

Thinking Through the History of the Book

Réfléchir par l'histoire du livre

Leslie Howsam

Volume 7, numéro 2, printemps 2016

Générations et régénérations du livre
The Generation and Regeneration of Books

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1036851ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1036851ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Groupe de recherches et d'études sur le livre au Québec

ISSN

1920-602X (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Howsam, L. (2016). Thinking Through the History of the Book. *Mémoires du livre / Studies in Book Culture*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/10.7202/1036851ar>

Résumé de l'article

S'appuyant sur des travaux de recherche en histoire du livre à la fois nombreux et très fouillés, les chercheurs en sont venus à rejeter les anciens modèles axés sur le changement révolutionnaire et le déterminisme technologique pour explorer plutôt les thèmes de l'évolution et de la transformation organique. De la même manière, l'ancien récit d'une histoire du livre unitaire et eurocentriste cède la place à quantité de récits parallèles de l'adaptation, par l'humain, des nouvelles technologies aux besoins émergents et aux nouvelles occasions d'affaires. Cet article pose que l'étude de l'histoire du livre se prête en fait à une réflexion quant à la façon dont on confère une forme matérielle au savoir et aux histoires. Il fait état de propositions récentes particulièrement prometteuses et identifie la recherche, la théorie et la pédagogie en tant que vecteurs d'une compréhension plus vaste. Non plus abordée comme une discipline universitaire, l'histoire du livre est vue comme une « interdiscipline », un espace intellectuel au sein duquel des chercheurs préconisant des approches disciplinaires diverses se penchent sur une même et vaste catégorie conceptuelle.

THINKING THROUGH THE HISTORY OF THE BOOK

Leslie HOWSAM
University of Windsor

* Editor's note: The following text is taken from the keynote address delivered on the occasion of the 23rd Annual Conference of the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing "The Generation and Regeneration of Books / Générations et régénérations du livre." The traces of oral presentation have therefore been retained. Moreover, the audio file includes exchanges with the audience that followed the presentation. The audio file is accessible here: http://www.usherbrooke.ca/grelq/fileadmin/sites/grelq/documents/Colloques/SHARP_2015/ouverture_et_Leslie_Howsam_2015-07-07_1.mp3.

ABSTRACT

An impressive body of meticulous scholarship in the history of the book has led scholars to reject outmoded models of revolutionary change and technological determinism, and instead to explore themes of evolution and organic change. Similarly, the old unitary and Eurocentric book history is being supplanted by a series of parallel narratives where the focus is on human adaptation of new technologies to newly felt needs and fresh marketing opportunities. The article suggests that the study of book history is a way of thinking about how people have given material form to knowledge and stories. It highlights some particularly ambitious recent arguments, and emphasizes research, theory and pedagogy as the means to a wider understanding. Rather than being an academic discipline, book history is identified as an "interdiscipline," an intellectual space where scholars practicing different disciplinary approaches and methodologies address the same capacious conceptual category.

RÉSUMÉ

S'appuyant sur des travaux de recherche en histoire du livre à la fois nombreux et très fouillés, les chercheurs en sont venus à rejeter les anciens modèles axés sur le changement révolutionnaire et le déterminisme technologique pour explorer plutôt les thèmes de l'évolution et de la transformation organique. De la même manière, l'ancien récit d'une histoire du livre unitaire et eurocentriste cède la place à quantité de récits parallèles de l'adaptation, par l'humain, des nouvelles technologies aux besoins émergents et aux nouvelles occasions d'affaires. Cet article pose que l'étude de l'histoire du livre se prête en fait à une réflexion quant à la façon dont

on confère une forme matérielle au savoir et aux histoires. Il fait état de propositions récentes particulièrement prometteuses et identifie la recherche, la théorie et la pédagogie en tant que vecteurs d'une compréhension plus vaste. Non plus abordée comme une discipline universitaire, l'histoire du livre est vue comme une « interdiscipline », un espace intellectuel au sein duquel des chercheurs préconisant des approches disciplinaires diverses se penchent sur une même et vaste catégorie conceptuelle.

The title of this article is deliberately ambiguous, a double-entendre whose meaning depends on whether the emphasis goes on the “through” or the “thinking.” From one perspective, members of the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing (SHARP) and others who practice the book-historical disciplines should be *thinking through* our field of study—what it means and where it is going. In that sense, we are gradually working out the implications of the standard chronological and thematic narratives of book history—whether about beginnings and definitions; or about turning points and moments of rupture; or about material forms (and generic forms) and their places in history. That analytical process, of examining the story we started out with in order to build upon it, includes a stage of critiquing, perhaps eventually discarding, some conventional or received knowledge, and of incorporating the fresh knowledge that is been discovered in the past three decades of scholarship.

From another perspective, this title proposes a kind of thought experiment, focused on *thinking* (about whatever might be on one's mind) but with those thoughts intensified by using the intellectual lens offered by our field of study. That is the idea that books are good for thinking. As it happens, I'm going to talk about both these things, because I think they are connected to the broader question of how the history of the book gets defined and characterized, by practitioners and students and also by journalists and the general public.

Definitions of the history of the book are legion. Forced to come up with one myself recently, I wrote: “the history of the book is a way of thinking about how people have given material form to knowledge and stories. Knowledge and stories are intangible; it is their material forms that make them accessible across the barriers created by time and space. . . . Thinking about old books gives us access to traces of the past, and reminds us that

new books embody concrete evidence of the practices of our own time.”¹ Other scholars might define our field of study differently, perhaps by setting out to draft a unitary narrative of the book’s history, or by placing their own scholarship as a subdiscipline of literature, or history, or communication. Both of those approaches are valid on their own terms, but neither is really satisfactory for capturing the diversity and power of a shared way of thinking.

The call for papers for the 2015 SHARP conference in Montreal, with its connected themes of evolution and revolution, challenged book historians to think through what each of us means by the history of the book and to interrogate the models and paradigms we have inherited:

Models of revolution or conquest shape much of the general discourse on the history of the book, despite the fact that many excellent studies, in their details, demonstrate quite the opposite, showing rather the continuity and gradual migration of forms and practices in book culture. Oral story, manuscript, printed book, newspaper, e-book: each is reborn in the next in ways that more often than not amount to a complex accumulation rather than a clean replacement. In this sense, books and the book trade itself may be likened to genes, which both perpetuate themselves and change; they recombine with themselves while altering in response to their environment. SHARP 2015 presents the following challenge to the world book history community: can we reconsider the history of the book using models of transition, permeation, rebirth, inheritance, and/or organic transformation? How do books, book cultures, or book systems spread and readapt? What comes into view (or what fades) if a conceptual model of generational change is brought to bear on the question of how books are made? Are there areas in which a kind of revolutionary model is still appropriate?²

This is a richly challenging manifesto, and the final question in particular demands an answer. The classroom, where simple ideas can be discarded as more sophisticated ones emerge, is perhaps the only place where a kind of revolutionary model might be appropriate. In that safe pedagogical space, common cultural myths like “the conquest of print” or “the death of the

book” can be deconstructed and unpacked with the guidance of a skilled instructor. When a lesson on revolution-versus-evolution-in-book-history succeeds, students have their minds opened to thinking new thoughts, and wrestling with ideas that may contradict a lifetime of assumptions. I’ve taught this way myself, laying out a sort of notional “history of the book in five minutes”. I start—since you have to start somewhere—with writing on stone and bone; move on to writing on papyrus and parchment and then paper. Around the same time, the hugely important transition from scroll to codex happens, followed by an age of manuscript books. Somewhere in the middle of the story, Gutenberg and the beginning of printing are identified as *the* revolutionary and transformative moment, and as one that uncannily mirrors the new digital technology of our own time. Then onwards to the seventeenth century, where various knowledges circulate vigorously. Into the eighteenth, the novel begins to flourish and maybe there was a reading revolution. (Or maybe not, but something happened to the relationship that men and women had with the printed word, and it happened especially to women readers.) Then follow machine printing, cheaper mass-produced books and periodicals, and popular literacy in the nineteenth century; then photocomposition technology and paperback marketing strategies in the twentieth; and in the twenty-first, digital transmission of knowledge and news, of stories and data. And there the story ends, for the moment.

This is such a powerful chain of events that it is quite difficult to critique, but students can be guided to interrogate its compelling narrative. In particular they will notice that what we have here is a western and Eurocentric history. A lot of the story’s apparent inevitabilities have to do with the materials and practices that were used in that particular culture (which also happened to be an imperial culture)—and then got imposed, adopted and adapted in Europe’s colonies and elsewhere. In this sense, book history apparently becomes a global history only towards the end of its narrative. Another critique applies: the potted history applies a kind of technological determinism, especially where the printing press is concerned.

What students will learn as they read and study some of the latest research in book history is that not one of the several alternative material formats, alternative genres, and alternative reading practices was superseded entirely, even in Europe. Instead, each was largely displaced in the spheres where the new ones made sense. (But never entirely displaced.) It was, however, in the

interests of the people *selling* the various new technologies of the book to use the language of innovation and revolutionary change, and to suppress, even conceal, a narrative of media complexity.

So no, a revolutionary model is not appropriate—but scholars and teachers in our field still have to work and teach around that model’s powerful, persistent place in contemporary discourse. The e-book and the digitization of journalism are profoundly worrying to a lot of people. Meanwhile, they are a source of pride and profit to a lot of other people. And some of the latter are telling a story about books and history that suits their own corporate interests.

Can we tell a better five-minute version of the story of the history of the book? This time, our story will take into account what we have learned from the scholarship of the past few decades. We had better approach the question from thematic and theoretical perspectives, rather than from a strictly chronological, apparently empirical, one that tends to bury its theory in a narrative of inevitability.

This time I would offer three starting points. First, the book-shaped object people are so worried about losing should really be called “the print codex”—or something, anything but “the book”—because digital books are still books in the sense that they convey knowledge and stories in material form, and so were manuscript books. Not to mention that other material genres, notably periodicals and newspapers but also wampums and clay tablets, are part of the history of the book.³ D. F. McKenzie put it best, when he wrote a long time ago: “What we much too readily call ‘the book’ is a friskier and therefore more elusive animal than the words ‘physical object’ will allow.”⁴

Second: Whatever the material form, the book is mutable; as both text and object, it travels and it changes and keeps changing. Printing did not stop that happening, any more than digital is bound to start it happening—the essence of the knowledge or story the book conveys is a fusion of text and object that can take multiple forms, sometimes even forms that convey contradictory meanings. James Secord, invoking the metaphors of evolutionary change, calls this “literary replication.”⁵ A book, or part of one, might appear first in a newspaper, and migrate to a pamphlet. A reader

might experience its text indirectly, through a review, rather than by reading the authorized edition with which that knowledge/story is most closely associated. And even what seems to be the authorized text/object changes again and again—multiple printings (with revisions which might be identified or not)—multiple editions, perhaps new writers involved to keep it up to date, and so on and so on. The history of the printed book—which is only a subset of the history of the book—is largely a history of reprinting and revision.

And thirdly, historians know that the agency for change—in the forms and practices of book culture—lies not with the technology, but rather with the people who are *using* whichever technology they have at hand. Agency remains in the hands of authors, publishers and readers—and editors and booksellers and librarians, and all the other people whose labour, creativity, investment, knowledge, and responses together give shape to a book culture. Digital technology, like printing, paperback binding, stereotype plates, and all the other technologies that came before it, is powerful, but its power is in the hands of people—of makers and mediators, receivers and preservationists, proprietors and policy-makers.

If these three points begin to capture the history of the book—organized around the linked themes of mediating human agency and material mutability—the answer to the Montreal SHARP 2015 call for papers has to be “yes”: we can, and should, reconsider the history of the book using models of transition, permeation, rebirth, inheritance, and/or organic transformation. But if we are going to do something on such a large scale, how will we reconcile that scope and ambition with the kinds of projects we see on most conference programs and journal tables of contents? The kinds of projects most of us are engaged in may demonstrate these grand models, but they do it on a rather small scale. So small, in many cases, that they don’t seem to have much to contribute to the big picture.

History Books in the History of the Book

My own work offers an example of thinking on large and small scales simultaneously. I decided a few years ago that, rather than join the ranks of scholars researching the history of literary and scientific works, I should attend to the authorship, publishing, and reading of historical works—

academic histories, schoolbooks, nursery histories, book reviews, magazine articles—works of any genre and any format published in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Britain and concerned with the past. I want to demonstrate that—as with literature and science—publishers and the marketplace had agency in the making of history books. I want to persuade my historian colleagues that these works did not spring fully formed out of the heads of scholars like ourselves. (And hence, that the publishers, journal editors and publishing systems within which we work nowadays also have this kind of power and agency in the shaping of scholarly agendas.)

My research methodology is time-consuming: I go into the archives of publishers and read their correspondence with historian-authors, with their own editorial and sales staff, and sometimes with readers. There I learn about (for example) the dizzying complexity of the origin and use of a simple school history of England. The publisher recruits an author, and then persuades him or her to respond to market demands. The publisher also works with school boards whose curricular politics become a force to be reckoned with. Then a few years later, the author is dead but the book is not—so the publisher has to recruit an editor to add a couple of chapters to bring the thing up to date, and perhaps soften the earlier language, or change the emphasis a little to conform to new trends in pedagogy. And eventually, after decades' worth of records, I will find some evidence of the publishers' realization that this title, this product—this history book—has run its course. Meanwhile it has influenced thousands of children, who may or may not have recorded their impressions for the benefit of a Reading Experience Database. And some of those children will have grown up to become historians themselves, with the narrative of this simple school history of England—whichever of its many versions they happened to encounter—permeating their consciousness and influencing another generation of scholars and students.⁶

To get a grip on all that detail, I have to become a bibliographer and a textual editor in a small way—not to produce a proper critical edition, but at least enough to be able to demonstrate the sometimes-bizarre fluctuations of the texts and material forms of these books. I am not trying to say anything new about the history of the book in a global context, or even about the larger history of the book in modern Britain; my canvas is a lot smaller than that. I am writing a series of microhistories, in order to offer

my readers enough evidence to convince them in their several disciplinary capacities. I hope that book historians will see that history books are a category worth submitting to our methodologies; and I hope that general historians will see that book history can offer a new way to think about historiography, as a practice embedded in a book culture.

I am pretty ambitious for this project. I hope to be able to use the peculiarities of this curiously overlooked genre to say something about authorship, and publishing, and reading. The more you think about it, the odder history starts to look, when viewed as a publishing genre or a bookseller's category. Given that history is a matter of knowledge, not of creative writing, history books are all trying to tell what is, essentially, the same story about any given time and place. Whose intellectual property is the narrative of known events in the political history of England? Is it plagiarism to write, for a second publisher, a history exhibiting "disconcerting similarities" to the textbook you wrote a few years ago for their rival? Similarities that extend to the way the book has been pitched to teachers and school boards?⁷ And then, what kind of a genre is history, given the professionalization of the academic discipline, its embeddedness in universities, and its commitment to revision based on archival research and documentary analysis. How does all of that come into conflict with the market for school books, where the demand is for texts with minor tweaks, designed to enable instructors to retell and continue teaching an established narrative?

These are large questions. But even though the ambitions are big, the methodology is small, even plodding: reading letters in archives; calling up school histories in the special collections of research libraries and comparing them to other works in the same genre, or to other editions of the same book; and laboriously keeping track of the results of all this painstaking research. Sometimes the ambition gets lost in the detail. But as the SHARP 2015 call for papers observed, it is in the details that research demonstrates continuities and analysis strengthens the argument for an evolutionary model of change.

A Dozen Ambitious Projects from Practitioners of Book History

Ambition has not been absent among scholars of the history of the book, even though it is tempered with scholarly attention to theory as well as to empirical evidence. A dozen examples will demonstrate the reach and the variety of recent studies:

In the present volume of *Memoires du Livre / Studies in Book Culture*, Robert Darnton addresses the question of whether or not books caused the French Revolution.⁸

Anthony Glinoe (also in this volume) explains the role that fiction plays in popular stereotypes of the power of publishers.⁹

In *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (2000) the late Christopher Bayly revealed how information networks shaped the British Raj.

Meredith McGill made us see how American literature developed out of a “culture of reprinting,” the common practice of reproducing cheap, often pirated, works of English literature.¹⁰

Trish Loughran has questioned the truism that “imagined communities” have been created by shared experiences of reading novels and newspapers. Benedict Anderson’s much-cited work comes in for a stringent critique when Loughran applies some of the principles of book history.¹¹

Andrew Pettegree wants to make a Universal Short Title Catalogue, a collective database of all books published in Europe from the beginning of printing until the end of the sixteenth century.¹²

Simon Eliot got people around the world excited about developing a Reading Experience Database, a mechanism to capture those ephemeral shreds of evidence about ordinary people’s responses to books.¹³

Alistair McCleery wants us to put Germany, not the United Kingdom and United States, at the centre of a history of transnational publishing conglomerates in the long twentieth century.¹⁴

Jacques Michon showed how Québécois writers and publishers powered an articulate Francophone culture, despite sitting next door to the most eloquent Anglophone culture the world has ever known.¹⁵

Sydney Shep, deftly modelling a way to approach the basic research question about books, asks about “situated knowledges” in a multiform history that cannot be pinned down to a circuit of communication without skewing its meaning.¹⁶

Martyn Lyons has reopened the whole question of a history of writing, by changing the standard assumptions and parameters and looking at authorship from below, the writing experience of ordinary people.¹⁷

Germaine Warkentin is rethinking the history of the book from the philosophical ground up, situating her work in North America rather than in Europe, and with First Nations peoples rather than with the well-known figures of the European tradition.¹⁸

As this brief roundup suggests, there is no shortage of ambitious projects that look at the history of the book over long periods of historical time. And yet each of the ones I’ve mentioned, and dozens more, also depend on very close and detailed readings of material, contextual and textual evidence. And few if any of these scholarly projects can be captured in a brief journalistic story about the past and future of “what we much too readily call ‘the book.’” Whether it is a frisky animal or a string of DNA code, the subject with which we all concern ourselves resists both definition and metaphorical figuring. Its claims are vast, not least because a lesson that applies to one period or place does not necessarily apply in another.

It is unlikely that even the most experienced book historian would be familiar with all of the twelve publications and projects I have mentioned. Some are very new, and they span a wide range of time periods, of geographical places, and of academic disciplines. All they have in common is

ambition—and that indefinable “something” which has to do with thinking in terms of materiality, mediation, and mutability.

Projects that tackle a narrower scope also share these assumptions, and one like my work on historians, or yours on—whatever you are working on—is equally ambitious on a smaller scale. All of us depend on the community of book historians to recognize and identify the sort of thing we are doing, and to see it in comparison with other scholars’ research. When we go outside of book history, though, we are addressing colleagues and students in our home academic disciplines, or else we are addressing the general public where we write or speak in a more popular vein.

In discipline-specific contexts, the themes of materiality, mediation, and mutability will likely give way to a different conversation—in a French or English literature department, one about genres or national literatures; among the historians and communications specialists, a debate about national identity and the role of public spheres; and in libraries, capturing for the record every element of the precious objects that have survived from the past. Each disciplinary conversation uses the book, and cultures of the book, in its own way. But it is only the “interdiscipline” that is book history that uses the book as a way of thinking; it leaves all those specific issues a bit loose in order to perceive the way they form a pattern when viewed all together. When book historians convene together at conferences and symposia, we have a fleeting opportunity to change the conversation for a few days. That might account for SHARP’s reputation for warm and supportive collegiality.

A different sort of challenge presents itself, however, when the book historian addresses a non-academic audience, where disciplinary constraints and debates are sidelined. Here the task is to confront the prevalent model of revolution or conquest: that powerful myth of the triumph of digital technology over a conception of “print culture” that is narrow, restrictive and—all too often—downright wrong. Talking to the media is a chance to challenge common beliefs about digital textuality; (it is not free of cost, for example, just because it does not depend on paper or parchment). But the lesson of a book culture that is about transition and permeation is not one that can be conveyed in a 60-second sound bite. It takes a little time—preferably time spent reading some books and articles.

A Book History Manifesto?

If the study of book history is as ambitious, as rigorous, and as intellectually exciting as I have suggested, perhaps I ought to be calling for a Book History Manifesto. This might be an echo of *The History Manifesto* currently in circulation.¹⁹ Should I be making a clarion call for ambitious researchers and theorizers? Should I insist that we assert more forcefully our shared ways of thinking, both in the academy and in popular culture?

I do think we have a lot to impart about what our “interdiscipline” has accomplished and what it promises for the future. We could help policy-makers a great deal with such contemporary issues as open access, intellectual property, the textual survival of minority cultures, and the way in which ideas tend to morph as they move. In some institutions, book history might help reinvigorate the humanities curriculum, offering a fresh way to give students a body of knowledge relevant to their needs.

If we can clearly articulate an evolutionary model, we will have an answer to offer when we are asked to predict the future of the book, since we obviously do not (and cannot) know which of our contemporary publishing models, which genres and categories, which material supports, are going to be the dinosaurs, and which ones are going to adapt and survive. The formidable entity that was the Victorian quarterly journal, for example, reached a kind of dead end early in the twentieth century. When that happened, historical scholarship, scientific knowledge, and literary fiction all survived, but they also changed because they were working within new publishing paradigms. Maybe we have to answer the journalist’s question with a question: When you ask me to predict the future of “the book,” what aspect of that complex cultural phenomenon is it that you are talking about? And (by the way) what makes you think a historian—or a librarian, or a literary scholar, will know the answer, when our predecessors in past centuries had no idea of how the forms familiar to them were going to evolve?

The trouble is, that kind of answer is not a sound bite, and it will not fit into the 140 characters of a tweet. It will most likely result in the interview being spiked by the journalist’s editor because it does not say what he or she was expecting to hear.

Rather than think in terms of a manifesto, then, I think the project of book history comes back to pedagogy and to scholarship. If the journalist, her editor, and their readers had learned some book history in school and university, they would be in a better position to speak, write, and learn about new technologies and old ones. They would already know about the multiformity of print and the book, and about the way those forms and formats developed out of a thriving and functional manuscript culture in Europe—but emerged differently out of other media cultures in other places. They would remember learning about the mutability of texts, the clever ways that editors could manipulate the same text—the same book, or the same story or knowledge—to convey different messages. They would understand that the way societies think about how knowledge and stories are conveyed is a matter of the choices made by human agents: readers, writers, publishers, librarians, booksellers; parents and children; leaders and followers; teachers and students. They would also know that while there is specialized knowledge about the book which is beyond most of us—beyond all but a few experts in each knowledge category—nevertheless the idea of “the book”—or of “the history of the book” or of a “book culture”—is well within the grasp of anybody who has learned to think critically.

Critical thinking, or “media literacy” as it is sometimes called, has to do with understanding the interests, motives, and practices behind the messages that are ubiquitous in contemporary culture. In this sense, book history is an excellent training for media literacy, for understanding (for example) that history books do not spring fully formed from the heads of professors in Oxford; that a skilled editor and a canny publisher can make a novel more saleable than its creator could imagine; and that the history of science is not a matter of great men with revolutionary ideas who initiate paradigm shifts, but rather of the cautious application of trust and competence to ideas whose time has come. So much of the history of the book is the history of the business and commercial aspects of the various publishing cultures of the past. About trust in a product, about framing a product for the marketplace, about designating one work of art as literary and another as popular.

Book History: An Interdiscipline

But book history's great strength is also a weakness. It is hard to imagine a community of book historians speaking directly to policy-makers, not just because it is complicated, but also because book history is not, and never will be, an academic discipline. Instead, it is what I have been calling an "interdiscipline"—an intellectual space where like-thinking scholars bring their differing mindsets and methodologies to bear on material texts. This is a very fine thing, but still it lacks the cohesive power that academic disciplines possess. There is no shared methodology, just a number of different kinds of practices, each of which works within its own limited temporal, geographic and generic parameters: bibliographical analysis; archival research; textual editing or encoding; database creation, and so forth. What is shared is not method, and not subject matter, but rather that way of thinking, that sense of the creation, mediation and consumption of the objects of communication being crucial to the way that culture and society work. And all the more when those objects are multiplied. Not only medium and message, but also infrastructure.

The reason why definition and modelling are so difficult is that there are several histories of the book. Some are focused on the cultures of particular times and places, as the various national book-history projects of the last several years have demonstrated. Others are directed at particular genres, as in the case of the epic or of the novel; or selected publishing formats such as the paperback or the e-book; or at the mediation of intellectual cultures as in the case of religious, scientific or historical knowledge. There is an abstract history of the book, which is concerned with those big themes of materiality, mediation, and mutability—and there is another one so concrete that it addresses nothing beyond the description and analysis of a single work, one text/object in a global catalogue of millions.

Rather than get out my trumpet and call for book historians to address themselves to the world, I would rather propose that we keep on with what we are doing: researching, thinking theoretically, and teaching about the history of the book; meeting from time to time at conferences; and explaining to anyone who will listen that the history of the book is a big subject, that it is a way of thinking about how people have given material form to knowledge and stories. If that way of thinking can become part of

the educated imagination, then the history of the book will have fulfilled very big ambitions indeed.

Understanding how books work is not only part of a well-rounded education; books and book culture are good for thinking, part of the logic of everyday life. In a 1994 article in the *New York Review of Books* an eminent historian, one with an anthropological bent, suggested that “some things are especially good to think about.” Since the historian was Robert Darnton, you might be forgiven for guessing that he was referring to books, but in fact his argument on that occasion was that “sex is good for thinking.” Darnton asked readers to imagine themselves as anthropologists trying to make sense of a culture, observing that:

Many peoples do not think in the manner of philosophers, by manipulating abstractions. Instead, they think with things—concrete things from everyday life, like housing arrangements and tattoos, or imaginary things from myth and folklore, like Brer Rabbit and his briar patch. Just as some materials are particularly good to work with, some things are especially good to think about (*bonnes à penser*). They can be arranged in patterns, which bring out unsuspected relationships and define unclear boundaries.

Sex, I submit, is one of them. As carnal knowledge works its way into cultural patterns, it supplies endless material for thought, especially when it appears in narratives—dirty jokes, male braggadocio, female gossip, bawdy songs, and erotic novels. In all these forms, sex is not simply a subject but also a tool used to pry the top off things and explore their inner works. It does for ordinary people what logic does for philosophers: it helps make sense of things.

Even the most ardent book historian would be reluctant to suggest that books are as “sexy” as sex itself is, but they are just as good for thinking, especially when we conceptualize “the book,” a material object, as one of those concrete things. Exemplars of this object can be arranged in patterns. The patterns in question might be genres, or *oeuvres*, something as small as the arrangement of a library or a bookstore or as large as a national literature. It might be the way in which a new piece of writing makes its way through its initial readership and then moves outward, remade in fresh

formats, to reach new geographies and generations of reception. Or it might be about patterns of continuity and change, about evolution, permeation, rebirth and inheritance.

Leslie Howsam is Distinguished University Professor Emerita at the University of Windsor and Past-President of the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing. She is a Senior Research Fellow at the Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities. Publications include the edited *Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book* (2015), *Past into Print: the Publishing of History in Britain 1850–1950* (2009) and *Old Books & New Histories: An Orientation to Studies in Book & Print Culture* (2006).

Notes

¹ Leslie Howsam, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1.

² “Conference Theme, Call For Papers, SHARP 2015,” SHARP, accessed 2015, <http://sharp2015.ca/en/theme-call-for-papers/>.

³ For wampums see Germaine Warkentin, “In Search of ‘The Word of the Other’: Aboriginal Sign Systems and the History of the Book in Canada,” *Book History* 2 (1999), 1–27.

⁴ D. F. McKenzie, “The Sociology of a Text: Orality, Literacy and Print in Early New Zealand,” *The Library* 6th series, 6 (1984), 334.

⁵ James A. Secord, *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of “Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation”* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 126

⁶ For several examples, see L. Howsam, *Past into Print: the Publishing of History in Britain, 1850–1950* (London: The British Library; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

⁷ National Library of Scotland. John Murray Archive. Acc.13328/195/EI14. This file tells the story of Robert M. Reyner’s *Middle School History of England* (several editions ca 1930s), in a correspondence between John Murray and Longman over competing books by the same author.

⁸ <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1036853ar>

⁹ <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1037044ar>

-
- ¹⁰ Meredith L. McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834–1853* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).
- ¹¹ Trish Loughran, “Books in the Nation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book*, ed. Leslie Howsam, 36–52.
- ¹² Andrew Pettegree, *The Universal Short Title Catalogue* (online resource based at St Andrews University: <http://www.ustc.ac.uk/>); see also *The Book in the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).
- ¹³ “UK RED, the Reading Experience Database,” The Open University, last accessed 2015, <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK>.
- ¹⁴ Alistair McCleery, “The Book in the Long Twentieth Century,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book*, ed. Leslie Howsam, 162–80.
- ¹⁵ Jacques Michon, *Histoire de l'édition littéraire au Québec au XXe siècle*. 3 vol. (Montreal: Fides, 1999; 2004; 2010).
- ¹⁶ Sydney Shep, “Books in Global Perspectives,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book*, ed. Leslie Howsam, 53–70.
- ¹⁷ Martyn Lyons, *The Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe, c1860–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012; repr. 2014).
- ¹⁸ Germaine Warkentin, “Dead Metaphor or Working Model? ‘The Book’ in Native America,” in *Colonial Mediascapes: Sensory Worlds of the Early Americas*, ed. Matt Cohen and Jeffrey Glover (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 47–75. See also: *Writing as Material Practice: Substance, Surface and Medium*, eds. Kathryn E. Piquette and Ruth D. Woodhouse (London: Ubiquity Press, 2013), *A Lakota War Book from the Little Big Horn: The Pictographic Autobiography of Half Moon*, ed. Castle McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Library and Peabody Museum Press, 2013), and *The Library*, 7.16.2, June 2015, 195–200.
- ¹⁹ Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). A revised version is available online as an Open Access publication at: <http://historymanifesto.cambridge.org/>.

Bibliography

- Cavallo, Guglielmo and Roger Chartier, eds. *A History of Reading in the West*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999.
- Darnton, Robert. For a list of publications, many supplied with links to full text, see <http://www.robertdarnton.org/publications>.
- Fraser, Robert and Mary Hammond, eds. *Books without Borders*. 2 vols. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Howsam, Leslie, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

———. “Academic Discipline or Literary Genre?: The Establishment of Boundaries in Historical Writing.” *Victorian Literature & Culture* 32:2 (2004), 525–45.

———. *Past into Print: The Publishing of History in Britain, 1850–1950*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009.

Lyons, Martyn. *The Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe, c. 1860–1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. First published 2012.

McGill, Meredith L. *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834–1853*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

McKenzie, D. F. *Making Meaning: “Printers of the Mind and Other Essays.”* Edited by Peter D. McDonald and Michael F. Suarez. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002.

McKitterick, David. *Old Books, New Technologies: The Representation, Conservation and Transformation of Books since 1700*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Michon, Jacques. *Histoire de l'édition littéraire au Québec au XXe siècle*. 3 vols. Montreal: Fides, 1999–2010.

Patten, Eve and Jason McElligott, eds. *The Perils of Print Culture: Book, Print and Publishing History in Theory and Practice*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Piper, Andrew. *Book Was There: Reading in Electronic Times*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

Raven, James. *The Business of Books: Booksellers and the English Book Trade*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

Secord, James A. *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of “Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation.”* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Suarez, Michael and Henry Woodhuysen. *The Oxford Companion to the Book*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Warkentin, Germaine. “In Search of ‘The Word of the Other’: Aboriginal Sign Systems and the History of the Book in Canada.” *Book History* 2 (1999), 1–27.