A History of Reading

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BOOK REVIEW

A History of Reading, by Steven Roger Fischer, London, Reaktion Books, 2019, 438 pp., A\$24.99 (soft cover), ISBN 978-1-78914-068-2

When Steven Roger Fischer's *A History of Reading* was first published in 2003 to much critical acclaim, the *Times Literary Supplement* review concluded 'twenty years from now, the history of reading will look quite different'. Indeed, it does! The conjunction of the smart phone and the net have dramatically transformed modes of reading, communication and interpretation.

Thankfully, Fischer, a former Director of the Auckland Institute of Polynesian Languages, has recognised these dramatic changes in a new preface to his extensive history of reading. Sadly, he has not updated the extensive bibliography from the original edition. Fischer ranges the reading landscape widely, mainly in a Western context, although there are significant chapters on the development of reading in China, Japan, Korea, Meso-America, and India.

Alberto Manguel, in his *History of Reading* (1996), defined reading broadly as the deciphering of signs. Fischer places his reading analysis in a similarly wide context, asking What was the nature of writing and writing materials used? How was reading taught, and to whom? Did people read aloud or silently? What was the nature and status of readers and writers?

It's revealing how the reading wheel turns over the millennia; from sign and symbol interpretation, to silent reading, to oral transmission of texts, to the widening of reading access through the printing press and later educational reforms to provide wider access and free libraries (sadly diminishing in the public library sector in Britain in the last decade) and then to the present information anarchy.

Fischer's detailed text provides innumerable individual examples of his reading frameworks. Thus, the popular novel, which gained prominence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially through the circulating libraries, was cited by many as promoting immorality, while Jean-Baptiste de La Salle in the eighteenth century, complained bitterly about those who read in bed.

What constitutes the process of reading in the digital era and how do we define it? Fischer says the average white-collar worker spends between five and eight hours a day reading, but is it really reading? If, as is claimed, the average mobile phone user looks at their screen 150 times a day, what is the depth of their reading and textual comprehension? Are we all now confined to our own work or social echo chambers on the net?

Fischer hints at important questions for the future of reading when he says 'pre-schoolers and nursery school children try to swipe the pages of their first physical book'. We need to ensure that reading moves beyond the simple skimming of tweets and move to a deeper understanding through continued immersion in full texts, i.e. to adopt what Professor David Mikics argued, in his 2013 book, *Slow Reading in a Hurried Age*.

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