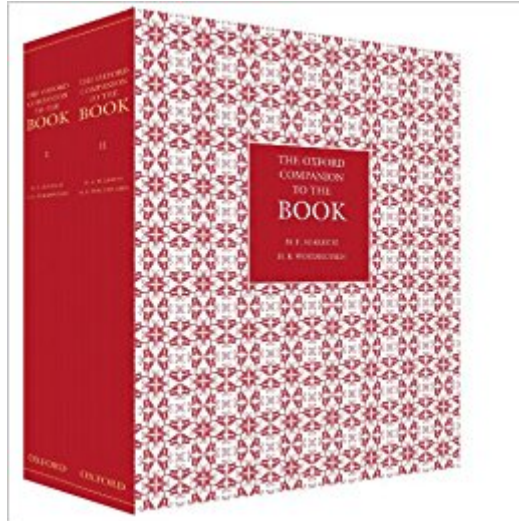


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The Oxford Companion To The Book



Synopsis

The Oxford Companion to the Book is the first reference work of its kind covering the broad concept of the book throughout the world from ancient to modern times. Along with such subjects as bibliography, the history of printing, editorial theory and practice, and textual criticism, it also engages with newer disciplines such as the history of the book and the electronic book. Additionally, the companion provides an engaging analysis of how books and societies have shaped one another. Written by the world's top scholars in bibliography and book history, the companion is an authoritative and highly informative work of reference for an international readership across a vast range of disciplines. This unique two-volume work is organized into two parts. Part I is a substantial series of introductory essays—over forty essays offer generic histories of the subject as well as surveys of the history of the book around the world, including the Muslim world, Asia, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Part II of the companion comprises an A-Z section of over 5,000 entries on every aspect of this exceptionally rich and diverse subject, ranging from brief definitions and biographical entries to more extensive treatments. Both parts of the text are richly illustrated with reproductions, diagrams, maps, and examples of various typographical features.

Book Information

Hardcover: 1408 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; 1 edition (February 8, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0198606532

ISBN-13: 978-0198606536

Product Dimensions: 12 x 5.2 x 9.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.6 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (6 customer reviews)

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This volume is a departure from the usual OUP "companion" format. The first volume consists

largely of substantial essays on book-related essays, the remaining pages being given over to the more conventional dictionary format. It is also physically larger: two substantial quarto volumes that are lovely to look at but comparatively unwieldy to handle. The contents resemble some other less-useful companions in being decidedly academic in character. The professional specialties get extensive treatment, the notion of "book" is extended to cover material from the beginning of writing systems to the latest (as of a couple of years ago) in digital texts, and the prefatory essays give the history of the book global scope. There is less color and humor than one might hope for in a more companionable companion. If the entries are small, they are useful starting-points for investigations that will inevitably lead users to the internet where space is not an issue. In that respect the OUP has done the right and indeed a very clever thing in making a kind of ur-book out of this companion: as a physical object it is the state of the art in reference-book production with lovely typography, heavy paper, and binding that shouts "I am a book!" Indeed it is, and a timely book that fills a large gap in the shelf. No one does reference books better than OUP and they went all-out on this signature production. The price is steep but warranted by the quality of the product.

Two terrific tomes totaling 1,327 pages. The first 172 pages contain assorted essays on the physical development of the book. The next 271 pages consist of country-by-country histories of book publishing, distribution, related economic issues, etc. This section is justifiably Eurocentric and makes interesting reading. The final 884 pages comprise an alphabetic dictionary/encyclopedia of book terms, publishers, printers, collectors, booksellers, etc. This section generally does not include entries for individual authors (no Hemingway, Joyce, Milton, Dickens) but does mention a few names such as Jonson and Shakespeare with regard to their role in the history of the printed word. Likewise, specific literary works are not mentioned except for a handful of historical landmark publications. The books are of high quality, strongly bound, and, surprisingly, lay pleasurably open for reading. I rather wish the slipcase had been traditionally bookish...the publisher's tablecloth pattern would seem more at home among the cookbooks in the kitchen than in one's library. Perhaps a nice can of leather-brown spray paint...it's an old trick but it might just work.

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