

# A Book by Any Other Name...

From beech bark to vellum and beyond, *Ralph Stanton* examines the shifting forms—and definitions—of the so-called book.



*Johannes Gutenberg;  
a sculpture at the  
Gutenberg Museum,  
Mainz, Germany.*

WE ALL KNOW WHAT a book is, don't we? It's a small plastic device with a screen that allows us to download texts from the Internet.

Is that not what came to mind when you read the title of this article? In this era of e-books and tablet computers, a little confusion may be present, so let's try to define exactly what is meant by the word "book."

*The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (1971) seems like a good starting point. The entry for books starts by telling us that there are variant spellings of the word, including b6c, booc, boc, bok, boke, booke, bock, boock, buk, buke, buick and buik. The origin of the word is Teutonic and the original meanings were writing-tablet, leaf or sheet. There is thought to be a connection with the name of the beech tree, b6c, in that beech wood or bark was once written upon.

The dictionary's definitions for the word require two pages of dense type and include "a written document... a narrative or account... a written or printed treatise... that in which we may read... subdivisions of a larger work... sheets of blank paper brought together as in an account-book... a packet of gold-leaf," and so on.

*Glaister's Glossary of the Book* (1960) offers a UNESCO definition: "...literary publication of

forty-nine pages or more not counting the covers."

*The Oxford Companion to the Book* (2010) offers several definitions: "any of the many kinds of text that have circulated in written or printed forms and the material objects through which these words and images are transmitted, and, a chapter or part of a whole text."

John Carter's *ABC for Book Collectors* (1995) doesn't bother to define the word, but Rose Folsom's *Calligraphers' Dictionary* (1990) has a definition that I like:

Single sheets of SKIN, BARK, PAPER, POPYRUS, fabric or dried leaves, single TABLETS or strips of clay, wood or bone, or any other single writing or printing surfaces, which are attached to each other to form a unit.

This expansive definition allows more ancient media to be admitted to the category and by implication, at the other end of the time line, provides an opening for us to include digital media like the various e-books.

Roberts and Etherington's *Bookbinding and the Conservation of Books* (1982) adds to the above definition "a continuous roll of parchment," that is, a scroll. The same source lets us know that a scroll

is “a roll of material, e.g. parchment...rolled onto rods,” and goes on to note that the Romans used the word *volumen* (roll) to describe this object. From *volumen*, of course, we derive our word “volume.” Typically two, three or more scrolls were needed to record a longer text. So the multi-volume text was common in the ancient world.

#### FROM SCROLL TO CODEX

Around the first century CE the scroll began to be replaced by the *codex* or *codex*. This new form of the book was strongly associated with the growth of Christianity, which embraced it for its Scriptures. In Latin, the word *codex* means a tree trunk or stem stripped of bark. The original book-related meaning of this word described two or more tablets of wood, metal, ivory or papyrus held together with rings. But soon vellum was used in place of earlier materials and a model of the future paper-based book was born.

So now the simple definition found in Haller’s *Book Collectors Fact Book* (1976), “A collection of sheets of paper fastened together and bound in wrappers or in covers,” itself lifted almost word for word from *The Bookman’s Concise Dictionary* (1956), is enough to describe the common 20th-century book. This last-mentioned work provides 80 related terms all starting with “book”! And, for lovers of the trivial, it adds that the contractions of this word are b. or bk. or bb. in the plural.

One of the modern definitions of book is “subdivisions of a larger work,” as, for example, the book of Ruth from the Bible. The transmission of ancient texts from multi-volume scrolls to the codex results in the common use of numbers in titles, as in, for example, *The Ten Books on Architecture*, by the first-century Roman architect Vitruvius. This system of subdividing important sections of a single work into “books” was carried forward into the Renaissance, for example, *The Four Books on Architecture* by Andrea Palladio.

#### BOOK AS ÜBER-CHAMELEON

We have to account for the book after the codex. This is a complex issue because the book is being transformed in two directions. Marshall McLuhan, who said that art forms emerge when technology becomes outdated, predicted the first transformation. The codex starts to become an art form, and it is not easy to draw a line on the page to say where the book ends and the art form begins. The second

transformation is the invention of e-books.

I believe we are obliged to accept the e-book as a legitimate form of the book. First since, as we have seen, the existence of multiple texts in one container is nothing new. Second since, from the precedent of the transformation from the book as a scroll to the book as a codex, the transit from one form to another is one of the characteristics of the book itself. Third since e-books conform to the definition “that in which we may read.” And fourth since makers of these devices admit the obvious when they name their creations, that is, they call them books, e-books and e-book readers.

Strictly speaking the plastic device described at the opening of this article is an e-book reader. But, as with the codex, the e-book’s content and form are conflated so that in common use an e-book reader is usually called an e-book, although in fact it typically contains dozens if not hundreds of e-books.

The presence of the word “reader” is interesting in this usage, since one of its meanings is “a book of collected or assorted writings.” The adaptive capacity of this new form of the book is only beginning to show itself, and its future transformations can only be awaited with keen anticipation. We can conclude that the book is a rather sneaky thing that has shown, and continues to show, a capacity to transform itself that would make an adept chameleon envious.

There are about 150 historical museums, collections and workshops in Europe mainly concerned with printing and the history of paper. Almost half are in Germany; France and the Netherlands round out the top three countries with an evident enthusiasm for documenting the history of books in this way. These numbers do not include many museums that are highly specialized, like museums of comic books, nor do they include many interesting collections in museums that cover wider subjects.

I hope, in future articles, to look at specific European sites where the history and evolution of the book is documented and will use what is found there to say some more about the b6c, booc, bok—or whatever word you care to use for this favourite item.

The first in a series of occasional articles by *Ralph Stanton*, head of Rare Books & Special Collections at the Irving K. Barber Learning Centre at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and a director of the Alcuin Society.