

# How words made the world

A breathtaking survey of how writing has developed over the past 5,000 years

## HISTORY

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**The Written World** How Literature Shaped History  
 by Martin Puchner  
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The subtitle of this book, *How Literature Shaped History*, raises hopes. So at last we are going to find out whether, as is often claimed, literature has had a civilising effect, and reading novels and poems has made people better and the world a better place.

Well no, as it turns out, we are not. For “literature”, in Martin Puchner’s usage, means simply writing. So inscriptions on clay tablets by accountants in ancient Mesopotamia qualify as literature just as much as Shakespeare’s plays (which he does not get round to mentioning). This considerably reduces his subtitle’s claim. That our world has come into being through literacy is so obvious that he wastes no time demonstrating it.

What he does instead is construct an often enthralling account of how writing developed, following its

invention in the Tigris and Euphrates valleys some 5,000 years ago. At first, he believes, it was the exclusive possession of kings and scribes, and used for economic and political purposes. As its usage widened, though, it was seen as a way of preserving “foundational” texts, such as the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Hebrew scriptures and Homer’s epics.

A paradox that Puchner unearthed early in his story is

that key figures in the formation of thought and belief deliberately refrained from writing. The Buddha, Confucius, Socrates and Jesus, although they lived in literate cultures, chose not to write, but gathered their students around them and talked. Accounts of their teachings were put together and written down only after their deaths. Their reasons must have varied, but Socrates opposed writing on mental-health grounds – he believed it would shrink the memory and diminish one’s ability to think.

The advance of literacy was, Puchner shows, broadly a process of the West learning from the East. Alphabets evolved in the eastern Mediterranean, replacing

more cumbersome sign systems such as Egyptian hieroglyphics, and the first true alphabet with letters for vowels and consonants was Greek. The manufacture of paper and the invention of printing, using wooden blocks, were Chinese breakthroughs, and it took centuries for them to reach the West. We think of printing with moveable type as the brainchild of Johannes Gutenberg, but it seems that, in this, too, the Chinese might have been first.

Puchner has a keen eye for the ironies of history. Gutenberg, he points out, grew prosperous by printing thousands of indulgences, which were in great demand because the Turks had captured Constantinople and the Pope had promised remission of sins to all who took up arms against Islam. Sixty years later, the same German presses were turning out vast print runs of Luther’s

invectives against indulgences, which launched the Protestant reformation and split Europe.

In Puchner’s theory, foundational texts have appeared throughout history. The Tale of Genji, written by a lady-in-waiting in the Japanese

court around AD1000, was the first novel, and One Thousand and One Nights might have been the first example of a story collection framed in a connecting narrative. Trying to date it, though, reduced him to despair, and Scheherazade, its fictional narrator, appeared to him in a dream and advised him to give up.

Cervantes's Don Quixote was a foundational text in that it was the first to suggest that reading might harm you, since immersion in chivalric romances drives its hero mad. It was foundational, too, because it raised the issue of intellectual property. Pirated editions began to appear within months of its publication in 1605, and an unknown author published a sequel. Cervantes responded

by writing a second part. Later foundational texts that Puchner investigates with, as usual, a lively engagement with the human stories involved, include the American Declaration of Independence and The Communist Manifesto.

His saddest story is about the Maya. When Cortes landed in Central America in 1519 he found a flourishing civilisation that had invented its own writing and literature. A Franciscan in his entourage, Diego de Landa, took a benevolent interest in Mayan culture until it emerged that they had practised human sacrifice. Mass arrests followed and, under torture, prisoners admitted that their books were sacred texts or, as de Landa put it, "falsehoods of the devil". At a great auto-da-fé the priceless achievements of Mayan culture went up in flames.

But Mayan scribes, faced with the extinction of their

civilisation, recorded their belief that a Sovereign Plumed Serpent created the universe,

that the gods made humans out of maize, and other hallowed tenets, and used the Roman alphabet, so that Europeans would understand. Around 1701 a Dominican friar found their manuscript, copied it out and translated it into Spanish.

Puchner's seemingly boundless curiosity propels him not just through the world of books but around the globe. He visits the site of Troy, and is disappointed to find it so small. In Nanjing, he inspects the stone cells in which candidates for the Chinese imperial civil service would be isolated for three days and nights, regurgitating their knowledge of the Confucian classics. He seeks out Mayan monuments in Mexico, and interviews the writer Orhan Pamuk in Istanbul. On St Lucia to meet the poet Derek Walcott, he tries to drive across the island, breaks down and has to trek to safety through the jungle.

He does not describe any comparable adventures in reading, but he spends a

month slogging through JK Rowling's Hogwarts series and judges it a repetitive "hodgepodge". By contrast he is fascinated to find that there persists in West Africa, alongside Arabic written culture, a tradition of oral storytelling that preserves the 13th-century Epic of Sunjata, about the founding of the Mali empire, which allows storytellers to introduce their own variants, just as the Homeric epics are thought to have been produced in Ancient Greece. His ideal is "world literature", a phrase he borrows from Goethe, who was impatient with

cultural frontiers, read Chinese novels and Persian poetry and knew a dozen languages. The breathtaking scope and infectious enthusiasm of this book are a tribute to that ideal. ■

“**Socrates believed that writing shrank our memory**”



**Cervantes** His Don Quixote was considered harmful



**Write stuff** From far left, the Amarna letters; Egyptian hieroglyphs; Mayan; Ancient Greek; the Diamond Sutra, AD868; and German printing, c1445