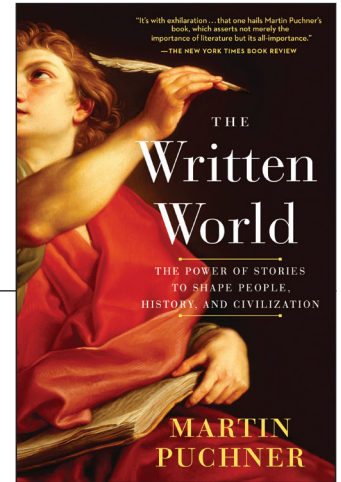




The Written World

The Power of Stories to Shape People, History, and Civilization

by Martin Puchner



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“Puchner doesn’t just tell us about the important works of literature that have shaped civilization over four thousand years, from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to *Don Quixote* to J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series. He tells us about the people whose personal persuasions led them to create those works. It’s literature not as mirror, then, but as potent force.” —*Library Journal*

“Well worth a read, to find out how come we read.” —Margaret Atwood, via Twitter

• about the book •

In this groundbreaking book, Martin Puchner leads us on a remarkable journey through time and around the globe to reveal the powerful role stories and literature have played in creating the world we have today. Puchner introduces us to numerous visionaries as he explores sixteen foundational texts selected from more than four thousand years of world literature and reveals how writing has inspired the rise and fall of empires and nations, the spark of philosophical and political ideas, and the birth of religious beliefs. Indeed, literature has touched the lives of generations and changed the course of history.

At the heart of this book are works, some long-lost and rediscovered, that have shaped civilization: the first written masterpiece, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*; Ezra’s Hebrew Bible; the teachings of Buddha, Confucius, Socrates, and Jesus; and the first great novel in world literature, *The Tale of Genji*, written by a Japanese woman known as Murasaki. Visiting Baghdad, Puchner tells of Scheherazade and the stories of *One Thousand and One Nights*, and in the Americas we watch the astonishing survival of the Maya epic *Popol Vuh*. Cervantes, who invented the modern novel, battles pirates both real (when he is taken prisoner) and literary (when a fake sequel to *Don Quixote* is published). We learn of Benjamin Franklin’s pioneering work as a media entrepreneur, watch Goethe discover world literature in Sicily, and follow the rise in influence of *The Communist Manifesto*. We visit Troy, Pergamum, and China, and we speak with Nobel laureates Derek Walcott in the Caribbean and Orhan Pamuk in Istanbul, as well as the wordsmiths of the oral epic *Sunjata* in West Africa.

Throughout *The Written World*, Puchner’s delightful narrative also chronicles the inventions—writing technologies, the printing press, the book itself—that have shaped religion, politics, commerce, people, and history. In a book that Elaine Scarry has praised as “unique and spellbinding,” Puchner shows how literature turned our planet into a written world.

— about the author

Martin Puchner is the Byron and Anita Wien Professor of Drama and of English and Comparative Literature at Harvard University. His prizewinning books cover subjects from philosophy to the arts, and his bestselling six-volume *Norton Anthology of World Literature* and his HarvardX MOOC (massive open online course) have brought four thousand years of literature to students across the globe. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

— note to the instructor

In *The Written World: The Power of Stories to Shape People, History, and Civilization*, Martin Puchner explores 4,000 years of literature to show its power to influence entire civilizations. He provides the historical and cultural setting for key works in literary history, explaining why these particular texts were written and how they managed to make their mark on society when so many other works faded into obscurity. His literary and cultural analysis is interspersed with anecdotes from his own journey across the globe while researching the book. This makes *The Written World* an intriguing account that is part literary critique, part history book, and part travel journal. His recollections add moments of levity and personal insight that are expertly woven in with information on the texts' authors and historical contexts. The text's scope makes it a good selection for post-secondary courses, especially world history and world literature courses. This book can also be used in classes on literary criticism.

With each chapter, Puchner provides brief biographies on the authors of the different works, which help humanize the people behind the works who might otherwise be viewed as remote, austere historical figures. For this same reason, he also highlights lesser-known facts about the authors, such as the revelation that Alexander the Great kept a copy of Homer's *Iliad* under his pillow during his conquest of the Middle East. Over the course of the book, Puchner explains the controversies surrounding texts such as the *Communist Manifesto* and contrasts the original motivations of the authors with contemporary interpretations of their texts.

Presenting a comprehensive look at the world of authorship, *The Written World* covers many of the technical and cultural barriers authors have had to overcome or circumvent in order to be published, from the difficulty of transporting texts during Ashurbanipal's reign to the Soviet Union's brutal censorship during Akhmatova and Solzhenitsyn's time. This book guides students towards a better appreciation of the extraordinary effort that went into writing and preserving foundational texts that are now freely available to the public. He examines in depth the technological revolutions that directly influenced literary movements, demonstrating how technology and literature have been tightly linked since the beginning of human civilization. Throughout the book, Puchner ties together famous literary works from around the world into a single overarching narrative. In doing so, he shows how these foundational texts influence the future of world literature and culture alike.

— recurring themes in the text

The Different Approaches of Cultures to New Inventions: Throughout the book, Puchner shows examples of cultures that either embraced or resisted new writing innovations and then tracks how each culture's decisions regarding these inventions influenced their future development. In Chapter Four, he examines the "format war" between the Christians and Jewish people, with the Jewish religious leaders using papyrus scrolls while Christians adopted a new format: the parchment codex. Today, the literary world is caught up in another format war, this time between traditionally bound books and e-books. What are the similarities between these conflicts? The differences? Can paper books and e-books coexist, or will e-books replace paper books in the position of dominance?

The Varied Functions of Writing: In this historical account, Puchner describes how writing was viewed by leaders and writers as a tool for attaining economic prosperity, power, knowledge, and even immortality: “For Ashurbanipal, rising to the highest rungs of scribal art meant that he would be the first king not at the mercy of his interpreters. . . . He would have access to the source code of power. As a high scribe, he would be in control of his own destiny.” In class, compare the focal figures of the different chapters. How do Ashurbanipal’s motivations for learning to read and write contrast with Murasaki’s? What commonalities of experience can be seen between Murasaki and the fictional Scheherazade? How did their cultural environments and social standings influence their approach to storytelling?

Literature and Society: Alexander the Great valued writing as a way to unite cultures through foundational texts. He used the *Iliad* to create a common mythology and inspire his people. Ashurbanipal viewed writing primarily as a source of power. Murasaki used writing to record her social circumstances. Benjamin Franklin saw writing as a way to spread knowledge and establish a national identity that would unite the colonies in the face of fearsome opposition. After studying *The Written World*, have your students write a persuasive essay answering the following question: What, in your opinion, is literature’s greatest contribution to human society?

— topic for discussion

In Chapter One of *The Written World*, Puchner describes how Alexander the Great was influenced by the *Iliad*. Tell your students to pick a book that has significantly influenced their lives. During the next week, they should conduct independent research on their book and then give a short presentation on it. After the presentations, have a class discussion on the effect literature can have on individuals. What literary themes or storylines seem to be the most inspirational? Puchner argues that Homer was a guiding force behind Alexander’s decision to invade the Middle East. Are authors in any way responsible for the accomplishments or misdeeds of those inspired by their works?

If desired, this discussion can be used to introduce the topic of authors’ ethical responsibilities. It is easy to determine whether a nonfiction writer is following ethical standards based on whether the author presents accurate, unbiased facts. However, it is more difficult to judge whether a writer of fiction is behaving ethically. What expectations or rules should be placed on fiction writers, if any? Are writers to blame if their readers misuse their works?

— topic for discussion

After students finish reading Chapter Two of *The Written World*, discuss it as a class. According to Chapter Two, how did Ashurbanipal’s perspective on writing change throughout his life? What do you believe prompted these changes? Next, have the students share examples of how their own perspectives on writing have changed through the years. Do they still hold the same view on literature as they did when they were children, or have their perspectives evolved based on their experiences? Do they agree with Ashurbanipal’s worldview regarding literature? Why or why not?

— topic for discussion

Murasaki favored poetry and fiction. She avoided stating any straightforward judgments on her country’s class system or harsh restrictions on women. Instead, she used poetry as a way to express her ideas. In class, study selections from Murasaki’s poetic diary. Based on this diary, what conclusions can be drawn about the writer’s personality, experiences, motivations, and opinions on Japanese culture? How does this diary compare with traditional autobiographies and memoirs? What prompted this cultural tendency to express ideas through allusions, instead of sharing ideas and opinions outright?

— topic for discussion

For the most part, Puchner presents a research-based account of the history of world literature and its effects on different cultures. However, in Chapter Six, he departs from this format and explains that his search for the author of *One Thousand and One Nights* was partially influenced by a dream. In your opinion, what benefits might this inclusion of the author's personal background (as well as his other moments of personal insight) provide for the book?

— topic for discussion

According to Puchner, "storytelling and writing technologies didn't follow a straight path." The introduction of writing to cultures had unexpected, diverse side effects. In *The Written World*, he lists some of the effects writing had on different cultures:

Writing itself was invented at least twice, first in Mesopotamia and then in the Americas. Indian priests refused to write down sacred stories for fear of losing control over them, a feeling shared by West African bards who lived two thousand years later and halfway around the world. Egyptian scribes embraced writing but tried to keep it secret, hoping to reserve the power of literature to themselves. Charismatic teachers such as Socrates refused to write, rebelling against the idea of foundational texts having authority and against the writing technologies that had made them possible. Some later inventions were only selectively adopted, as when Arab scholars used Chinese paper but showed no interest in another Chinese invention, print.

In class, discuss what other writing innovations have affected cultures around the world. Were the transitions more likely to be difficult or were they usually accepted by the people without significant resistance? How has America's literary culture been influenced by recent writing and publishing technologies? Considering the direction in which technology is currently moving, what new innovations might be on the horizon, and what effects will they have on literature?

— classroom exercise

Socrates rebelled against the written word, seeing it as a dangerous invention that could have disastrous results. "You couldn't ask a piece of writing follow-up questions; words would be taken out of the context in which they were spoken, which would make them bound to be misunderstood, beyond the control of their author; words would survive the speaker's death, so that he would be unable to refute false interpretations that might arise later." By contrast, Socrates' students believed that writing would preserve knowledge for future generations. Considering the spread of misinformation through writing today, were Socrates' fears justified, or were his students right on this issue? If Socrates was here today, how would you respond to his argument that writing would degrade the public's ability to reason and retain information?

Break the students into two teams. One team will defend Socrates' perspective on writing, while the other will defend the position of his students. Assign the teams' positions on the issue and give them one class period to plan their arguments. During the next class, have them present their arguments to the opposing side. Before they enter the debate, remind them that they should observe the same rules of conduct used during Socrates' time, carefully listening to the other side's argument before defending their own side. This will allow them to coherently respond to the other sides' points, thereby strengthening their own argument.

— classroom exercise

Puchner writes in Chapter Seven: "In the new world made by print, it didn't matter that you were the leader of the mightiest organization in the world or that you could claim to be speaking for God. What mattered was how good you were as an author; it was the only thing that gave you authority."

Consider this quote in light of the first four chapters of *The Written World*. In the beginning of literary history, writing was the province of kings, philosophers, and religious leaders. In order for their readers to listen to them, writers first had to prove their qualifications by their spoken words and their deeds. In Chapter Seven, the balance of power shifts so that Martin Luther, a relatively unknown monk, is able to challenge the words of one of the most powerful men in Western civilization. What, in your opinion, led to this shift in power? Does credit rest solely with the invention of the printing press or was something else at work in the culture?

In class, study the format of Luther's pamphlets and printed sermons. Then, present the students with the following question: Were Martin Luther and Gutenberg the true instigators of a drastic power shift, or was it the result of larger cultural factors that were already at work? Their responses to this question should be written using the same format and tone as Luther's writing, combining logic and opinion, while directly addressing the audience.

classroom exercise

In class, compare and contrast the development of literature in Eurasia with its development in Latin America. What are some similarities between how these disparate cultures treated writing? What are some differences? How was the rise of writing influenced by each culture's geographical location, trade networks, and social structure?

classroom exercise

In Chapter Nine, Puchner shows how the increased mechanization of writing via the printing press proved problematic for authors. The printing press allowed them to share their stories with wider audiences, but it also weakened authors' bargaining power and opened the door to plagiarism: "The division of labor between people who invent stories (authors), people who own the machines for producing printed books (printers and publishers), and people who sell those books (distributors and booksellers) has certainly benefited authors, allowing them to reach many more readers than ever before. But it has also limited their control over their own works."

Printers could easily betray authors and sell facsimiles of their stories without paying them. Puchner argues that Cervantes' experience with literary piracy was only the beginning of an ongoing struggle between authors, printers, and plagiarists. In class, look at the rise of e-books and independently published authors in today's literary market. With the invention of the e-book, have authors finally taken back full control of their stories? Are authors able to achieve success without the help of publishers or printers, or do these institutions still play a crucial role in the literary world?

classroom exercise

In the opening of *The Written World*, Puchner explains that his goal is to provide his readers with a comprehensive look at the history of foundational texts and their influence on their respective cultures. After the class finishes the book, have the students write a short essay answering the following questions:

Did Puchner succeed in creating a coherent, comprehensive picture of the history of foundational texts and their various effects on their cultures? Did he, in your opinion, leave out any important literary texts or moments in literary history, or should he have spent more time examining a shorter list of texts? If you had written this book, which foundational texts would you have included? To what extent do you think the world's perception of "important" literature is influenced by those who compile our textbooks and engage in the field of literary scholarship?

classroom exercise

Throughout the book, Puchner gives examples of famous literary texts that underwent dramatic journeys, often across entire continents. Using *The Written World* and other academic sources, the students must pick one of the texts studied in *The Written World* and map out its journey across the globe, marking any important events surrounding the text. They will then turn this information into a fake travel journal, written from the perspective of their chosen text.

classroom exercise

Describing Murasaki's two diaries, Puchner observes that one was written in prose, while the second was "entirely poetic and therefore highly allusive." In class, compare her two diaries. Which structure do the students prefer? Are they more drawn to the ambiguity of poetry or the more straightforward nature of prose? For one week, have them keep a diary, mimicking one of the two styles used in Murasaki's diaries. Afterwards, have them revisit the question of the strengths and weaknesses of the different writing structures.

classroom exercise

This book is not only a history of the development of literature and of nations; it is also a history of individuals. Well-known conquerors like Alexander the Great and Cortez are placed alongside monks, Japanese courtiers, and carpenters from Nazareth. In *The Written World*, Puchner gives brief summaries of their lives. However, for the sake of brevity, he restrains himself to the main details, particularly the ones that connect with the larger world of literature. Many aspects of these individuals' experiences and personalities are left untouched.

For this activity, the students will complete a character study of one of the individuals mentioned in *The Written World*. Their chosen person can either be a main player in the book or they can be someone who is only briefly mentioned. Regardless of their person's prominence in *The Written World*, they should attempt to create an accurate summary of the individual's life. This character summary should be three to four pages in length and include thoughtful analysis of the individual's experiences, motivations, and personal traits. While compiling this character study, the student should use at least two print and three online sources, not including *The Written World*.

resources

"Alexander the Great," *Ancient.eu*, Web Page: This page details Alexander's life and conquests. It ties into his love for Homer's *Iliad*, while providing a straightforward account of his military campaigns and accomplishments.

"Frame Story," *Literary Devices*, Web Article: This article summarizes the functions and key aspects of frame stories. It also gives examples of frame stories in classical literature, as well as contemporary stories.

"The Real Don Quixote," *Radiolab*, Web Podcast: In this podcast, *Radiolab* looks at the history of *Don Quixote* and the subversive elements used by the author.

"Requiem," Anna Akhmatova: While Puchner references this poem and quotes a few lines, the full text is not included in his book. Some students may be less familiar with "Requiem" than some of the other texts. If so, it would be helpful for them to read the poem that Akhmatova spent much of her life protecting.

"The Thousand and One Nights: A History of the Text and its Reception," Dwight Reynolds: This literary essay examines in-depth the background of *A Thousand and One Nights* and how it was received by different cultures.

• other works of interest

Reflections on Literature and Culture, Hannah Arendt

The Campaigns of Alexander, Arrian

On Paper: The Everything of Its Two-Thousand-Year History, Nicholas A. Basbanes

No Ordinary Man: The Life and Times of Miguel de Cervantes, Donald P. McCrory

Literature, Culture and Society, Andrew Milner

Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls: The History of Judaism, the Background of Christianity, the Lost Library of Qumran, Lawrence H. Schiffman

Merchants of Culture, John B. Thompson

Printing and Publishing in Medieval China, Denis Twitchett

Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights, Marina Warner

Words Made Fresh: Essays on Literature and Culture, Larry Woiwode

Off the Books: On Literature and Culture, J. Peder Zane

• about this guide's writers

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• notes



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