

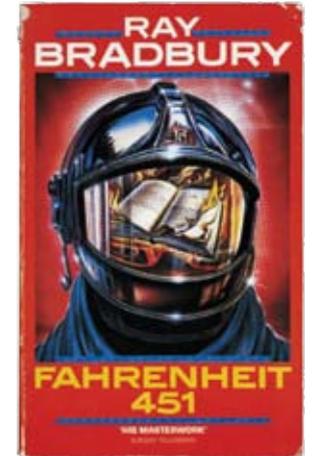
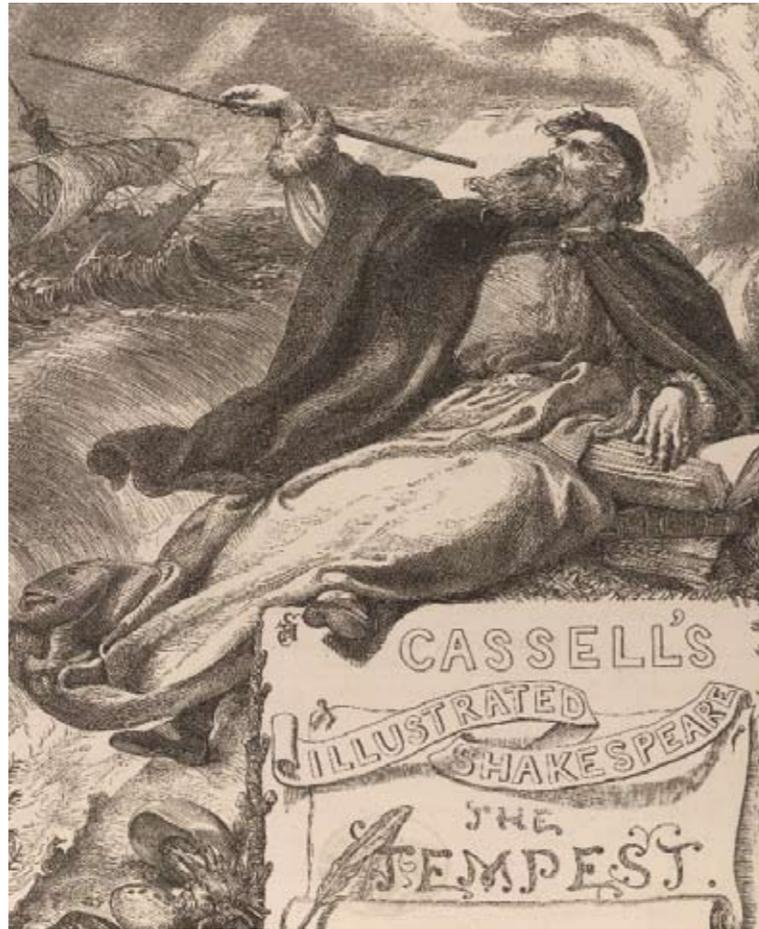
BOOKS IN HISTORY



For many centuries, books have been emblems of our culture and regarded as one of the defining characteristics of developed civilisations. They have been symbolically central to many religions and they have been identified with learning and sound moral virtues. They have been signs, or even manifestations, of power and magic: Shakespeare's Prospero, whose library was "dukedom large enough", was to be overthrown by seizing and destroying his books; Marlowe's Faustus would burn his books as a last desperate measure to save himself from damnation. The need to control the dangerous potential of this key medium of communication and information has exercised the minds of many political rulers, who have supported the approach taken in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*; the burning of books is an emotive cultural image. The coming of the book, and its subsequent spread to mass markets, has brought entertainment, education, political change, and spiritual or intellectual development to millions of people over the centuries. In Britain, we do not pay value added tax on books, because, like food and children's clothes, they are considered to be essential items, not optional luxuries. An eleventh-century mosaic (opposite) still surviving on the walls of St Sophia in Istanbul, depicting Christ flanked by the Emperor Constantine IX and his wife, nicely summarises the veneration and respect in which the book, and the idea of the book, has been held over many ages. The Emperor holds a bag of money, while Christ holds a book.

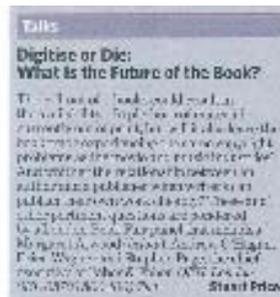
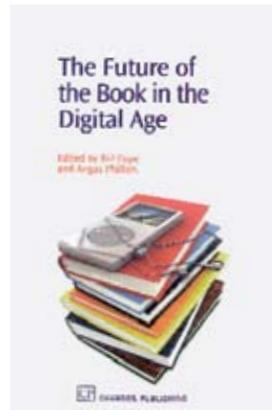
Books are also tremendously familiar objects, and easy to find. New ones are being produced all the time, and our libraries and bookshops are full of them, providing access to information, knowledge and cultural heritage. As historical artefacts go, they are still relatively cheap to acquire and abundant in supply. A nineteenth-century book, or even a seventeenth-century one, in sound contemporary condition, can often be bought for a fraction of the price which might be sought for a clock, or a picture, or some other household object of comparable date. It is not hard to

Books have always been an essential part of the equipment of wizards and magicians, who are often represented with books—Prospero's books were the source of his magic, while Faustus summoned the devil with book in hand



The burning of books is an emotive cultural image. The Nazis are notorious as book-burners, and the images of their book bonfires of the 1930s are well known (overleaf), but the idea has a much longer history. The first Chinese Emperor, Qin Shi Huang, is remembered not only for the Great Wall of China and the terracotta army, but also as the first great ruler to try to control the thinking of his people by burning books. Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451 has entered the canon of classic 20th-century fiction for its portrayal of a society in which the reading or keeping of books is a crime, and in which firemen are employed to burn books





obtain permission within our extensive networks of research and historic libraries to be able to hold, examine and study books of all periods.

THE CHALLENGES OF A DIGITAL AGE

Despite all this, we are now living through a time of great change in which the status and future of the book is increasingly questioned. The death of the book has been in the air for some time, as a consequence of the communications revolution brought about by new technology. The advent of the Internet is widely and rightly identified as one of those great watersheds, like the invention of printing or the mechanisation of industry, which affect the way people live and think. Other new communication media, like radio and television, have come along and established a comfortable co-existence alongside books, but the Internet has greater potential to supplant, rather than supplement, the primacy of print on paper as the preferred method of transmitting texts from one person to another, whether it be for work or pleasure.

Will books die? Much speculation takes place against a background of fast-moving change. We are currently too close to the first wave of that change process to be able to forecast all the consequences, or their precise chronology, but we can make some predictions and try to pick our way through some of the conflicting opinions which abound. The death of the book is resisted and denied at least as much as it is forecast, partly on the grounds of empirical observation and partly on more sentimental ones. People like books and many current users of such a familiar and trusted part of the fabric of life are instinctively hostile to the notion that they may become less necessary. More concretely, it is argued that we are still seeing a steady increase in the numbers of books published and purchased year on year, that the e-books of today are clumsy substitutes, and that the long-term stability of electronic media has yet to be proven. The death of the book could be like the paperless office, a false prophecy which will not come to be.

We should be wary of such observations. The technology is still young, and it moves fast; consider the speed with which

Will the book be supplanted by electronic technology?

<h2>Yes</h2> <p>Simon Waldman Internet editor, the Guardian</p> 	<h2>No</h2> <p>Brian Lang Chief executive, British Library</p> 	<p>design: it's virtually indestructible, portable and versatile, but above all self-contained. No expensive hardware, intervening software, password or downloading stands between the human eye and the printed page. The book can very effectively stand up for itself against electronic media.</p> <p>For a wide range of uses, the book is ideal. For novels, poetry, plays, biographies; for linear reading rather than intermittent consultation – the book is best. Books for the beach and bed, disks for detail and data. And don't forget: the internet may have grown massively, but more books are being published now than at any time in history. How's that for staying power?</p>
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Dear Brian,
First, can we divorce the sentimentality that surrounds the printed word from this debate? Yes, racks of leather-bound books look fantastic.

dia which once cost hundreds. Surely you can see the benefit of both of these phenomena? And surely you have to believe that for all the aesthetic virtues we associate

unteers are putting 1,000 of the world's greatest works of literature – from Balzac to Xenophon – into digital form.

Instead of clinging on to the crudeness of the book, we should be trying to get as many internet-connected PCs to as many corners of the world as possible. We should save our children from out-of-date textbooks and get schools connected as quickly as possible. You, meanwhile, should continue to make as much of your collection available to the public for free on the net as you can. Those who want to keep their books, will do – like those who hang on to vinyl records. But for those who want to acquire, share and spread knowledge, elec-

vinyl records were replaced by compact discs (themselves now yesterday's news, with the rise of downloading). The statistics for book production do indeed show regular rises, but they include electronic publications, and are enhanced by the recent growth in print-on-demand reissues of older material. The British Library, in its *2020 Vision* (issued in 2010) predicts that by 2020, 75% of all titles worldwide will be published only electronically, or in both digital and printed versions. There are already some arenas, like that of scientific journals, in which electronic communication has all but taken over from traditional formats. Scientists and biomedical researchers, who need immediate access to the outputs of the global research network, rely primarily on Internet-enabled electronic publishing mechanisms to disseminate their findings and discover those of their peers. Humanities scholars are gradually catching up with their scientific colleagues by recognising the potential of the Internet to go beyond mere access to textual sources, to the creation of interactive frameworks within which subjects can be explored, and knowledge shared, in new ways. The rise of social media like Facebook is influencing a whole generation (and

The future of the book, and its survival (or not) in a digital age, is much discussed and debated