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WHAT IS THE HISTORY OF BOOKS? REVISITED

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Abstract

Having accepted the invitation to revisit my essay of 1982, What Is the History of Books?, I find that I can do it only in the first person singular and therefore must ask to be excused for indulging in some autobiographical detail. I would also like to make a disclaimer: in proposing a model for studying the history of books twenty-four years ago, I did not mean to tell book historians how they ought to do their jobs. I hoped that the model might be useful in a heuristic way and never thought of it as comparable to the models favored by economists, the kind in which you insert data, work it over, and arrive at a bottom line. (I do not believe that bottom lines exist in history.) It seemed to me in 1982 that the history of books was suffering from fissiparousness: experts were pursuing such specialized studies that they were losing contact with one another. The esoteric elements of book history needed to be integrated into an overview that would show how the parts could connect to form a wholeor what I characterized as a communications circuit. The tendency toward fragmentation and specialization still exists.

Keywords: book history, interdisciplinary integration

Full text

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