

Book Review

Portable Magic: A History of Books and Their Readers by Emma Smith

by Rachael Rhine Milliard

Portable Magic: A History of Books and Their Readers by Emma Smith is a wonderful look at the use of the object of the book in human history. It opens with the allegory of “The Master and the Pupil,” where the magician leaves the powerful spell book out and the young apprentice, in reading it, causes problems because he does not understand or respect the book’s power. Books, in all their glorious bookhood, Smith argues, “have agency” (2022, 11).

These magical objects, these “material talismans” (2022, 11), don’t just transport people and shape thought, but act as vehicles of change and weapons of influence. *Portable Magic* explores the development of the book in the narrative and practical realities of human history. The book has changed and grown to become what it is, both as an object and an influence in society and history.

In this vein, Smith’s *Portable Magic* challenges publishing professionals to think about the use and purpose of their publications. It challenges some of the foundational ideas on which the publishing profession and Western society are built. *Portable Magic* also encourages readers, both general and publishing professionals, to look at the gaps in the known history of the book and its role as an object of power in history.

Smith first challenges the historically accepted narrative of the book in a discussion of the Gutenberg Bible as proof of the superiority and ingenuity of the West. As Smith points out, the Chinese first invented movable type in the 11th Century (Columbia University 2024). The first metal movable type

was invented and used in Korea in the 1230s (Berkowitz 2023). Historically, in the narrative most of us in the West share, Gutenberg is credited with that invention. It is a narrative carried forward into Western cultural history that helped shape the world we know now.

Smith uses the Gutenberg example to shake readers' understanding about how the book has been used in history. *Portable Magic* also discusses the book as an object of propaganda, credibility, convenience, and censorship, among other applications. Smith artfully breaks down the myth, real history, use, and misuse of the book, which is ultimately an object of power.

Smith finishes with as much refinement and world-shattering truth as she begins. Books, Smith writes, “. . . do not simply reflect us, but shape us, turning us into the readers they would like to have” (2022, 245). *Portable Magic* entrances, ensnares, enthralls, and contests accepted lore in its witty and eye-opening discussion of the book as an object of power and influence, where physical manifestation cannot be separated from content.

References

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