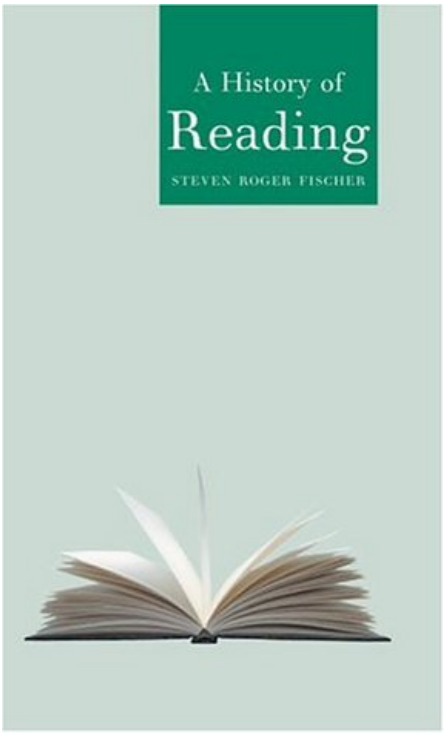

A History of Reading

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Steven Roger Fischer's fascinating book traces the complete story of reading from the time when symbol first became sign through to the electronic texts of the present day. Describing ancient forms of reading and the various modes that were necessary to read different writing systems and scripts, Fischer turns to Asia and the Americas and discusses the forms and developments of completely divergent dimensions of reading.

With the Middle Ages in Europe and the Middle East, innovative re-inventions of reading emerged – silent and liturgical reading; the custom of lectors; reading's focus in general education – whereupon printing transformed society's entire attitude to reading. Fischer charts the explosion of the book trade in this era, its increased audience and radically changed subject-matter; describes the emergence of broadsheets, newspapers and public readings; and traces the effect of new font designs on general legibility.

Fischer discusses society's dedication to public literacy in the sweeping educational reforms of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and notes the appearance of free libraries, gender differences in reading matter, public advertising and the "forbidden" lists of Church, State and the unemancipated. Finally, he assesses the future, in which it is likely that read communication will soon exceed oral communication through the use of the personal computer and the internet, and looks at "visual language" and modern theories of how reading is processed in the human brain. Asking how the New Reader can reshape reading's future, he suggests a radical new definition of what reading could be.

A History of Reading Details

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Author	:	Steven Roger Fischer
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From Reader Review A History of Reading for online ebook

Elia says

Finally, I get to review this book!
First, let me agree with The independent on this and say that it is a hugely ambitious volume, yet not overly-ambitious.
I thoroughly enjoyed reading these pages. I will not go into summarising each chapter but let me say that the linearity is mostly chronological with different people/themes treated within the chapter. I expected from the broad aspect that this book treats to get bored when reaching certain sections. I actually enjoyed reading about concepts I had prejudices against! You might think you don't care about why Japanese elite women contributed to silent reading, but it is presented in such a way to capture the essence, without being troubled with historical/pompous details. The transitions are really smooth, you can get lost in the book. What is most impressive is the last chapter, mostly introducing the future of reading, where grand conclusions and flying pigs are expected but the author kept it simple and real, and had a very decent approach that did not ruin the book, like most similar authors tend to do.
Highly recommended for those with a passion for reading, putting your hobby into context.
Moreover, for serious writers, this is a step away from all the negativity your publisher might keep pushing.
Give it a read :)

Pab says

This Tryptich is the best series of introductory language textbooks I've ever devoured. Highly Highly recommended.

Michael A says

As a history book, this is perhaps an average work. In fact, I'd say it was more a 3-star affair if you read it strictly in that sense. What I appreciated about it, instead, was the author's enthusiasm for the act of reading and how that helped contribute to my own joy in reading -- let me explain below.

The book itself is a bit disjointed; the information is too densely packed in to be easily retained. That being said, I learned a lot of interesting things from the book -- that China and early Islamic entities had much richer intellectual and literate cultures when Europe was barely struggling to get by through scriptoriums and blunt politics. That China was responsible for paper and that Korea (!) had first developed moveable metal type to assist its new script, Hangul, and so on. That people once saw the very act of reading and writing as an almost divine skill. It also had a lot of great writing about early printing press history -- that most of what people read was ephemera like pamphlets, devotional primers, and so forth. If you're a complete newbie like me, you will find this book worthwhile for this kind of information -- the main problem, again, is that it is just rather disorganized (especially in the last chapters). So a lot of what you read within is easily forgotten unless you are taking copious notes in the process of reading it.

The main reason I'm giving it four stars is that I think it gave me a lot to think about in why I read the way I do. That is, it offered a lot of chances for me to reflect along the way as why I love reading. The author's

energy and love for the subject rubbed off on me, too. I like reading because I think it truly is one of our specie's greatest gifts, an almost magical way of allowing us to explore our own way of thinking, to tell our stories, to inform each of other of new ideas, to allow us to communicate in ways that don't involve speaking, and so on. For me, it really gives life an added richness (along with films). If I didn't have either of those, I think I would find life much more dull and boring. So my hat is off to the author for reminding me how great the act of reading is and to give it my best effort for all the time I have left in my life. That last chapter, especially, is truly wonderful just for giving me that renewed awareness of just how much reading means to me in my life.

I'd recommend this book, but you have to understand this was just my personal reaction to it and other people may find it more dry than I did..

Tom says

I thought I'd find this subject more interesting, but for whatever reasons, this didn't hold my attention despite the wealth of information it contains. Ironically, this is the first book in print that I've attempted to read for quite awhile (it is not available as an ebook) and I found the experience physically awkward: the binding was very tight and the pages would not lay flat enough to read comfortably.

Sarah says

I'm still reading this, as it's not light going. But it's absolutely fascinating, for readers and writers. 'Writing freezes the moment. Reading is forever"

Gabriel Avocado says

The writing style is informative but fairly dry. Also the author is ridiculously racist at some points. We get it. You hate Muslims, Catholics, the low countries--anyone who isn't a WASP, essentially. Really now.

Other than that, Fischer does a great job of building up a history of literature from the very first civilizations. He focuses heavily on Western civilizations, but the chapters on the origins of writing across the globe are very interesting. Unfortunately, I would not have bothered with this if I didnt have to read it for a class--while informative, it can be extremely tedious at times and somewhat difficult to understand for those reading without a teacher's guidance. Recommended for history buffs, those starting out in info sci/library sci, and hardcore literature fans.

Boris Limpopo says

Fischer, Steven Roger (2003). A History of Reading. London: Reaktion Books. 2011. ISBN 1861891601. Pagine 384. 9,94 €

Bel libro, anzi bellissimo libro. Come sanno scriverne soltanto gli autori di tradizione anglosassone (Fischer è un professsore neozelandese), per rendere piano e interessante per tutti un argomento solitamente (e con ingiustificabile pigrizia) considerato per specialisti.

Ne ho già dato qualche anticipazione in due post, parlando di pergamena (ma la storia finisce qui) e di Tiresia.

E allora, prima di profondermi in lodi e citazioni, mi tolgo subito dalla scarpa un sassolino appuntito che mi scava nel tallone.

Fischer usa il verbo obtain nella sua forma intransitiva 27 volte (ah, le gioie delle edizioni digitali) in 384 pagine: cioè – anche a contare note, bibliografia e indice analitico – un'occorrenza ogni 14 pagine. È chiaramente un vezzo dell'autore, e questo basterebbe da solo a provocare la mia irritazione. Aggiungiamo che obtain nella sua forma intransitiva non è un verbo d'uso frequente, ed è per di più un falso amico, cioè una parola che non ha in inglese lo stesso significato che verrebbe spontaneo assegnargli in italiano (mentre nella forma transitiva significa come in italiano ottenere, in quella intransitiva corrisponde grosso modo a prevalere). Cominciamo dal significato di obtain secondo il Merriam-Webster:

Transitive verb:

to gain or attain usually by planned action or effort.
Esempi: The information may be difficult to obtain. We obtained a copy of the original letter.

Intransitive verb:

archaic: succeed
to be generally recognized or established: prevail
Esempio: These ideas no longer obtain for our generation.

Middle English obteinen, from Anglo-French & Latin; Anglo-French obtenir, from Latin obtin?re to hold on to, possess, obtain, from ob- in the way + ten?re to hold.
First Known Use: 15th century.

Secondo l'OED online:

[with object] get, acquire, or secure (something):
adequate insurance cover is difficult to obtain
[no object] formal be prevalent, customary, or established:
the price of silver fell to that obtaining elsewhere in the ancient world

Origine: late Middle English: from Old French obtenir, from Latin obtinere 'obtain, gain'.

Insomma, l'abuso del verbo to obtain è un vezzo dell'autore. Si potrebbe anche dire un suo lezio, come ho imparato da poco:

lèzio s. m. (ant. o letter. lèzia, f.) [forse dal lat. dilectio «affetto», der. di dilig?re «amare»], non com. – Atto affettato e svenevole, smanceria, moina; usato per lo più al plur.: non posso soffrire tutti quei suoi lezî; quanti lezii ha fatto questa mia pazza! (Machiavelli); gli sembrava evidente che essa lo trattasse secondo una sua particolare idea educativa, senza le lezie che la gente di campagna dedica agli infanti (A. Banti). [Vocabolario Treccani]

Peccato anche che Fischer sia convinto (e sia sfiggito ai suoi editor) che Tarquinio Prisco non è l'ultimo, ma il quinto dei sette re di Roma [rif. Kindle 1349].

Devo però ringraziare Fischer per avermi fatto incontrare l'indimenticabile figura dell'imperatore bizantino Costantino V (718-775), detto il Copronimo dai sui nemici iconoduli (lui era invece un iconoclasta) per ricordare la storia – realmente accaduta o perfidamente inventata – secondo la quale al suo battesimo, la notte di Natale del 718, il piccolo Costantino avrebbe defecato nella vasca battesimale. Copronimo signofica, in greco, nome di merda.

Al di là di queste piccolezze, il libro è bello e interessante. Il punto di vista dell'autore è molto originale (la lettura non coincide con la scrittura o con il linguaggio – come si potrebbe pensare superficialmente – tant'è vero che alla storia del linguaggio e alla storia della scrittura Fischer ha dedicato altri due volumi, e questo completa la trilogia).

Quasi tutto quello che c'era da dire l'ha detto con l'enfasi e l'entusiasmo che le sono proprie Maria Popova su Brain Pickings. È stata la sua recensione che mi ha fatto conoscere il libro e venire la voglia di leggerlo, e dunque il meno che posso fare è indirizzare a lei anche voi qui.

* * *

Questa volta vi invito anche a leggere le citazioni che ho scelto e vi segnalo, perché dànno un'idea piuttosto accurata del libro, migliore di qualunque riassunto possa farne io (riferimento come sempre alle posizioni sul Kindle).

Writing is a skill, reading a faculty. [66]

Others have argued that early historical reading in particular was ‘a matter of hearing the cuneiform, that is, hallucinating the speech from looking at its picture-symbols, rather than visual reading of syllables in our sense.’ [128-129. La citazione è dal celebre The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind di Julian Jaynes, pubblicato originariamente a Princeton nel 1976, ristampato a Boston da Houghton Mifflin nel 1990 – questa almeno l'edizione in brossura che ho io]

For thousands of years, reading was a medium; it was not yet a channel. [265]

Sumerians called those who catalogued libraries ‘ordainers of the universe’. Cataloguing a library means fragmenting human experience. All catalogization is subjective and arbitrary, an offence to the written work: that is, to something intrinsically universal and indivisible. This offence has been committed in every epoch, generally in the name of utilitarianism. Since life itself is uncatalogued, reading should be uncatalogued. However, this is impractical. More useful access to information is won only through limiting the limitless, as the earliest literate societies already discovered. [354]

«May my father and the gods keep you well. Gentlemen's clothes improve year by year. The son of Adadiddinam, whose father is a mere underling of my father, has received two new garments, but you keep getting upset over just one garment for me. Though you gave birth to me, his mother adopted him; whereas his mother loves him, you do not love me.» [396: è un grand commis di Hammurabi che scrive alla mamma!]

Here, too, the written word was not an end in itself, but a means to an end, a socially sanctioned medium (not yet an autonomous channel) through which the scribe was permitted to speak on behalf of the person dictating the message. The 'true' message lay not in the cuneiform tablet or papyrus missive, but in the ultimate oral transmission: that is, the scribe reading the message aloud to its addressee. [411: here è l'antico Egitto]

But public texts were to impress, not to inform. [494]

Preliterates and non-literates were still displaying prodigious oral feats of memory. Such ability had been innate, of course, appearing to be exceptional only to literates who no longer daily exercised humankind's natural oral talents. Oral ability weakens upon accession to literacy. [660. Poche righe sotto ho anche imparato la parola acrophony: (1) the application in the evolution of an alphabet of a pictorial symbol or hieroglyph for the name of an object to the initial sound alone of that name; (2) the naming of a letter by a word whose initial sound is the same as that which the letter represents – Merriam-Webster online]

But literacy is a response; not a stimulus. Literacy does not cause social and cognitive change (though it is probably a necessary precondition for some changes). Once larger complex societies rise, literacy can enhance complex organization, primarily by aiding memory and providing access to knowledge (via files, archives, libraries) to a degree no human mind can achieve unaided. Those who read can extend their communication spatially and temporally; they can also expand their memory in compass and duration. [672]

In an early form of textual separation, scribes wrote per cola et commata ('by clauses and phrases'). St Jerome (c. AD 347-420) was the first who described this method of segmenting a text, having discovered it in old copies of Demosthenes and Cicero, noting it 'conveys more obvious sense to the readers'. [748]

Once learnt, reading cannot be unlearnt, and so throughout antiquity tyrannical rulers who failed to prevent literacy attacked what opponents or suspected foes were reading: the books themselves. [758]

The Greek physician, anatomist and physiologist Galen (c. AD 130–c. 200), for example, eventually wrote in turn of Hippocrates: 'I shall interpret those observations [of his] which are too obscure, and add others of my own, arrived at by the methods he wrote down.' This of course became the very point of reading: to understand, learn from, then build upon a written text.
By the fourth century BC, then, reading and writing were beginning to be seen in an entirely new light in the West. [865]

An advocate of clear, concise writing, Callimachus, labouring under the Chief Librarian Apollonius of Rhodes (his opposite and adversary), undertook his task using a novel conception: the library as a model of the entire world, as perceived by the Greek scholars of the era.
[…]
Innovatively, books were listed in Greek alphabetical order (alpha, beta, gamma, delta and so forth); although known earlier, alphabetical listing had never been used to catalogue books on such a vast scale. Now, for the first time anywhere, a library was more than a depot of papyrus scrolls: it became a systematized information centre, since access had been acknowledged to be as important as the data themselves – indeed, the two in tandem were recognized to be of greatest benefit. [957-965]

The sixth-century AD Sefer Yezirah – Hebrew's earliest extant text of systematic, speculative thought – declared, for example, that God had created the world with 32 secret 'paths of wisdom' consisting of ten numbers and 22 letters. The physical world, time and the human body that comprised the cosmos's three strata were their direct product. All creation could be regarded as a veritable book of numbers and letters. Were we mortals to read the numbers and letters 'properly', unlocking their combination in imitation of God, we could similarly give life. [1086]

This is the lesson to be learnt from Vindolanda, a former Roman military base in northern England along Hadrian's Wall. Since 1973 some two thousand letters and documents on wooden tablets have been unearthed there, attesting to writing's pervasiveness in ancient Roman society. Comprising the largest archive of early Roman writings discovered anywhere, the Vindolanda literature dates from between AD 85 and 130. All inscriptions are written in ink or engraved by stylus on wax and convey the thoughts of ordinary men and women corresponding with each other on the base itself and with others far removed.
The fact that such a trove, in such an isolated locale, exists at all testifies to the great amount of correspondence that must have been taking place among Romans throughout the Empire. At this time, writing maintained personal contact, ultimately preserving the social network and Roman culture even in primitive foreign parts. Such correspondence also secured military supplies and sanctioned orders, as well as conveying essential intelligence. In other words, reading and writing kept the Empire functioning. [1167]

The 'reader' was a transmitter, not a receiver. [1275]

Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79) tells how Eumenes II (ruled 197–158 BC) of Greek Pergamum in Asia Minor, wishing to establish a library to rival the Library of Alexandria, ordered a shipment of papyrus from the Nile. But King Ptolemy of Egypt forbade its export, desirous to ensure the Library of Alexandria's pre-eminence as the world's repository of knowledge. Forced to find an alternative, Eumenes ordered his experts to create a new writing material, then, for his library. Whereupon these Eastern Greeks soon perfected a technique of thinly stretching and drying the skin of sheep and goats. The final product of this process eventually became the primary vehicle of a new world faith and the medium of an entire epoch – parchment. [1395: come ricordavo sopra, ne appbiamo parlato qui e qui]

At first the codex, still of papyrus, was merely a novelty, an object of curiosity. Traditional works were of course expected to be on scrolls. But as parchment gained in popularity, especially when Christians favoured texts on parchment and physicians preferred the codex format because of easier referencing, the codex of bound pages became more fashionable. [1414]

Not being a scroll, the codex could allow easy access to any part of the text for referencing.
[…]
(Only now is 'scrolling' returning, in descending Greek fashion, as the computer screen alters modern reading perceptions.) [1464-1468: ma non è questo il punto; il punto è che il codex a pagine rilegate consente un agevole accesso random, mentre lo scrolling nei computer e negli e-book costringe a un accesso sequenziale, ancorché veloce]

[…] silent reading protected Ambrose from interruption, thus permitting a one-to-one, more profound relationship with the written text. [1568]

With Japanese, for example, brain injury can cause someone to lose their ability to read the Sino-Japanese kanji characters, though they retain perfectly their ability to read the Japanese kana syllabic signs (as well as the reverse phenomenon). Clearly, the kanji and kana are neurologically dissociated from one another. Equally significantly, there is no evidence of any such disruption between the two types of kana (the

hiragana and katakana), which fulfil distinctly separate functions in Japanese reading; though two separate syllabic scripts (but not separate writing systems), these seem to be encoded as one in the brain. [2410]

It is one thing to worship a picture, it is another to learn in depth, by means of pictures, a venerable story. For that which writing makes present to the reader, pictures make present to the illiterate, to those who only perceive visually, because in pictures the ignorant see the story they ought to follow, and those who don't know their letters find that they can, after a fashion, read. Therefore, especially for the common folk, pictures are the equivalent of reading. [2556: è l'innovativo punto di vista di papa Gregorio Magno, c. 540-604]

In Western Europe at this time an 'illiterate' was not a person who could not read, but someone who could not read Latin, the vehicle of Christendom and all learning. Only someone who could read Latin was a litteratus, one capable of accessing and sharing written knowledge. (The attitude demonstrates how literacy in any society is not simply a question of who can read and write, but rather the accommodation of prevailing values.) [2574]

Abdul Kassem Ismael, Grand Vizier of Persia, possessed a library of 117,000 volumes. (Paris at the time held about five hundred books.) Whenever he travelled, he took his library with him on 400 camels, each trained to follow in alphabetical order so as to keep his catalogization intact! [2694]

At Cairo […], al-Hasan ibn al-Haytham (c. 965–c. 1039) – known in the West as Alhazen, mediæval Islam's greatest natural scientist – […] distinguished between 'pure sensation' and 'perception'. Pure sensation, wrote Ibn al-Haytham, is only unconscious or involuntary. But perception demands a voluntary act of recognition, such as reading a page of text. Here, for the first time anywhere, a formal explanation was furnished for the process of conscious activity that distinguishes 'seeing' from 'reading'. [2703]

Like Dante, most Ashkenazi Talmudic scholars drew upon four senses of reading. But their divisions differed significantly from Dante's. The pshat was the literal sense. The remez was the restricted significance. The drash held the rational meaning. And the sod comprised the mystical or occult interpretation. [4127]

Only one out of ten published works sold well, and the one 'bestseller' then helped to finance the publication of those that did not sell well. (This scheme functioned eminently, providing society with variety and quality, until the 1970s, when it was almost universally abandoned for 'guaranteed' sales in order to maximize profits for corporate giants.) [4205]

[…] 'gazettes' (from Venetian gazeta de la novità or 'a halfpenny of news', as Venice's sold for a gazeta, a coin of small value) […] [4258]

[…] the Enlightenment, which gave to the world, among other things, the three crucial concepts of the free use of reason, empirical method of science and universal human progress. [4369]

Whereupon one's very concept of reading's primary function altered: from focus to access.
It changed society profoundly. Ever since, reading has been viewed not as a place, but as a road. [4385-4386]

But for many the novel provided their only access to a larger experience. Others derived from it the satisfaction of a deep personal need for 'a philosophical or moral guidance, not set out in rules, but worked out, experimentally, in conduct'. [4493]

If anything, the great lexicographer was ravenous not of books, really, but of printed knowledge. [4526: si sta

parlando di Samuel Johnson]

«It is strange that there should be so little reading in the world, and so much writing.» [4562: la citazione è sempre di Samuel Johnson. E mi piace pensare che sia all'origine della famosa battuta di Massimo Troisi in Le vie del Signore sono finite: «Io non leggo mai. Non leggo libri, cose… Pecché… Che comincio a leggere mo che so' grande, che i libri sono milioni e milioni? Non li raggiungo mai, hai capito? Pecche io sono uno a leggere, loro sono milioni a scrivere.»]

During the Revolutionary War, the Connecticut schoolteacher Noah Webster (1758–1843) had come to believe that children could only learn to read ‘properly’ by pronouncing separately each individual syllable of writing. But they could not do this, he felt, unless the so-called ‘silent letters’ in English orthography were abandoned. So in his The American Spelling Book (1788), published shortly after the war, Webster introduced a distinctive American orthography in which the ‘historical u’ in such words as colour and honour was dropped, among other changes. [4879]

By 1850 literacy was enriching Europe’s north, illiteracy retarding Europe’s south and east. With 90 per cent of its population qualifying as ‘literate’ (a relative term), Sweden still led Europe in the number of those who could read, followed closely at 80 per cent by Scotland and Prussia. Both England and Wales were now 65 to 70 per cent literate, France 60 per cent. Spain could only claim 25 per cent literacy, Italy 20 per cent, followed by Greece and the Balkans. [4997]

Europe’s first such railway bookstall was W. H. Smith & Son at Euston Station, London, which opened in 1848. [5017]

For reading itself is the issue: the wealth of information that demands of every mature individual the daily exercise of rational choice, analysis, understanding. Those not yet mature, or simply overwhelmed by information overload, will neglect the nous for the noise. The scene’s greater lesson: there is indeed a way past the individual words, the cacophony of data. By turning information into knowledge (the reasoned distillation of experience) one can meet, understand and enrich one’s future. [5244]

There are always religious readers demanding only scripture be read, factual readers demanding only non-fiction be read, and even non-readers demanding nothing be read. [5330]

One might recall that, with the act of seeing, the mediæval Arab scholar Ibn al-Haytham distinguished between ‘pure sensation’ and ‘perception’, with pure sensation being unconscious or involuntary, perception, however, being a voluntary act of recognition – such as reading a page of text. [5618]

We do not mentally photocopy when we read, in other words. We process information on an individual bas

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{erika} says

One of the more interesting texts I have read for my LIS degree. Learned a lot of fun and relevant information and might have read for pleasure because I was curious about the subject matter which was much more detailed then I imagined.
