

The Oxford Illustrated History of the Book

James Raven, Editor

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Over a dozen historians contributed to James Raven's *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Book*, an essay collection about the long history of reading, publishing, and information dissemination.

From the earliest writings on clay tablets and bamboo slats to the latest innovations in e-books, this work presents both a high- and low-level view of the history of the book. Its essays explore the broader elements that contributed to book development, including the roles of religious and economic concerns in promoting certain book styles and formats, the nitty-gritty of paper production, and the evolution of copyright laws.

Each contributor has their own insights into different aspects of the book, its place in history, and what the definition of “book” should be. They reveal that, while books are now most regarded as sources of information or entertainment that must adhere to a specific format, this was not always the case. In fact, early books utilized many different structures and materials. Books and libraries became status symbols for the wealthy, as well as investments for booksellers determined to maximize profit wherever possible, even if it meant swiping titles from each other.

A timeline covers significant developments in publishing history, starting from the earliest known written symbols, preserved in South Asia as far back as 3500 BCE, while photograph samples of the discussed works, including a page from a very early version of the Qur'an and an ancient birthday invitation, are also included.

Together, these fourteen essays form a thorough picture of how and why books progressed along the lines that they did. In an age when books are once again experiencing momentous changes, this well-researched reminder of their durability and timelessness is very welcome.

The Oxford Illustrated History of the Book is an exploration of the history and culture of books and of reading around the globe.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (September / October 2020)

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