



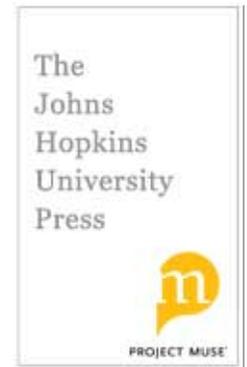
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*The Book: A Cover-to-Cover Exploration of the Most Powerful
Object of Our Time* by Keith Houston (review)

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The Book: A Cover-to-Cover Exploration of the Most Powerful Object of Our Time. By Keith Houston. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016. ISBN 978-0393244793. Pp. 448. \$29.95.

In this volume, Keith Houston aims to provide a “cover-to-cover” exploration of what he calls “the most powerful object of our time.” He refers not to the super-computer or the nuclear bomb, but the book. As he explains, “this book is about the history and the making and the *bookness*” of the “physical book” (xvii). Houston has already made his mark in scholarly discussions of what many would consider minutiae in *Shady Characters*, which tells the story behind various punctuation symbols. Broadening his scope to the paged book allows Houston to continue in this vein.

The structure of *The Book* examines the four major aspects of the physical book form. Houston examines, in turn, the *pages* books are made of (part 1), the *text* that fills these works (part 2), the *illustrations* that often illuminate those pages (part 3), and the tangible *form* of the “physical book” (part 4). Each of these sections tells a story that spans from ancient through to contemporary times. Moving to a new section is like hitting the carriage return on a typewriter as Houston takes us back to the ancient world to explore the origins of a paratextual feature of the book form. For example, in part one, Houston takes readers from the papyrus plant in ancient Egypt, to the subsequent “grisly invention” of animal-skinned parchment, and finally to the “ambiguous origins” of paper in China and its journey across the world and through the centuries (3–76). Part two, then, begins with the invention of writing by the Sumerians back in “one of the oldest settled civilizations in the world” (79).

For each of these sections, too, Houston lingers over a sociological spectrum that he fills out with supplementary information and intriguing anecdotes. For example, Houston’s account of the Chinese eunuch Cai Lun and his quest to navigate the imperial court of the Han dynasty and master the art of papermaking is genuinely interesting and helps bind together a technical account of the origin of paper (39–49). Interesting vignettes also punctuate Houston’s account: conspiracy theories to explain enigmatic watermarks on medieval paper (59–60); ancient prayers by Arab writers to the “King of the Cockroaches” to protect their books from insect infestation (51–52); silk maps smuggled in Monopoly board games to prisoners in World War II (38); the role of linen undergarments in the

early production of paper in Europe (61–62); a papermaking company in Greeneville, Connecticut, that in the 1850s used linen from ancient mummies for materials; the happenstance discovery of a trove of manuscripts in an Egyptian trash heap (261–63); the murder mystery associated with the discovery of the Nag Hammadi collection (277–79). Houston manages to weave together a web of these technical details into a coherent narrative that reads at times like a user’s manual and at times like an adventure tale.

Houston concludes the book with a colophon that describes, in the style of his own history of the paged book, every process that was required to produce *The Book* (329–31). This final section illustrates once more that the modern printed book “is the solution to an equation that takes in more than two thousand years of human history” (331). Because Houston often refers to the physical copy of *The Book* to illustrate a feature of bookmaking, the volume itself becomes a tangible piece of evidence for this account. Houston’s account is also well documented with an impressive range of scholarly works from the relevant fields of bookmaking. Accordingly, this book can also function as an accessible starting point for further research in these fields.

One storyline that is missing from Houston’s account but worth mentioning is the early and unanimous preference for the codex among early Christians in the Mediterranean world. The early adoption of this book form by early Christians outpaces the broader Greco-Roman culture by at least a century. Partly as an aid for public reading, the production and transmission of the New Testament and the biblical canon as a whole in the codex form is a historically significant aspect of the “birth of the codex.” Indeed, as “people of the book,” the history of the Jewish and Christian communities intersects at many places with the history of the paged book. There is much to mine from this interdisciplinary intersection. Even a brief discussion of the great Greek codex manuscripts of the Old and New Testaments from the fourth and fifth century would have enhanced this section of the narrative.

For example, the origin of Codex Sinaiticus and Constantin von Tischendorf’s Indian Jones like adventures in the nineteenth century to discover portions of this manuscript by chance in a heap material to be burned in a monastery on Mount Sinai is the type of tale that would fit nicely within Houston’s history. This observation is not really a critique of Houston’s work but perhaps simply a note for those interested both in book production and biblical studies. In this regard, Houston does mention the Dead Sea scrolls (25–28) and carefully details a codex of the Gospels from the seventh century (the St Cuthbert Gospel, 284–87).

Throughout his narrative, Houston also includes accounts of anxiety over each technological advance in book production. New advances were often met with scorn, suspicion, or alarm. For example, some worried in ancient Egypt that the invention of writing would “produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it” because they will “not practice their memory” (8). As the use of writing materials transitioned, Peter the Venerable in 1141 preferred parchment over

papyrus and decried the latter's origin from "the rags of old cast-off undergarments, or rushes out of Eastern swamps, and some other vile material" (56).

These paradigm-shifting changes were sometimes recognizable but often the true reach of a new technology was only gradually realized. When writing was combined with sheets of papyrus, for instance, a quiet revolution unfolded. This combination created "a self-contained mechanism for the storage and transmission of information—a pairing that endured as the premier information technology of the ancient world even as that world changed and expanded" (9). Houston also notes the spread of papyrus as a material for writing from Egypt out across the Mediterranean world over the course of thousands of years. Remarkably, though, "in all this time no one thought to write down precisely what this irreplaceable material was or how it was made" (10).

In a similar vein, Houston's chronological survey also highlights that the rise and fall of various versions of bookmaking elements overlapped more than is often recognized (e.g., Houston notes the "overlapping reins" of papyrus and parchment, 36, and also the fact that paper becomes dominant while papyrus and parchment were still in use, 55). The quest for an account of the true "invention moment" leads to the recognition that these discoveries were often arrived at independently, at different times, and in different locations. Through his history, Houston highlights the less sensational notion that the "inventors" of these technologies usually did not first discover but rather perfected the production of a particular new method (e.g. 61–62). This historical memory can help temper the angst contemporary readers sometimes feel while in the throes of technological advance.

Significant too is the impact that technological advance has on the user's experience. As Houston notes, "Paper, in its turn, subtly changed the people whose hands it passed through" (55). With the transition from papyrus or parchment to paper, for example, new genres of literature were possible, such as cookbooks or religious commentary (55). Another example comes with the advent of the cheaper paperback, which made possible the "dime novel" genre (308–9). Though Houston does not expand on this type of reflective commentary, it does surface occasionally and his volume provides a broad framework for those interested in this kind of analysis.

Houston begins his volume with a mini-lament about the technological advances that have relativized the "physical book" form. In this regard, there are varying contemporary impulses that either aim to deconstruct the physical constraints of the paged book and or seek to preserve the paratextual features of the codex. Houston could have perhaps included a separate chapter or a concluding reflection on the digitization and destabilization of the codex with the rise of new media. However, this omission perhaps illustrates the difference between text and *hypertext*: a "book" must end!

And so must a book review.

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