

The Book, Unfolded (Part 1)

ROBIN MITCHELL CRANFIELD zooms out to gain perspective
on the varied meanings of the book today.

*I don't think it's cool to spend the present
anticipating the future.*

—Kena Hara, *Books as Information Sculpture*

IN 1977 RAY AND CHARLES EAMES made a short film for IBM called *Powers of Ten*. The film begins with a couple sharing a picnic on a blanket in a Chicago park, on “a lazy afternoon, early one October.” The woman picks up a book and begins to read, while the man falls asleep next to her, one book in his hand,¹ and others scattered next to him. The camera is above him, so that he is situated within a metre-square space, with his free hand at the centre of the frame. Every 10 seconds, the camera zooms out vertically and the picnic scene shrinks within the frame as we pull away by powers of 10 until we are at the edge of the known universe. Then we zoom back towards the earth, again by powers of 10, eventually reaching the man’s hand, and then continuing on into his skin until we are within a single carbon atom surrounded by quarks. This extreme macrocosmic level looks similar to deep space; we seem to discover a matching viewpoint at the end of each scale. *Powers of Ten* is based on an illustrated book about scale called *Cosmic View* (1957) by Kees Boeke, a Dutch educator and pacifist. In the preface to *Cosmic View*, Boeke wrote: “At school we are introduced to many different spheres of existence, but they are often not connected with each other, so that we are in danger of collecting a large number of images without realizing that they all join together in one great whole.”

When I teach book design, the first applied lesson I give is also on scale and proportion. If they aren’t directed to do otherwise, it is natural for new students to begin building their page layout on the default letter-sized document in InDesign, ready to jump into typeface options as their first design choice. But the book is an object we relate to with our bodies, and observing that relationship is important.



Scene from *Powers of Ten*.
(Garry Ing/Flickr)

The scale of the page to our hand, the space for our thumbs in the margins, and the size of the type relative to our eyesight—these are all foundational to our experience of the printed book, so book design needs to begin here too.

In *Powers of Ten*, our perspective shifts from extreme positions as a way to present and maybe even to understand the nature of the cosmos itself. Considering the universe in its entire vastness like this can feel wondrous; it can also feel overwhelming and provoke anxiety. As designers themselves, the Eameses know how to direct our experience: they structure and contextualize our journey by factors of 10. Similarly, book design provides structure and context, which can focus and even calm the reader—producing an ideal state of mind to engage in long-form texts. Longer lines of text in a book’s interior pages can slow the eyes and the heart rate; serified words made of upper- and lower-case letters create easily identifiable, familiar word shapes. Designers aim to make this landscape feel comfortable for the reader as they set out to explore the new ideas within the texts they encounter.

SHOULD WE KISS OUR BOOKS?

I designed my first book in 2001, and I've been aware since that time that the format of the book is considered by many people to be in danger. Debate and predictions about the printed codex have been a constant throughout my career. Kenya Hara—best known as the lead designer at MUJI, and a book designer himself—writes in his book *Designing Design* (2007) that we should avoid predictions, pointing to the bold, futuristic predictions of the 20th century that, now faded and irrelevant, “do not excite us today.” In his book, Hara is attempting to translate his design approach into words—“in itself an act of design”—while locating his practice within both Japanese and Western design histories. One significant difference that Hara stresses, both in his writing and when being interviewed, is a tendency in Western culture to classify ideas in binary terms (man vs. nature) and in hierarchical terms (nature must be controlled by man) rather than viewing individual elements as part of a larger whole (man is formed by nature).

In approaching the book, Hara prefers not to classify the printed book in opposition to digital media, but rather to define it as one available information format—one of an increasing number of formats available to the reader—for which he has both fondness and respect. Rather than making predictions about the book, Hara grounds his understanding of the changing role of the book in *observation*. He considers the book's current effectiveness as a medium (he finds it still effective today) as well as the inherent appeal of paper itself, a material Hara loves so much that he considers it to be one of the three greatest inventions of all time. Hara suggests that when paper was the default medium for communication, it was an “unconscious surface” but it may be that, “today, paper, stepping down from the principal role of medium and freed from practical duties, can once again be allowed the charming behaviour of its intrinsic nature: a material.”

I have noticed something similar in conversations I have with clients who publish books: what is special about printed books becomes clearer to us when print is not the default option. At this moment in time, it



.....
Michel de Montaigne.

might be that we are experiencing more consciously the book as a designed object. We are not the first generation to experience a shift in our relationship with the book. How did people think and feel about books after the invention of the codex, but before they could be reproduced mechanically? Erasmus and Petrarch felt compelled to “kiss volumes like holy relics,” while Machiavelli changed out of his workday clothes into “robes of court and palace” before entering his library as a mark of respect for it. (In the present, as I write this onscreen, I have five books scattered on my desk and my computer monitor is sitting on three others. How could I explain this to Erasmus?)

In contrast to these deeply reverential readers, people born into the newly post-Gutenberg Europe of the 16th century began to have the luxury of treating the book as an accessible object. This was a generational shift. With diminished paper prices, commercial publishing flourished, creating an expanding market and a new appetite for content written in the vernacular. Private citizens began to build small libraries of their own, something which became increasingly fashionable as the century after the invention of the printing press wore on.

In the context of these changes and trends in the 16th century, the French writer and philosopher Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592)

began writing in a new style: the personal essay. Collected and published, his *Essais* became a bestseller in its time. In her recent biography of Montaigne, Sarah Bakewell describes his approach as “writing about oneself to create a mirror in which other people recognize their own humanity.” Insightful, and as sincere as it is playful, Montaigne’s writing was most of all dedicated to investigating a key question of the Renaissance era: *how to live*. These informal, personal essays would probably not have been imaginable as content for a book in the time of the scriptoria. Faster and cheaper printing and reproduction technologies made his book a possibility. It wasn’t just that he, as a writer, could access the technology to have his text reproduced (and then to reproduce edited, rewritten editions later in his life), but that publishers were increasingly in need of new and accessible content to sell. Right after the turn of the 21st century, when online publishing (particularly the rise of blogs) meant that there was similarly both a market and a marketplace for quickly produced content with broad appeal, the personal essay experienced a new golden age. This time, a sudden proliferation in the written vernacular was facilitated by the “invisible hand of the page-view economy,” as Jia Tolentino describes it in her 2018 article for the *New Yorker*, “The Personal-Essay Boom Is Over.”

The rise of the written vernacular in the 16th century had some wonderful consequences, including new literary styles and a wider range of information available to be shared. But it also led to increased social and political fragmentation and new-found power struggles. Montaigne, for example, wrote his own gently funny essays about everyday life against a backdrop of gruesomely bloody battles between Protestants and Catholics in France that extended beyond his lifetime.

As Hara points out, a common assumption at the turn of the latest century has been that digital and print media form a kind of competitive binary, not a continuum. Arguably, that assumption may have limited our ability to understand what kinds of challenges the Internet—itself a kind of library—might actually present. Looking at it from a greater distance, the main challenge the Internet presented

to us may not have been toward the printed book, specifically, but rather to our greater social fabric and sense of shared community. With this in mind, it’s worth rethinking how we approach our understanding of the printed book in the 21st century and how we consider its future. The ramifications of the ways in which different types of information are able to spread as a consequence of new media forms is something that deserves our critical attention.

THE 21ST-CENTURY BOOK

Although intending to protect and preserve the book as a format, we might have instead become too fixated on a very tiny corner of a universe that, as we can see in *Powers of Ten*, is actually quite rich and complex. We hover over that first metre above our blanket, keeping an eye on our picnic as if it might be snatched away from us at any moment. It’s understandable that we do this: we were and still are encouraged to feel anxious by a drumbeat of predictions and overconfident think pieces (often driven in part by advertising for new technology) on the “death of the book,” the “death of print” and the “death of long-form writing.” These arguments have their corollary in the “I still love ‘real books’—they smell great” declarative essay. As a print book designer, I have always felt a little disloyal about this, but I don’t like those essays very much. The premise, which is essentially a binary, doesn’t feel right to me. I once saw a U.S. marine on Twitter ask if the tablet on which he reads books when deployed overseas “counts” less. I have the same question.

In his online essay “Do Audio Books Count as Reading?” author James Tate Hill describes his transition to a reader as a child once he gained access to an audio library for the visually impaired. At first he checked out audio books based on familiar movies, and then ventured into new and original texts, eventually becoming a writer himself. Hill had never been a willing reader of codices—skipping ahead impatiently through his *Choose Your Own Adventures* to find the quickest possible route to an ending—but audio access made him an enthusiastic one. Like the marine on Twitter, however, Hill also wonders if what he reads “counts.” Paraphrasing Sven Birkerts in *The Gutenberg Elegies*, Hill comments,

“Listening to a book shares more with the act of watching television than reading print, and given my own seamless transition from watching TV with my ears to reading talking books, I’m in no position to refute his comparison.”

In his essay, Hill shares how his sense of himself as a reader and writer is impacted by a culture in which the act of reading text is considered to be a more authentic and, as he describes it, a more “pure” engagement with written text than listening to a narrator read it aloud. When well-meaning friends in his social media feed describe themselves as “only” listening to a book, what do they mean? When one of Hill’s professors offers René Descartes’ claim that sight is “the noblest” of the five senses to his class for discussion, where does this leave the reader who, like Hill, doesn’t have a strong sense of sight? Hara, for his part, approaches our range of senses differently than Descartes. In conversation with the Dutch podcast *Typeradio*, Hara reflects: “Every sense is combined. Sight is not solitary. Sight is related to smell and touch and hearing.” According to Hara, the emphasis we currently place on our sense of sight is a cultural imbalance. In Hara’s estimation, the haptic qualities of the codex are central to its value. This actually puts him in agreement with the champions of printed books in Hill’s essay, the ones like Oliver Sacks, who, upon losing his eyesight, mourned the loss he experienced of



.....
*Spread from a sample book for Takeo Paper,
designed by Kenya Hara.*

“real books”—the printed codex—and the many who, without thinking, position tablets and audio books as less authentic. The difference, I think, is that Hara finds joy in the form of the paper codex, without diminishing the value of other formats. To me, this is not only a much more practical approach, it is also kinder and more open, more interesting. Using this lens, I can sympathize deeply with Sacks about his loss of access to the codex experience, but I can also consider Hill’s reading life as authentic in its own right.

Descartes’ impulse to rank our senses rather than to consider them as equal parts of a whole brings me back to Montaigne, whose essays Descartes found so dangerously heretical that he wished to censor them. Montaigne’s openness to multiple perspectives (including that of his cat) alarmed Descartes, who felt that this kind of lack of order and hierarchy left him “lost in this nook of the universe not knowing who put us here, what we have come to achieve, what will become of us when we die, incapable of all knowledge.” Thinking of this loss, Descartes said, “I become frightened, like someone taken in his sleep to a terrifying deserted island who wakes up with no knowledge of what has happened, nor means of escape.” He was not alone in these intense fears: Montaigne’s books were eventually banned in France for more than 200 years. But they never disappeared: the *Essais* are currently available online and in print. Bridging history, the golden age of the personal essay helped propel him to a renewed significance in the digital age.

To finish tracing the constellation formed by Hill, Descartes, Hara and Montaigne, I think finally of the connection between the written and oral tradition in Montaigne’s own writing. When his best friend Étienne de La Boétie died tragically young, he left his library of Greek manuscripts to Montaigne. Montaigne felt that his discussions with La Boétie were foundational to his own thought; he wrote partly in response to remembered conversations with his friend. And so, accompanied by his grief, the oral tradition was infused into Montaigne’s writing, along with the Greek philosophers he and La Boétie discussed passionately in their youth, whose own tradition was both oral and written.

We are now living about 1,600 years after the

invention of the codex, 1,100 years after the oldest surviving printed book was printed, almost 600 years after the incunabula, and nine years after the invention of the iPad. The book's stubborn refusal to die as of 2018 hasn't diminished the grim predictions about its future. If anything, the predictions have gotten bolder. This past winter, the *New York Times* ran an article titled "Welcome to the Post-Text Future" predicting the end of text itself. Published online, the article was illustrated with images of people with grave expressions and writing on their bodies, which would surprise the viewer by moving subtly. Graphically, it was convincing for a split second, suggesting a glossy new world of glass pages populated with live, breathing people, not still—old, dead—letters. But the article itself was written in text, and I found it through Twitter, which is primarily a text-based platform. The article did not seriously consider the history of text-based communication, nor did it consider its own present-day context. It was making bold predictions without the clarity provided by cool, grounded observation.

In the end, a better metaphor for the book might not be the Eameses' picnic scene, but the grass underneath it. Some blades of grass are books, but some are also broadsides, newspapers, love letters and even tweets, and these blades cross-pollinate by way of flowers in the larger, shared green they are all part of. A reader can wander across the blades to investigate further afield without worrying that it all might disappear while they aren't on guard. With extended neglect, the grass could wither and die. It requires care, and it deserves it too: its roots combine to keep the soil from eroding. But this is normal maintenance, not an ongoing emergency. There is time and space to explore, and also to observe. When you lie down surrounded by your books and have a nap in the sun, the grass continues to grow, and it will still be there when you open your eyes.

¹ The book is *The Voices of Time* by Julius Thomas Fraser. The book lying next to it displays an enormous clock face on the cover. The camera begins to pull away from the earth as the man loses consciousness, echoing the beginning of *Alice in Wonderland*, as Alice

falls asleep next to her reading sister, meeting a rabbit with a pocket-watch, who leads her to exit the scene by an enormous vertical fall that she estimates at about 4,000 miles—the distance to the centre of the earth—but which she lacks the tools to gauge accurately.

.....
~ Robin Mitchell Cranfield is a graphic designer based in Vancouver, BC, and a director of the Alcuin Society. She was profiled in *Amphora*, no. 152 (Summer 2009).

The second part of this article appears on page 13 of this issue.

SUGGESTED READING

K. Boeke, *Cosmic View*, New York, John Day, 1957.

Powers of Ten, dir. Charles and Ray Eames, USA, IBM, 1977.

K. Hara, *Designing Design*, Baden, Lars Müller, 2007.

'Kenya Hara 1/2,' *Typerradio*, [podcast], Typerradio, 2008, http://www.podcasts.com/typeradio_podcast/episode/kenya_hara_12.

J.T. Hill, 'Do Audio Books Count As Reading?' *Literary Hub*, 11 January 2018, <https://lithub.com/do-audio-books-count-as-reading/>.

F. Manjoo, 'Welcome to the Post-Text Future,' *New York Times*, 9 February 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/02/09/technology/the-rise-of-a-visual-internet.html>.

J. Tolentino, 'The Personal-Essay Boom is Over,' *The New Yorker*, Cultural Comment, 18 May 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/jia-tolentino/the-personal-essay-boom-is-over>.