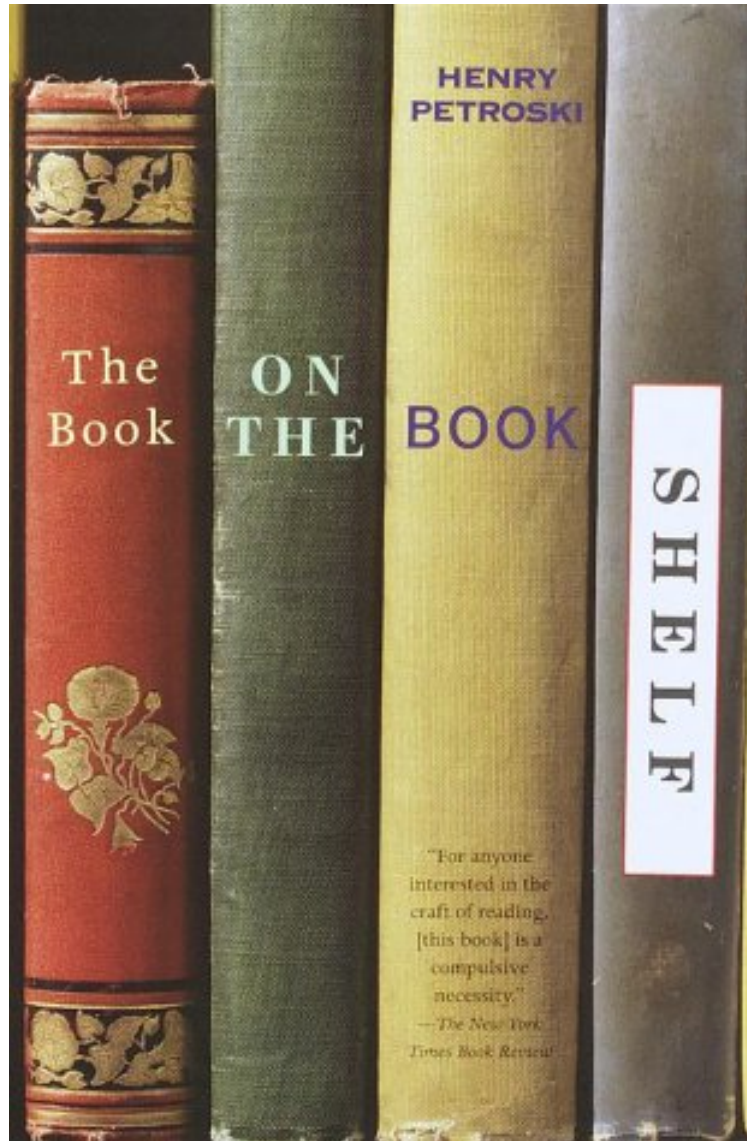


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## The Book on the Bookshelf

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From the author of the highly praised *The Pencil* and *The Evolution of Useful Things* comes another captivating history of the seemingly mundane: the book and its storage. Most of us take for granted that our books are vertical on our shelves with the spines facing out, but Henry Petroski, inveterately curious engineer, didn't. As a result, readers are guided along the astonishing evolution from papyrus scrolls boxed at Alexandria to upright books shelved at the Library of Congress. Unimpeachably researched, enviably written, and charmed with anecdotes from Seneca to Samuel Pepys to a nineteenth-century bibliophile who had to climb over his books to get into bed, *The Book on the Bookshelf* is indispensable for anyone who loves books.

.com Consider the book. Though *Goodnight Moon* and *Finnegans Wake* differ considerably in content and intended audience, they do share some basic characteristics. They have pages, they're roughly the same shape, and whether in a bookstore, library, or private home, they are generally stored vertically on shelves. Indeed, this is so much the norm that in these days of high-tech printing presses and chain bookstores, it's easy to believe that the book, like the cockroach, remains much the same as it ever was. But as Henry Petroski makes abundantly clear in *Book on the Bookshelf*, books as we know them have had a long and complex evolution. Indeed, he takes us from the scroll to the codex to the hand-lettered illuminated texts that were so rare and valuable they were chained to lecterns to prevent theft. Along the way he provides plenty of amusing anecdotes about libraries (according to one possibly apocryphal account, the library at Alexandria borrowed the works of the great Greek authors from Athens, had them copied, and then sent the copies back, keeping the originals), book collectors, and the care of books. Book-lover though he may be, however, Henry Petroski is, first and foremost, an engineer and so, in the end, it is the evolution of bookshelves even more than of books that fascinates him. Pigeonholes for scrolls, book presses containing thousands of chained volumes, rotating lecterns that allowed scholars to peruse more than one book at a time--these are just a few of the ingenious methods readers have devised over the centuries for storing their books: "in cabinets beneath the desks, on shelves in front of them, in triangular attic-like spaces formed under the back-to-back sloped surfaces of desktops or small tabletop lecterns that rested upon a horizontal surface." Placing books vertically on shelves, spines facing outward, is a fairly recent invention, it would seem. Well written as it is, if *Book on the Bookshelf* were only about books-as-furniture, it would have little appeal to the general reader. Petroski, however, uses this treatise on design to examine the very human motivations that lie behind it. From the example of Samuel Pepys, who refused to have more titles than his library could hold (about 3,000), to an appendix detailing all the ways people organize their collections (by sentimental value, by size, by color, and by price, to name a few of the more unconventional methods), Petroski peppers his account with enough human interest to keep his audience reading from cover to cover. --Alix Wilber From *Publishers Weekly* That bookshelves might harbor secret and enchanting lives is a thrilling prospect for any serious reader. What laws of human nature govern our sturdy cases of books? What damning quirks of character glare from a few casually stowed volumes? In this disappointing study, however, Petroski's effort to reveal the "evolution of the bookshelf as we know it" yields few rewards. Pondering the physics of the bookend and the genealogy of the library carrel, this Duke University scholar observes the bookshelf as a piece of the infrastructure undergirding our

civilization. We learn that medieval books were chained to their shelves to prevent theft, and that beverage stains have plagued bibliophiles almost since the dawn of the printed word. Admirers of Petroski's earlier works (*The Evolution of Useful Things*, *Remaking the World*, etc.) will not be surprised by his exquisite research, or by the gusto with which he plunges into the dustiest of library bins. But the bookshelf proves a more oblique topic than bridges or even pencils, two of Petroski's other interests. The practical construction principles of bookshelves make for rather dull reading, and conjecture about lectern usage in the Middle Ages wears thin. This book is most successful when delving into the gritty aspects of engineering, whether it be the cantilevered forces of library book stacks or the architecture of the British Museum Reading Room. After lingering among such fusty stacks, readers will welcome the whimsical appendix, which proposes arranging one's books alphabetically by the author's first name, or even by the first word of the antepenultimate sentence. (Sept.) Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc. From *Library Journal* If "God is in the details" then those seeking God should read Petroski's books (including *The Pencil: A History of Design and Circumstance* and *The Evolution of Useful Things*). In all of his books, Petroski reveals the technological issues and surprising histories of everyday things. Here he details the evolution of the bookshelf. Most people, librarians included, think of bookshelves, if they think of them at all, as an inevitable response to the development of books. Petroski starts by questioning why books are shelved vertically on horizontal shelves with their spines out and follows with the story of how the storage and shelving of books as well as the design and construction of libraries has developed: from the scrolls and codexes of ancient times to medieval monastic libraries (where books were chained to desks) to the development of modern bookstacks, the evolution of compact shelves, and a consideration of the future of the book. Petroski includes delightful glimpses of noteworthy book collectors of the past and how they organized their books. Well written and richly illustrated, this book is not just for bibliophiles. Highly recommended. A Paul A. D'Alessandro, Portland P.L., ME Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.