

business cards, a handy form of inexpensive advertising that descended from the more elaborate trade card, which had been in use for some time.

The first cards were simple typographic designs, the printer being limited to whatever types, borders, and decorative material he had in his shop. Later, wood engravers were available to supply custom engravings of buildings, shop fronts, or merchandise. Type foundries soon offered “stock cuts” in the form of copper electrotypes, along with an ever-widening selection of type faces, ornaments and borders. With the addition of the printer’s own “artistry,” such as setting type at angles or in odd shapes, Victorian printing design came into its own.

Today, we look on this period as quaint because we are so far removed from it, but at the time people of “taste” were appalled, and their opinions are summed up by this quote from Clarence Hornung’s *Early Advertising Art*:

*“No lettering was too vile for the type founder to defile his moulds with; the insane contortions of typographical arrangements, the diagonal setting and diamonds of the compositor were abortions. Then came the crowning tragedy of all—the public liked it.”*

## BOOK REVIEWS

### *A Book Worth Revisiting*

*The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age.* Sven Birkerts, Faber and Faber, Boston/London, 1994.

I have heard it said that people do not like to read books that disagree too strongly with their own opinions or biases. On the other hand reading a book that disagrees to a moderate degree with one’s own ideas can be a stimulating experience.

I found Sven Birkerts wonderful book *The Gutenberg Elegies* one that alternately supported my own biases and preconceptions in what I call the “Gutenberg” section of the book, and yet definitely challenged my own opinions in what I have termed the “Elegies” section.

### *The Power of Reading*

The “Gutenberg” section of the book, entitled “The Reading Self” by Birkerts, is a poetically written testimony to the power of reading in our lives. However not just any reading, for Birkerts carefully delineates between what he calls “horizontal reading” and “vertical reading.” Horizontal reading is only too common in a world that bombards every person with too many “bits” of information. Television newscasts offer brief sound and picture bites which juxtapose serious stories about world disasters alongside quickly forgotten stories about the latest car accident or house fire. Newspapers are a crazy mélange of serious stories about in-

ternational terrorism juxtaposed with the latest fashion news, sports scores, comics and advertisements for fast food companies. The Internet has justly been called by one observer the "great information swamp." Horizontal reading may inform us, but it can also confuse us and make us feel alienated and empty.

Birkerts argues for the nourishing power of vertical reading, that is "serious" reading, particularly the type of reading that is discovered so well in literary works of art. This type of reading helps to enhance the human soul, helps to create fully mature human beings who if they are not fully at peace in their world at least approach some understanding of what that broader world is all about and of their place in that world.

As Birkerts expresses it:

My use of soul is secular. I mean it to stand for inwardness, for that awareness we carry of ourselves as mysterious creatures at large in the universe. The soul is that part of us that smelts meaning and tries to derive a sense of purpose from experience.

I found myself continually nodding in agreement with Birkerts' assertions about the vital importance of reading to the process of human growth. So how could I possibly disagree with him, how could I have been challenged by a set of ideas I supported so wholeheartedly? The answer is that I began to feel uncomfortable, began to disagree, when Birkerts moved from the "Gutenberg" part of his book to the "Elegies" part.

An "elegy" is defined in the dictionary as "a mournful or melancholy poem," and "elegaic" as "sad, mournful, melancholy."

The second and third parts of Birkerts' book, "The Electronic Millennium," and "Critical Mass: Three Meditations," constitute the melancholy or elegaic part of the work. Here Birkerts bemoans the passing of serious reading which he views as being steadily and inevitably replaced by a new electronic sensibility in the world. But I will let Birkerts speak for himself:

As the world hurtles on toward its mysterious rendezvous, the old art of slowly reading a serious book becomes an elegaic exercise... the whole familiar tradition of the book. All around us, already in place, are the technologies that will render it antiquated (p. 17).

There are, we know this, fewer and fewer readers for serious works (p. 28).

The printed word is part of a vestigial order that we are moving away from – by choice and by societal compulsion... away from patterns and habits of the printed page and toward a new world distinguished by its reliance on electronic communications (p. 132).

...we are as a culture, as a species, becoming shallower (p. 228).

It is true there are brief flickers of hope and even a note of rebellion in these last two parts of the book, when Birkerts observes "that the need for the writer is right now probably as great as ever," (p. 208) and where he confesses that "We may discover, too, that language is a hardier thing than I have allowed." He even ends his book with a call to arms to reject a world where "Bottomless wells of data are accessed and manipulated," and where

serious reading plays little or no part: "Refuse it" he asserts (p. 229).

### *Will Serious Reading be Replaced?*

Despite these few sallies in defense of reading, however, the overriding message of these parts of the book is inescapable, that serious or in-depth reading will inevitably and irreversibly be replaced by the millions and billions of bytes of information that assault all of us every day of our lives. And this frankly is where I part company with Birkerts. It is true that I cannot offer him any scientific or empirical evidence that he is wrong in the conclusions he draws about the future of serious reading. I can only offer some anecdotal evidence about reading in today's world along with an intuitive sense that places a much greater faith in the resilience and common sense of human beings.

First I would have to observe such a phenomenon as the Canadian best sellers list a few weeks ago. The remarkable thing about the fiction list is that the top ten fiction titles were all works of literary fiction. There was not one work of popular fiction in the top ten list. Readers were buying and reading titles by well established fiction writers like Alice Munro, Timothy Findley, Jane Urquhart, Richard Ford and Ian McEwan, less well known, but established literary writers like Richard B. Wright and Sandra Birdsell, and newer literary writers like Dennis Bock, Jonathan Franzen and Michael Crummy.

I would also point to the popularity of reading clubs and the fact that members of these clubs are not necessarily following Oprah, but are choosing demanding works of fiction and non-fiction to both

read and discuss. In recent months my wife's club, for example, has read and discussed Charlotte Gray's biography of Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill (*Sisters in the Wilderness*), Alistair MacLeod's wonderful novel *No Great Mischief*, and Sky Lee's novel *Disappearing Moon Café*. All quality books that easily constitute "serious" reading. And so I would judge that what Robertson Davies called the "Clerisy," those who read for pleasure and with some pretension to taste, are indeed out there and alive and doing well.

To finish, since Birkerts speaks of his daughter's reading, I will use my own son's reading as an example of how young people have not abandoned reading in a world that is becoming increasingly electronic. My twelve-year-old David is as enamoured of television and video games as the next boy. He is, however, also a passionate reader and has the ability to read at an adult level. For children's books he, like every other youngster today, has enjoyed the Harry Potter books, but he is also reading the demanding fantasy fiction of Philip Pullman. For adult books he has so far read *The War of the Worlds*, *Dune*, *Lord of the Flies*, and *Fahrenheit 451*. I think there is something in human nature that may temporarily be stimulated by the marvels offered by electronic technologies like computers, DVD machines, video cameras, and the Internet. But there is also something in human nature that eventually and rather inevitably tires of these electronic divertissements. There is something in human nature that makes people hunger for a deeper, more enriching experience, an experience that is so well

satisfied by the reading of challenging and well written books.

So, to conclude, if you are the sort of serious reader who likes to have your own opinions supported and cosseted by an author then I recommend that you read Section 1 of Sven Birkerts' *Gutenberg Elegies*. If in turn you are the sort of serious reader who likes to have his or her views and ideas challenged then I in turn challenge you to read Sections 2 and 3 of the *Gutenberg Elegies*. If you are the well rounded reader, one of the Clerisy, however, you will of course read the entire book.

*Richard Hopkins*

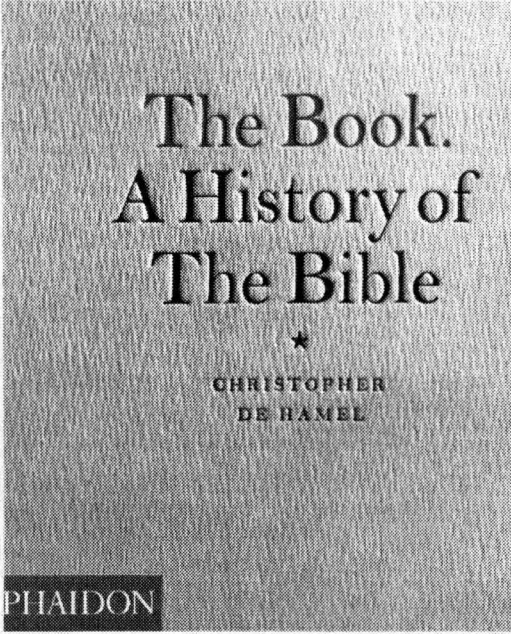
### *The Bible as a Book*

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*The Book. A History of the Bible.* Christopher de Hamel. Phaidon Press Limited, London & New York, 2001. Square octavo, cloth over boards, jacket, 352 pp. Retail C\$59.95

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AS de Hamel writes in his introduction, the title of this book could as easily be *The Bible. A History of the Book*: "[the] constant reshaping of the same text makes the Bible so fascinating as a book." Coming on the tails of a century that saw some of the most extravagant editions ever printed (the Arion and Pennyroyal editions are the most recent, but think back to the Doves and Bruce Rogers projects, the deluxe Gutenberg facsimiles, etc), this survey of the Bible's incarnations since the earliest existing manuscripts is an excellent primer on the broader topic of the book as object. The book's first half begins with Saint Jerome's translations in the fourth century AD and spans the Middle Ages, picture



# The Book. A History of The Bible

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CHRISTOPHER  
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and Wycliffite editions, and Gutenberg. The latter half covers the Bible's spread in lockstep with European exploration and printing technology. With only a slight change in emphasis, this book could be read as a history of book production for the past two thousand years.

The production is excellent, as far as trade publication standards go. Colour reproductions are clear and plentiful. While establishing a look distinct from its subject matter is the wise course, Ken Wilson's modern, asymmetric design underscores its own practical shortcomings: the type runs off the top and bottom of pages (when your thumb isn't covering the words up while holding the book open).

Currently Fellow Librarian of Corpus Christi Library, Cambridge, de Hamel had been responsible for all sales of medieval and illuminated manuscripts at Sotheby's for 25 years. His writing is clear and engaging, neither straying into the arid wasteland of academia (though he has the credentials) nor attempting to sensationalize what is – let's not kid ourselves – a topic only the afflicted can appreciate. A recommended addition to any collection of books on books.

*Rollin Milroy*