

The Oxford Companion to the Book

Michael F. Suarez, S.J. and H. R. Woudhuysen, eds. *The Oxford Companion to the Book*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 2 vols.: 1327 pp. \$325.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780198606536 (set).

On first looking into *The Oxford Companion to the Book* several questions quickly present themselves. Does its appearance now in 2010 represent a summing up of a medium of communication that has had a noble, four-thousand-year history, but which inevitably must step aside as the digital revolution advances, blurring at best and even calling into question, as it marches forward, the distinctions among physical formats that have shaped our culture for so long? Are editors Suarez and Woudhuysen seeking to both elegantly and elegiacally pay their penultimate respects to the book as material object before it disappears from the everydayness of life, saying, in effect, this is the way we were? Or does this *Companion* attest that the book as we have known it yet has a future? Addressing the question of editorial perspective is worthwhile, and there is much to say about this aspect alone, but it is only one of several lenses through which this major undertaking may be viewed and appreciated.

The Oxford Companion to the Book is, by any measure, a stunning accomplishment. No less in the beauty of its production as a two-volume, boxed set than in its wide-ranging, authoritative content, the *Companion* pays homage to the inestimable importance and impact that recorded texts in all their manifestations have had on societies and cultures the world over throughout history. At 1,327 pages and weighing just under 11 lbs., this “companion” is not for the beach or the backpack. But on a shelf within easy reach it will travel marvelously with anyone who is seeking reliable information about any aspect of the book: its history, production, dissemination, influence on culture, and much in addition.

Befitting its subject, the *Companion* is an exemplar of book making. Quarter bound in a vivid burgundy with gold lettering and with richly patterned, decorative endleaves and high quality, glossy paper, it gives evidence of consummate care in every aspect of its production. In short, it has curb appeal. Oxford has also published an electronic edition under its Digital Reference Shelf banner (not seen), but one can easily imagine the initial impression of the digital version on the part of the interested student or scholar being much different, less *impressive* if you will, than its print counterpart.

Inside its covers, the set consists of over 5,000 A-Z entries, preceded by fifty-one essays, of which nineteen are thematic studies and thirty-two histories of the book from a national or regional vantage point. The essays occupy about two-thirds of the first volume with the much shorter A-Z entries taking up the rest of volume one and all of the second. To produce the remarkable breadth and depth of information about the book, past and present, the editors assembled a team of associate and assistant editors, essayists, and contributors, altogether numbering nearly 400 scholars and practitioners. Among them are professors of literature, book and cultural historians, antiquarian booksellers, librarians, special collections curators, archivists, and typographers.

In their introduction the editors clarify that “book” in the title is a synecdoche of sorts, the one standing for the many (x). Thus newspapers, maps, music, prints, etc. are not excluded. At the same time, while recognizing the

inadequacy of the term, they state that “book” does suggest a degree of emphasis. The “book,” however, is not to be equated with “books,” that is, viewed only as a finished object apart from the fascinating kaleidoscope of details surrounding book making, selling, reception, and, ultimately, how the book has shaped, and been shaped by, societies through the ages. To this end the essays and A-Z entries work together to present a cornucopia of knowledge that will satisfy both the ad hoc need for definition (“blind tooling”), brief historical background (“*Index Librorum Prohibitorum*”), and biographical detail (“Baskerville, John”) as well as a means of more sustained and contextual investigation, e.g., essays on “Bookbinding,” “The Book as Symbol,” “The History of the Book in Britain, c. 1475-1800.”

The *Companion*'s navigational aids consist of a Thematic Index of Entries, a general index, and a network of cross references directing the reader between entries, from entries to essays or the reverse, and from one essay to another. The Thematic Index serves as a cognitive map of the whole, allowing more systematic study by making it possible to see and move easily from entry to entry within a larger topic area. In keeping with the inherent serendipity of classification, numerous interesting and some surprising discoveries can be made by scanning this index. For example, under “Censorship, Pornography, and Control,” the entry for Alexander Solzhenitsyn's Soviet-era novella *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* reveals that initially it was approved by Nikita Khrushchev himself as a propaganda tool against Stalinist hardliners but was later suppressed when the parallels between Stalinism and Communism became too apparent. Nor are present-day phenomena overlooked; for example, incorporated under “Reading,” just below “McGuffey Readers,” is an entry for “Oprah's Book Club.” But more importantly, what one would most expect to find covered here is indeed here: “gloss,” “uncial,” “vellum,” subsumed by “MS Book, The”; “engraving,” “intaglio,” “desktop publishing,” with methods and types of “Reproduction”; “Bibliothèque nationale de France,” “Melk,” “Bodleian,” “Pierpont Morgan,” together with hundreds more “Libraries.” In short, with every page turn of the index, the impression of the comprehensiveness of this effort is heightened.

While the Thematic Index is invaluable in allowing the reader to see at a glance the host of entries related to any major aspect of book history, one might also wish to see the entries themselves, in reverse fashion, point back to the index, facilitating a scan for related entries and thus allowing a reader to gage quickly where the entry “fits” in the world of the book. Another helpful feature not included would have been a list of articles grouped by their authors. Nevertheless, on balance, the *Companion* does a very worthy job of providing a structure for organizing and collating content topically.

The book as vehicle of divine revelation, the intimate connection between a text and adherence to a faith tradition, has been given its due in the *Companion*. “The Sacred Book” is the second in the array of thematic essays in which Carl Olson (Religious Studies, Allegheny College) discusses the beliefs of five of the world's religious traditions concerning the authority of their written scriptures. He defines the special nature of books deemed sacred while indicating that in most cases the ascent to sacred status is gradual and dependent on consensus concerning origin and completeness. Brian Cummings (English, University of Sussex), writing in “The Book as Symbol,” points to the metaphorical association between the physical form of the book and divine purpose. In the Christian tradition he cites passages from Isaiah (34:4) and Revelation (6:14) which liken the passage of time in the created world to “a book which opens and which finally is closed” (63). Craig Kallendorf (Classics and English, Texas A & M) in “The Ancient Book” summarizes the development of the physical book and writing in early civilizations. Greek and Roman reading practices, libraries, and standards of textual criticism are also highlighted, and much interesting information is dispensed along the way. Discussing the book trade in Greece and Rome, Kallendorf explains that

the concept of “publication” initially meant a public reading (*recitatio*) by an author of his new work. Reading aloud was commonplace in classical culture and because of the attendant requirements of proper breathing, vocalization, and gesture was listed in many medical texts as an activity that promoted good health (30).

In other essays, Christopher de Hamel (Librarian, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge) lends his expert knowledge to an overview of the manuscript book in the medieval era; Christina Dondi (Research Fellow, Lincoln College, Oxford) describes the rapid transformation in book production ushered in by printing with movable type and the rise of the scholar printer-publisher; Emile G. L. Schrijver (Special Collections, Amsterdam University Library) surveys the significance of books and manuscripts for the transmission of knowledge and faith in Judaism; and M. Antoni J. Üçerler, S.J. (Jesuit Historical Institute, Rome) writes on the role printing played in the Christian missionary enterprise. The physical components of books, such as paper, binding, and illustration, along with an overview of the growth and change in print technology, are each the subjects of other informative essays. An impressively thorough set of thirty-two national and regional “history of the book in” surveys concludes the collection of essays.

All of the essays and many of the A-Z entries include bibliographic references. Most are to publications within the last twenty years, and a surprising number are within five years. Although they are not numerous, the black and white illustrations serve to enhance the essays and entries they accompany, particularly those that depict the variety of technologies used in printing.

But what of the future? In their essay on “The Electronic Book,” authors Eileen Gardiner and Ronald G. Musto (co-directors of the American Council of Learned Societies Humanities E-Book Project) state that “authorial intention and control over the reader’s experience of the text” is “one of the chief issues in electronic publishing” (167). They speculate that the capabilities of hyperlinking and the inclusion of almost unlimited quantities of supplemental material, fast becoming standard features in e-publishing, will result in a different reading experience, one in which “authorial voice and point of view are contested much more actively than in print” (167).

It is this aspect of the “reader’s experience of the text” that suggests, that rather than being eclipsed by the digital world, print culture is making room for digital culture just as manuscript culture made way for print. In a similar way, printed books and the advent of title pages, tables of contents, chapters, etc., changed the reader’s experience of the text, we are witnessing another set of changes. Some changes will be (and already are) exhilarating as they enhance and intensify the experience of reading. Others will be not that useful or aesthetically mediocre. For some purposes, the material book will still be the best option. Here in the West, at least, the ever-present ordinariness of books has masked a long, complex, and, most significantly, still-developing history. Nevertheless, we continue to marvel at how waxed boards, parchment scrolls, vellum manuscripts, hand press books, and now digitally produced and read books continue to bear witness to, in the editors’ apt phrasing, those “whose lives have been variously sustained by ‘the book’ in its rich pluriformity and diverse contributions to our common humanity” (ix). To this end the *Oxford Companion to the Book* is a superb testament. Highly recommended for all academic and special libraries.

Bruce Eugene Eldevik
Luther Seminary Library

