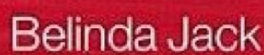


Belinda Jack

# READING

## A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP, United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

© Belinda Jack 2019

The moral rights of the author have been asserted

First edition published in 2019
Impression: 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law, by licence or under terms agreed with the appropriate reprographics rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above

You must not circulate this work in any other form and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press 198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018967690

ISBN 978–0–19–882058–1
ebook ISBN 978–0–19–255245–7

Printed in Great Britain by Ashford Colour Press Ltd, Gosport, Hampshire

Links to third party websites are provided by Oxford in good faith and for information only. Oxford disclaims any responsibility for the materials contained in any third party website referenced in this work.

Copyrighted material

# Contents

List of illustrations

1 What is reading?

2 Ancient worlds

3 Reading manuscripts, reading print

4 Modern reading

5 Forbidden reading

6 Making sense of reading

7 Pluralities

References

Further reading

Publisher's acknowledgements

Index

Copyrighted material

# List of illustrations

1 Sixteenth-century bookwheel

Wellcome Collection. Reproduced under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution license (CC BY 4.0) https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0.

2 A Buddhist library

Christophe Boisvieux / age fotostock.

3 Cartoon

© Nigel Sutherland.

4 Child reading Braille

Joerg Boethling / Alamy Stock Photo.

5 Fresco showing a child being taught to read, 1st century BCE

MATTES Ren / hemis fr / age fotostock.

6 Christine de Pizan, *Le Livre de la cité des dames*

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits, Français 607.

7 Woodcut, printing in the 16th century

Image Asset Management / World History Archive / age fotostock.

8 Richard Hoe's rotary press

De Agostini / Biblioteca Ambrosiana / De Agostini Editore / age fotostock.

9 Numbers of titles per year the ESTC has categorized as 'fiction' (1600–1799)

Copyrighted material

Olaf Simons / CC BY-SA 3.0. Reproduced under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported license. https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en.

10 Nazi book burning

World History Archive / age fotostock.

11 Guillaume Apollinaire, ‘Cheval’

The Picture Art Collection / Alamy Stock Photo.

12 Rubin’s ‘vase’

Oxford University Press ANZ.

Copyrighted material

Chapter 1
# What is reading?

## What do we mean by reading?

Most of us take reading for granted. It's only if we're involved in teaching someone else to read, for example, that we may realize what a strange and complex process or series of processes it is. The neurology, or neuropsychology, of reading remains a relatively primitive field of research. It's not surprising. Reading can have myriad effects on us. These can be frightening, spiritual, emotional, erotic, motivating, entertaining, informative, and enlightening—and so much more. And each of these descriptions is open to further interpretation. One person's idea of the erotic may not always match another's. The sexologist Thomas Laqueur goes as far as to argue that private reading itself made masturbation possible, irrespective of the reading material. He also argues that the stimulus of the imagination encourages self-absorption and a feeling of freedom from social constraint.

Where and with whom we read will also affect how we understand and respond to our reading. For a very long period most people were read *to*; and as children this may be our first introduction to the written word. We may read at the same time as being read to, following the text while listening to it being read. This is the case with a good deal of reading in religious

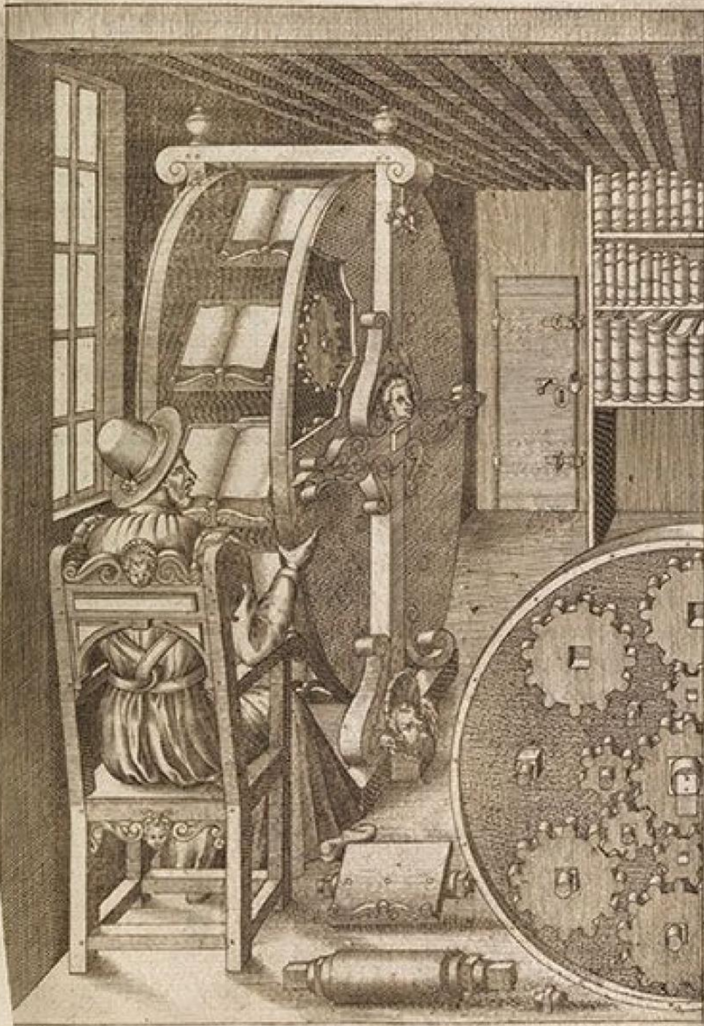
Copyrighted material

settings. We read at school and university, at work, at home, while eating, while travelling, in the garden, in parks, while waiting for an appointment, on the beach, in libraries, and so on. We read alone and in more sociable spaces. We may choose to conceal what we are reading—or to flaunt it, to suggest our interests, to advertise our political or gender allegiance, our degree of education, our cultural awareness, and so on. Reading material can act as a powerful symbol. Its materiality may matter as much as its content. In the Semitic religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—the book may be an object of veneration or fetishism. Within numerous religious practices the book may be raised, carried in procession, kissed, and so on. At the same time, the material existence of the book may tell us relatively little about reading. Between the first publication of Mao's *Little Red Book* in 1961 and the height of the Cultural Revolution in 1969, 740 million copies may have been printed. Its cultural and symbolic value may endure however little we know about how it was and is read, and by whom.

We can read one thing at a time, or we can read multiple sources more or less simultaneously. We may think of this skipping from text to text as a new phenomenon, the 'clicking on' of the digital reading age, but libraries have long been organized to allow for the consultation of multiple volumes more or less at the same time. The bookwheel or reading wheel (see Figure 1), invented in the 16th century, was a large rotating bookstand that allowed for a variety of heavy books to be consulted easily, and for reading backwards and forwards between a number of books.

Copyrighted material

FIGVRE CLXXXVIII.



Copyrighted material

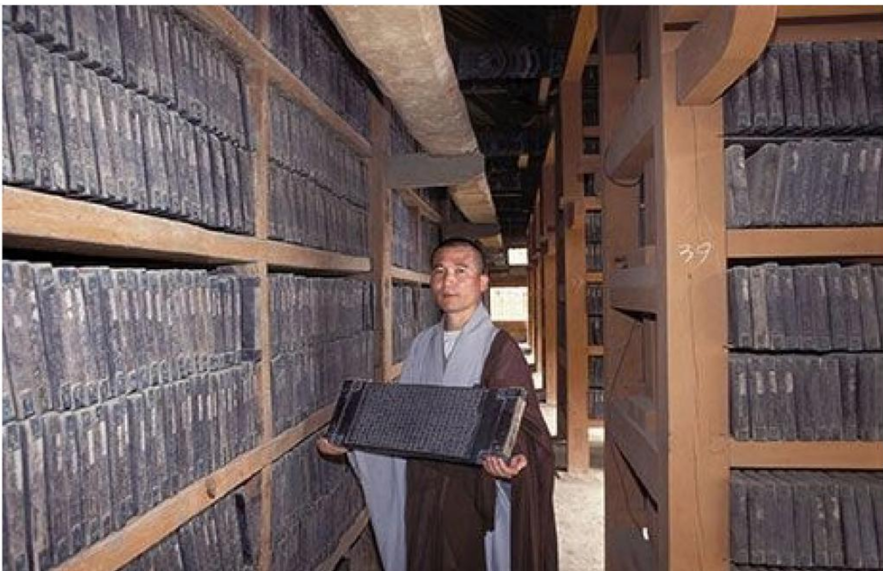
**1. Sixteenth-century bookwheel.**

We don’t read only print and its electronic facsimiles; we read landscapes, facial expressions, tea leaves, mathematical formulae, the future, and all manner of material on the internet. Mostly we think of reading as a process of decoding written and digital material and this may be as varied as a logo on a T-shirt, a poem, a political manifesto, guidebooks and handbooks (terms that suggest reading formats providing help and facility of access), tweets, graffiti, maps, a phone bill, tattoos, a dictionary, blogs, Wikipedia, crossword clues, the famously illegible doctor’s prescription (now generally printed not handwritten), legislation, a till receipt, an eBook, the lists of ingredients on food packaging, or a recipe, and so on. And in the ancient world reading could be still more varied involving inscriptions on public monuments that very few could read but which everyone understood as symbolic of the power of the state. Inscriptions might not have been read in the sense we usually understand, but they had meaning for those whose eyes encountered them all the same. Ovid (43 BCE–17/18 CE) describes a love letter sent by a Roman slave. The letter had been written on his body.

Some forms of reading are both literal and metaphorical. We might read an entry in an encyclopedia but we also refer to encyclopedic knowledge, suggesting that the acquisition of literacy will give us access to all we could possibly need or want to know. This isn’t, of course, the case. ‘Knowing’ is more than a matter of being able to read. Nor is ‘literacy’ an unproblematic concept. We know that during the medieval period in Europe, and at other times in other parts of the world, ideas about literacy have been very different. Lady Eleanor De Quincy was unable to

Copyrighted material

write, but could read in three languages (Latin, French, and English). She commissioned the *Lambeth Apocalypse*, a highly illustrated work in the Apocalypse devotional manuscript tradition. This required both reading skills and a kind of meditative reading ability that involved keeping a holy image in the mind's eye while reading. What mattered was contemplation, the reader 'seeing with the heart'. Not dissimilarly, Buddhist texts were designed to be read, but principally in order to be memorized. The objects themselves were objects of veneration (see Figure 2).



**2. A Buddhist library.**

Scholars have argued that European medieval texts were intended to be read in myriad different ways, out loud or silently, by a lone reader, or in a group, and assimilating varying degrees of meaning as a function of both word and image and in different linguistic registers. Legal documents were decorated with seals and images which had to be interpreted along with the text.

Copyrighted material

We may gain a high level of literacy, as understood in the modern world, but this doesn't guarantee understanding of the written word in whatever media. Language, whether oral or written, is a slippery business and always subject to misunderstanding and misreading. Take a recipe, a piece of writing designed to be unproblematic. If the instructions that are given are not clear then the dish may be a disaster (see Figure 3).

THE RECIPE SAID "STAND FOR FIVE MINUTES"

**3. Cartoon.**

Copyrighted material

But if basic instructions are subject to misreading or misunderstanding, then how do we make sense of idioms, metaphor, and figurative language and all those techniques that make for effective use of language, particularly the language of literature, where the highest density of ambiguous language is arguably to be found? When we read that ‘All the world’s a stage’, we understand. But how? Literature provides the most privileged examples of the complexities of the act of reading itself.

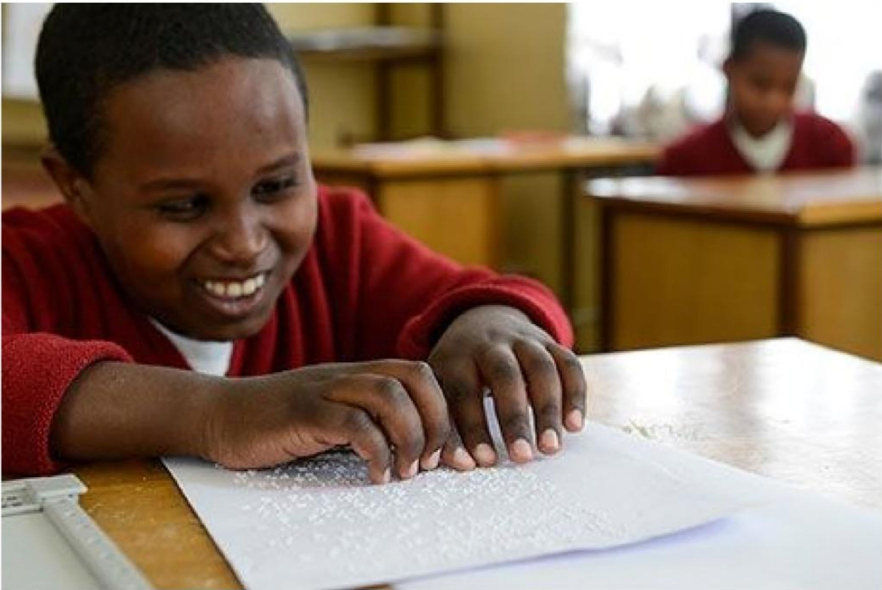
To understand reading we need to appeal to a wide range of disciplines—myriad forms of history, literary and textual studies, psychology, phenomenology (the science of things as opposed to the science of the nature of being), and sociology, to name the most obvious. Historians of the book and literary scholars have dominated research. What is now widely accepted is that reading is far more than the decoding of messages that have been previously encoded. The way we read is conditioned in all manner of ways. The look of what we read already stimulates certain expectations. Pink high-heeled shoes on the front cover of a novel suggests that what we will read belongs to the category of ‘chick lit’. Every aspect of a text’s design, whether it be in paper or electronic form, influences how we read. These are not trivial matters. Jan Tschichold (1902–74), author of the ground-breaking *The Form of the Book*, a study of typography, was born in Germany but in 1933 he was imprisoned by the Nazis because of their antipathy to the New Typography. To the contemporary reader, Tschichold’s precepts could not be more ideologically innocent: ‘The Typography of books must not advertise. If it takes on elements of advertising graphics, it abuses the sanctity of the written word by coercing it to serve the vanity of the graphic artist incapable of discharging his duty as a mere lieutenant.’

Reading is both a physical and mental activity. It stimulates

Copyrighted material

neurological pathways in ways which remain to some extent a mystery, despite sophisticated methods of brain imaging. Physically, or more accurately physiologically, the eye (or finger in the case of Braille) has to 'see' (or feel), identify, and recognize the printed words. Chemical processes are then triggered which create patterns of nerve currents which are sent to the brain. The cerebral cortex interprets the data. The eyes are involved in various movements, first: fixation (the eyes dwell), then inter-fixation (the eyes move from one point of rest to another) and return sweeps (when the eye travels backwards and forwards). There may also be saccades, regression, and spans of recognition. Saccades are associated with the highly literate and involve hopping or jumping ahead of what is being read to prepare for later text-recognition. Regression requires a return to an earlier section of text to reread what may not have been fully understood —or to enjoy again. Spans of recognition are the expert reader's ability to take in large groups of words at one go. Readers of Braille engage in very similar ways with the 'reading' finger (see Figure 4).

Copyrighted material



**4. Child reading Braille.**

Linguisticians and literary scholars are not the only specialists who work on reading as a subject. Psychologists and neuroscientists have also made intriguing discoveries. Psychologists have conducted extensive research into the teaching and practice of reading. What is clear is that completely to analyse what we do when we read would be the epitome of a psychologist's achievements. It would mean making sense of the most complex workings of the mind, as well as unravelling the convoluted story of the most remarkable act that civilization has learned in all its history.

Neurologists consider that they are still very much in the foothills when it comes to understanding what goes on when we read complex language but some of the initial research is intriguing. Scientists have known about 'classical' language regions in the brain like Broca's area and Wernicke's, and that these are

Copyrighted material

stimulated when the brain interprets new words. But it is now clear that stories activate other areas of the brain in addition. Words like 'lavender', 'cinnamon', and 'soap' activate both language-processing areas of the brain and also those that respond to smells. Significant work has been done on how the brain responds to metaphor, for example. Participants in these studies read familiar or clichéd metaphors like 'a rough day' and these stimulated only the language-sensitive parts of the brain. The metaphor 'a liquid chocolate voice', on the other hand, stimulated areas of the brain concerned both with language—and with taste. 'A leathery face' stimulated the sensory cortex. And reading an exciting, vivid action plot in a novel stimulates parts of the brain that coordinate movement. Reading powerful language, it seems, stimulates us in ways that are similar to real life.

But despite all the research in so many domains reading remains in many ways mysterious because it is often impossible to generalize, to move from the individual reading experience to a general and more theoretical model. Did the invention of printing change the reader's mental universe? There is no simple answer to the question. What we read also has a material presence and the object of what we read has multiple roles. Books have mattered for what can be read inside them but they have also mattered for the taking of oaths, as gifts, and prizes. And the bestowing of legacies which is widespread in diverse societies may be significant in very different ways. The role of books in folklore and, contrariwise, the importance of allusions to folklore in written texts demonstrates a two-way relationship between oral and written or printed material.

It is these metamorphoses and movements which make a nonsense of ideas of what we read as 'belonging' to 'world

Copyrighted material

literature', or the 'post-colonial', or whatever other 'category' of writing might be proposed. Writers may be more or less sensitive to the question of their readers. The 'Nigerian' author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is published in the UK by Fourth Estate, in the USA by Alfred A. Knopf. In Nigeria, however, she is distributed by Muhtar Bakare Kachifo, a company conceived with the mission of 'Telling our Own Stories' (Farafina) which boasts an impressive and wide-ranging publishing list across numerous disciplines. It has its own on-line outlet, awards prizes, and publishes its own creative writing magazine, *Farafina*. To reach different readerships she is conscious of the need for multiple publishers and distributors.

Written material is wonderfully non-cognizant of physical space. It has no respect for linguistic or national borders. Their authors may or may not belong to an international republic of letters and those who make writing available to large numbers may or may not understand the language in which the text is written. Booksellers have often been itinerant—and may now be on-line—transcending national and linguistic boundaries. To think of reading in terms of an 'elite' and a 'popular' audience is no longer adequate; nor is the model of cultural change linear, or characterized by the 'trickle-down effect'. The model has to be one that allows for reversals of the current and for the muddying of the water. As historians of the book and reading have demonstrated, Gargantua (who first appeared in 16th-century French writings), Cinderella (whose origin may be in the story of Rhodopis by Strabo (*c.*7 BCE), which tells of a slave girl who marries the King of Egypt), or Buscon (who first appears in the picaresque tales of 17th-century Spain) move backwards and forwards between oral traditions, chapbooks (cheap pamphlets containing tales, ballads, or tracts and sold by pedlars), and 'sophisticated' literature, changing both nationalities and genres.

Copyrighted material

The author Salman Rushdie is one of the most eloquent critics of national literatures. In his essay 'Notes on Writing and the Nation' he writes:

> Nationalism corrupts writers too ... In a time of ever more narrowly defined nationalisms, of walled-in tribalisms, writers will be found uttering the war cries of their tribes ... Nationalism is that 'revolt against history' which seeks to ... fence in what should be frontierless. Good writing assumes a frontierless nation. Writers who serve frontiers have become border guards.

## The earliest readers

Both Neanderthals and early *homo sapiens* read markings on bones although what they signified remains an unresolved question—a record of days and lunar cycles, scores of some game? The Ishango bone is a slightly curved fibula of a baboon, about 10 cm long and dark brown in colour, with a piece of quartz fitted into one end. It is named after the place where it was found, in today's Democratic Republic of Congo. It may date back as far as 22,000 years. The notches are clearly man-made—this hasn't been disputed by archaeologists. So the question is, how were these 'read' by early man? If they are 'symbols'—signs that bear no resemblance to what they represent—what do they stand for? What can this ancient piece of baboon bone tell us about the earliest 'reading'? All manner of fascinating theories have been proposed. It says something wonderful about our humanity—and fascination with reading—that a small, very old animal bone with a few markings on it can arouse such intense speculation and debate.

Among the most convincing theories are those that decipher mathematical meaning. One school of thought believes that the

Copyrighted material

three columns of asymmetrically grouped notches imply that the implement was used to construct a number system and it has to be read as a numerical calculator. There have also been arguments that the bone can be read as an astronomical text, recording the lunar calendar. Microscopic imagery suggests that the notches correspond with a six-month lunar calendar. Other explanations include theories that the notches mark out stages in the female menstrual cycle.

The oldest inscribed (as opposed to carved) artefacts so far discovered are the Uruk bone tags, found in Egypt. The so-called U-j bone tags are not engraved with full writing; that is, the markings do not represent the spoken sounds of the Sumerian or Egyptian language of the 4th millennium BCE. The numbers and the pictograms showing cereal and birds, for example, can be 'read' in any language. The transformative breakthrough came with the rebus. The word derives from the Latin word meaning 'by things', 'by means of things'. The rebus allows the elements of any spoken word to be conveyed by means of signs. Thanks to the rebus, the sounds of spoken language could be systematically represented. The rebus principle has made something of a comeback in the electronic age—the text-message. It was kept alive in puzzles and by puzzle-lovers like Lewis Carroll, the author of the *Alice* books for children, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. Carroll would write to his young friends in rebus letters. 'Dear' would be represented by a little abstracted sketch of a deer; 'are', from the verb 'to be', would be represented simply by the letter 'r', and so on. Among the earliest ancient rebuses are Sumerian accounting tablets which date from around 3000 BCE.

This new communication system spread west to the Nile, east to the Iranian Plateau, and even to the Indus. The Sumerians lived in

Copyrighted material

what is now modern Iraq. During the 3rd millennium BCE, a very intimate cultural symbiosis developed between the Sumerians and the Akkadians, which included widespread bilingualism. Gradually Akkadian replaced Sumerian, probably *c.*2000 BCE. So what is there to read in this, the oldest written language of our race? Well, a surprising amount: hymns, lamentations, prayers (to various gods), incantations (against various sources of evil), romantic literature, wisdom literature (proverbs, fables, riddles), long epics, and myths. In total some 550 'texts' exist.

One of the most famous myths, which finds its counterpart in numerous other traditions, tells of the goddess Inanna and her journey into the underworld. But much that was committed to writing is, in effect, history, records of the lives and deeds of Uruk's kings: Enmerkar, Lugalbanda and, most famously, Gilgamesh. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* exists in a number of versions but each is essentially a love story. At the same time it is an exploration of aspects of our common humanity: our propensity for egotism and the temptations of ambition. On the other hand love and friendship are celebrated and our fear of loss, and knowledge of our own mortality, are recognized. Gilgamesh himself is a compound being—part man, part god. Each version of the story has essentially the same plot. Gilgamesh must leave Uruk, undertake a quest beset by obstacles, and then return home. The plot is an archetypal one. Other oral genres which were memorialized included legal, medicinal, culinary, and astronomical writings.

Not dissimilar literary texts began to appear during the Egyptian Middle Kingdom. One outstanding feature of this early Egyptian writing was its formal poetic characteristics. They employed a particular kind of metre, with units of two or three stresses each. This is a very early example of scansion, a way of organizing

Copyrighted material

writing so as to encourage a very particular way of reading it. A celebrated example is the didactic tale, ‘A Dialogue of a Man with his Soul’, also known as ‘A Debate Between a Man tired of Life and his Soul’, or ‘A Dispute over Suicide’ (*c.*1937–1759 BCE).

The Cretan script known as Linear A, found on Minoan tablets, dating from around 1750 BCE provides the earliest examples of European writing and remains undeciphered. The Olmec script from the Veracruz area of the Gulf of Mexico is the most ancient writing discovered from the South American region. Whether or not it is full writing remains a subject of controversy. It dates from *c.*900 BCE, at least a millennium before the Mayan scripts which are the best understood of all pre-Columbian Mesoamerican writing. There are examples carved into monumental tombs and other monuments, but also on fragments of wood, jade, and painted pottery and murals. Given the archaeological wealth and sophistication of Mayan civilization, it is quite possible that large numbers of codices (books made from hinged leaves as opposed to a scroll), made of bark paper and animal hide, have been lost. These would most likely have contained the same range of genres that existed in the ancient European centres of civilization.

Despite the innovation of full writing, most reading remained a simple activity as what was recorded was very basic information—names, numbers, and objects. Interestingly the Sumerian for ‘to read’, *šita*, also means ‘to count, calculate, memorize, recite, read aloud’. Only a very small percentage of the population learnt to read and it was almost exclusively a work-related skill. Some letters, however, demonstrate that writers and readers enjoyed poetic turns of phrase. An Egyptian bureaucrat, writing to his son some four millennia ago, advised: ‘Set your thoughts just on writings, for I have seen people saved by their labour. Behold,

Copyrighted material

there is nothing greater than writings. They are like a boat on water ... Let me usher their beauty into your sight ... There is nothing like them on earth.' Reading, by implication, is likened to making sense of words lifted into dry dock.

The transformation of Greek orality into Greek literacy has sometimes been described as a crisis. It was certainly a revolutionary moment. The Greek script was phonetic and non-standardized. They wrote *scriptio continua*, that is without breaks between the words. This made Greek script very hard to read. But it becomes easily comprehensible when read aloud correctly. Reading was regarded primarily as an oral performance. The writer's task was, in a sense, complete only when his words had been enunciated. It has also been said that the Greeks sometimes cast the writer and the reader as a homosexual couple in which the reader was the passive accomplice of the writer. Writing words was very much like writing music: both are performative acts.

By the 3rd century BCE, in the Greek-dominated society of Alexandria, reading and writing were part and parcel of most aspects of commercial, political, and social life. It is no surprise, therefore, that it was here that the first great library of the world was founded: the Library of Alexandria. It was established by Alexander's successor, Ptolemy I Soter, a Macedonian Greek, who ruled 323–285 BCE. The idea of the library was the result of a fusion of Greek and Egyptian ideals: the library would contain the sum of human learning. And the library of one of the world's earliest bibliophiles would eventually make its way to the Library of Alexandria—Aristotle's private book collection. It was here that the first complex system for indexing holdings was also invented. The catalogue contained some 120 scrolls, listing the library's contents which exceeded some half a million scrolls.

Copyrighted material

*Shujing* ('Book of Documents', Shang and early Zhou writings (1122–256 BCE), mostly prayers and legends), *Shijing* ('Book of Songs', poetry and folksongs), *Chungqiu* (Spring and Autumn Annals), and *Liji* ('Book of Rites', a collection of texts about ritual and conduct). By the Han period (the first two centuries BCE), public libraries contained hundreds of texts written on bamboo, strips of wood, and later paper scrolls. Basic techniques of printing developed using woodblocks and it was this method that supplied readers in China, Korea, and Japan with millions of pages of reading material for the world's largest groups of readers.

The next major revolution in the history of Chinese reading was the invention of paper in 105 CE. It was this that triggered the extraordinary expansion of reading throughout East Asia. What was available to read was voluminous and varied, though much of the more literary works concerned proper conduct and correct social relations rather than something more purely imaginative or escapist. Also remarkable was the recognition that literacy was in the interests of the common good, and the education of the lower classes of society was deemed to underpin, rather than threaten, the ruling classes. But the true printing revolution came only in the 16th century and by the 17th the Chinese probably published more books than all the world's other languages together. The other part of the world with a remarkable early reading tradition was pre-Columbian Mesoamerica where there were probably some fifteen distinct writing conventions, several preserved only in a single extant inscription.

## Learning to read

Reading is specific to the human species, like speech, but reading doesn't follow from innate capabilities which are activated simply by spending time with written materials. One of the most

Copyrighted material