished wood, with a handle at the top; the verses were written on a sheet of paper pasted directly onto the board.





Books once could slip into one's pocket; books in a companionable shape; books that the reader felt could read in any number of places; books that would not be judged awkward outside a library or a cloister: these books appeared under all kinds of guises. Throughout the seventeenth century, hawkers sold little booklets and ballads (described in *The Winter's Tale* as suitable "for man, or woman, of all sizes") which became known as chap-books in the following century.

The preferred size of popular books had been the octavo, since a single sheet could produce a booklet of sixteen pages. In the eighteenth century, perhaps because readers now demanded fuller accounts of the events narrated in tales and ballads, the sheets were folded in twelve parts and the booklets were fattened to twenty-four paperback pages. The classic series produced by Elzevir of Holland in this format achieved such popularity among less well-off readers that the snobbish Earl of Chesterfield was led to comment,

“

***IF YOU HAPPEN
TO HAVE AN
ELZEVIR CLASSIC
IN YOUR POCKET,
NEITHER SHOW IT
NOR MENTION IT.”***

In the nineteenth century, so many books were being published in huge formats that a Gustave Doré cartoon depicted a poor clerk at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris trying to move a single one of these huge tomes. Binding cloth replaced the costly leather (the English publisher Pickering was the first to use it, in his Diamond Classics of 1822) and, since the cloth could be printed upon, it was soon employed to carry advertising. The object that the reader now held in his hand—a popular novel or science manual in a comfortable octavo bound in blue cloth, sometimes protected with paper wrappers on which ads might also be printed—was very different from the morocco-bound volumes of the preceding century. Now the book was a less aristocratic object, less forbidding, less grand. It shared with the reader a certain middle-class elegance that was economical and yet pleasing—a style which the designer William Morris would turn into a popular industry but which ultimately—in Morris's case—became a new luxury: a style based on the conventional beauty of everyday things. In the new books which the mid-nineteenth-century reader expected, the measure of excellence was not rarity but an alliance of pleasure and sober practicality. Private libraries were now appearing in bed-sitters and semi-detached homes, and their books suited the social standing of the rest of the furnishings.



In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, it had been assumed that books were meant to be read indoors, within the secluding walls of a private or public library. Now publishers were producing books meant to be taken out into the open, books made specifically to travel. In nineteenth-century England, the newly leisured bourgeoisie and the expansion of the railway combined to create a sudden urge for long journeys, and literate travellers found that they required reading material of specific content size.





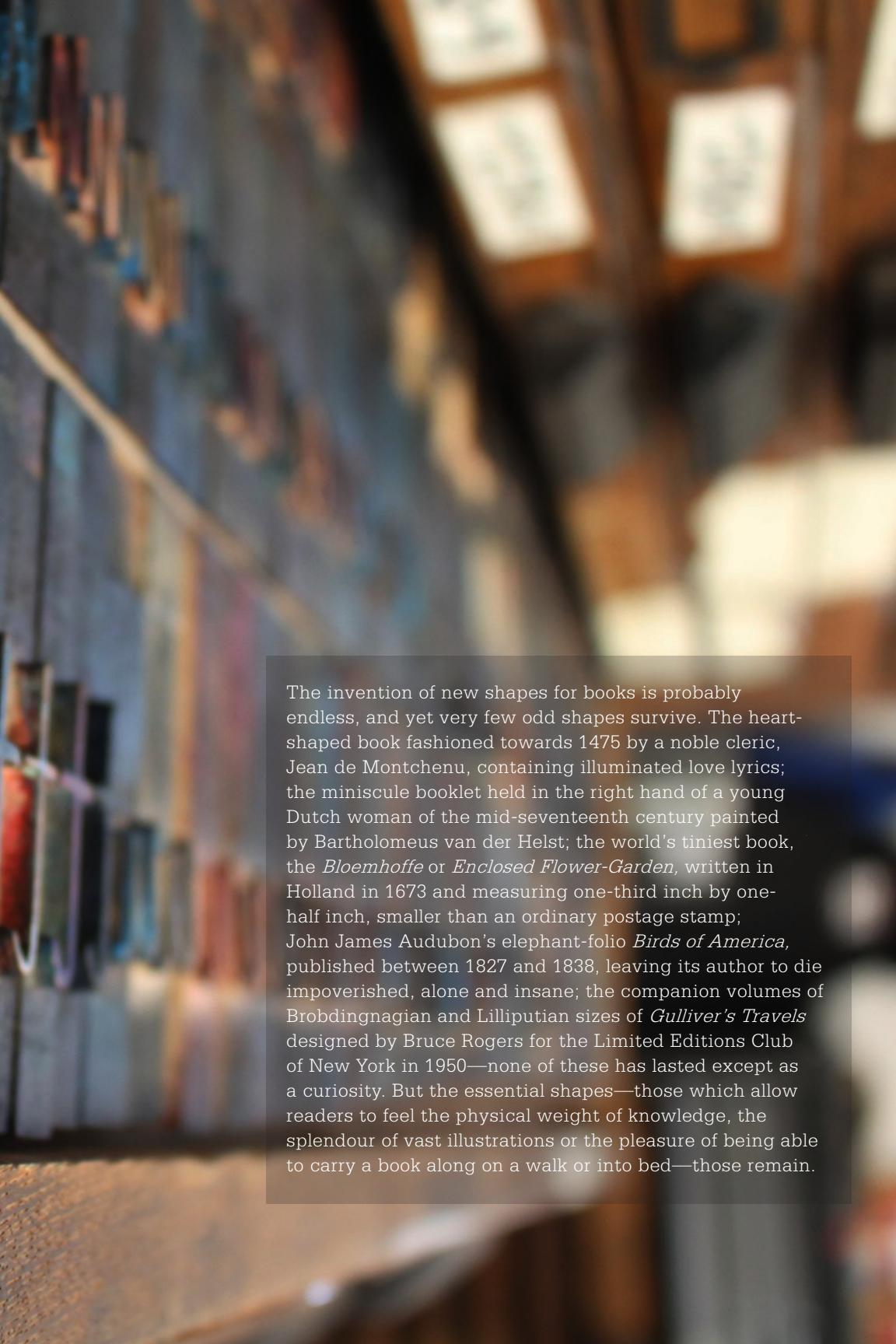
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What Lane now needed was a name for his series, “not formidable like *World Classics*, not somehow patronizing like *Everyman*”. The first choices were zoological: a dolphin, then a porpoise (already used by Faber & Faber) and finally a penguin. Penguin it was.

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More than its specific qualities (its vast distribution, its low cost, the excellence and wide range of its titles), Penguin’s greatest achievement was symbolic. The knowledge that such a huge range of literature could be brought by almost anyone almost anywhere, from Tunis to Tucumán, from the Cook Islands to Reykjavík (such are the fruits of British expansionism that I have bought and read a Penguin in all these places), lent readers a symbol of their own ubiquity.



A blurred background image showing a row of books on a library shelf. The spines of the books are visible, showing various colors and titles. The image is out of focus, creating a soft, textured look.

The invention of new shapes for books is probably endless, and yet very few odd shapes survive. The heart-shaped book fashioned towards 1475 by a noble cleric, Jean de Montchenu, containing illuminated love lyrics; the minuscule booklet held in the right hand of a young Dutch woman of the mid-seventeenth century painted by Bartholomeus van der Helst; the world's tiniest book, the *Bloemhoffe* or *Enclosed Flower-Garden*, written in Holland in 1673 and measuring one-third inch by one-half inch, smaller than an ordinary postage stamp; John James Audubon's elephant-folio *Birds of America*, published between 1827 and 1838, leaving its author to die impoverished, alone and insane; the companion volumes of Brobdingnagian and Lilliputian sizes of *Gulliver's Travels* designed by Bruce Rogers for the Limited Editions Club of New York in 1950—none of these has lasted except as a curiosity. But the essential shapes—those which allow readers to feel the physical weight of knowledge, the splendour of vast illustrations or the pleasure of being able to carry a book along on a walk or into bed—those remain.

REDESIGN AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY JULIA NOLFO
SAN FRANCISCO 2018

This book is an edited version of a chapter titled "The Shape of the Book" from Alberto Manguel's A History of Reading, published in 1996.

