

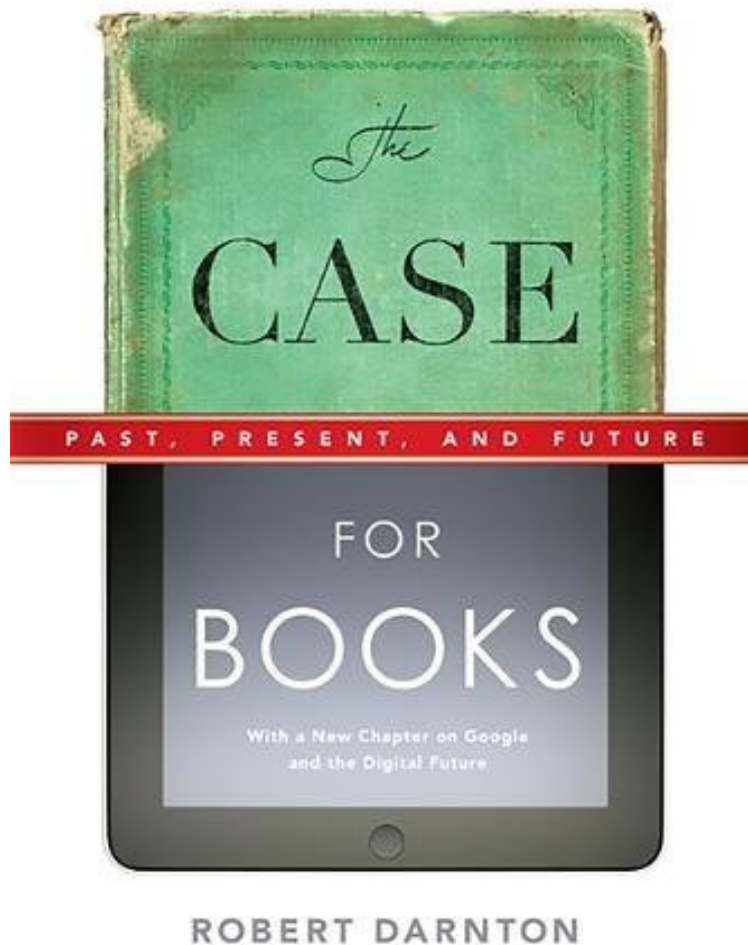
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## The Case for Books: Past, Present, and Future

Robert Darnton

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"Robert Darnton has the inquisitiveness of an investigative reporter, the thoroughness of a rigorous scholar, and the sensitivity of a novelist."  
—STANLEY HOFFMAN, *The New Republic*



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**Robert Darnton : The Case for Books: Past, Present, and Future** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Case for Books: Past, Present, and Future:

19 of 19 people found the following review helpful. The Case for BooksBy barbara a. trumpinski (kitten)After reading Robert Darnton's book The Case for Books: Past, Present and Future I would recommend it for every bibliophile's "books to read" list. Darnton is not only the director of the Harvard library, he is also a historian who has devoted a great deal of time and energy to the history of books, writing, printing and reading. The book provides an overview of

the subject without trying to do too much and without being dry and too technical. (I liked it so much I will admit to purchasing my own copy after I had read the first 6 chapters.) As indicated by the title, *The Case for Books* is divided into three sections, as indicated by the title, but the Introduction has one of the most important points in the book, in my opinion. Darnton says: "A generation "born digital" is "always on," conversing everywhere on cell phones, tapping out instant messages, and networking in real or virtual realities. The younger people you pass on the street or sit next to on a bus are both simultaneously there and not there." Even so, he doesn't want to choose between print and ebooks. He analyzes the way the public interacts with books and printing (he is especially fond of the 17th century and spends a lot of time on the craft of bibliography and the way it is possible to distinguish between editions of Shakespeare) and then provides one of the best and certainly one of the clearest explanations of the Google book settlement that I have read. He is obviously a fan of Google Books and other projects that provide access to information, but he is also not overly dazzled and points out the danger of giving one commercial entity a monopoly or even fostering an oligopoly. I particularly liked the chapters that dealt with reading. The description of the "commonplace book" of the 17th century was fascinating, as I had not heard of this before. He points to the idea of the history of books as the history of communication in print. Ideas are transmitted through the written word and books have shaped the thought and behavior of mankind for the last 500 years. Books aren't going to disappear. They may change format, but that has happened many times in the past. Darnton talked briefly about Open Access, and he has what is not quite a rant on the topic of destroying books to preserve them. This has happened in the past when the powers that be thought that microform was the wave of the future. It is not quite so bad with Google as scanning techniques have improved, but Google has sadly lacked quality control, particularly in some of its earlier scanning projects. Cyberspace needs to be regulated and have standards, but the information needs to be available for students and general readers alike. Information is valuable but it is not knowledge. Knowledge is priceless. I was surprised that he didn't mention projects other than Google Books which are providing material for free, for example Project Gutenberg, the Hathi Library and the Internet Archives, all of which are fine examples of providing public access to information. He also talked about university press publishing and Gutenberg-e, which was a project to provide electronic copies of the top dissertations in history, combining the work of the Columbia University Press and the American Historical Association and financed by Carnegie Mellon. It was only moderately successful and has ended. University Presses are publishing less and less because the public won't buy the books that are published and libraries can no longer afford them. There are fewer and fewer venues for faculty to publish and that has negatively affected academia which is still tied to print publishing as a means of advancing. Darnton obviously loves his subject and his profession. I think bibliophiles, librarians and others who are interested in the whys and wherefores of books that are either digital or paper who read *A Case for Books* will be satisfied.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. *Marian the Librarian Meets the New Digital Future* By Etienne RPT

There are several heroes in this book, but only one villain. The villain is, of course, Google, with its plan to digitize millions of books from research libraries and to make them available on the web to the public, for a profit. Google was challenged in court by a group of authors and publishers for alleged breach of copyright. For Robert Darnton, who expressed his views in numerous articles published by the NYRB and other journals, market forces cannot be trusted to operate for the public good. Looking back over the course of digitization from the 1990s, he sees a great missed opportunity: "we could have created a National Digital Library, the twenty-first century equivalent of the Library of Alexandria." Instead, "we are allowing a question of public policy--the control of access to information--to be determined by private lawsuit." Turning to the heroes of the book, the first character we meet is a fictitious one, who appears at various junctures in the text. Marian the Librarian, as she is called, answers queries about her job by explaining that librarianship "is all about money and power". She lives in a dangerous world of CIA plots to take all newspapers out of libraries, of books baking in chemical solutions to prevent their pages from turning into crumbs, and of civil lawsuits such as the Google Book Search case brought to the district court for the Southern District of New York. The case against Google's potential abuse of monopoly power is especially strong because, as people familiar with scientific publishing certainly know, it has happened before. Commercial publishers discovered they could ratchet up the subscription price of professional journals without causing cancellations, because once a university library subscribed, the students and the professors came to expect an uninterrupted flow of issues. This has resulted in the skyrocketing cost of serials, with the *Journal of Comparative Neurology* claiming the hefty price of \$25,910 for a year's subscription. As a consequence, libraries that used to spend 50 percent of their acquisitions budget on monographs now spend 25 percent or less. University presses, which depend on sales to libraries, cannot cover their costs by publishing monographs. And young scholars who depend on publishing to advance their careers are now in danger of perishing. For the author, lending his voice to Marian the Librarian, "To digitize collections and sell the product in ways that fail to guarantee wide access would be to repeat the mistake that was made when publishers exploited the market for scholarly journals, but on a much greater scale, for it would turn the Internet into an instrument for privatizing knowledge that belongs in the public sphere." The second hero of the book is Robert Darnton himself as a professional historian who made pioneering contributions to the history of books. Let's call him Bob the Historian. As he defines his field of inquiry, the purpose of the history of books "is to understand how ideas were transmitted through print and how exposure to the printed word affected the thoughts and

behavior of mankind during the last five hundred years". Initially, the problems took the form of concrete questions in unrelated branches of scholarship: What were Shakespeare's original texts? What caused the French Revolution? What is the connection between culture and social stratification? By asking new questions, using new methods and tapping new sources, the history of books turned into an exciting and thriving discipline, akin in its ambition and span to the history of science or the sociology of knowledge. Bob the Historian believes libraries should preserve as much printed material and other media as possible. He thinks that "future scholars may learn a lot from studying our harlequin novels or computer manuals or telephone books." As his own research has shown, "almanacs and chapbooks were the most popular kind of printed matter in early modern Europe--so popular, in fact, that libraries did not deign to collect them." Likewise, commonplace books where people copied valuable quotes and remarks are sites to be mined for information about how people thought in a culture based on different assumptions from our own. Bob the Historian's passion for the archive goes beyond the printed material. He notes that we have lost 80 percent of all silent films and 50 percent of all films made before World War II. And he refers to ongoing projects at Harvard to archive email exchanges and web content for future generations to study. His plea for conservation is fueled by his belief in the social role of the historian: "Any attempt to see into the future while struggling with problems of the present should be informed by studying the past". Although the study of history does not afford lessons that can be directly applied to present circumstances, immersions into the past can provide a useful perspective on current and future events. The last hero of the book is the same author in a different capacity: as a lover of books, bewitched by their texture and smell. Robbie Bookworm, if we dare call him so, recalls with emotion his first visit as a freshman to the rare books library at Harvard and his discovery of marginalia annotations of Emerson by Melville. Digitized images on a computer screen will always fail to capture crucial aspects of a book. "When I read an old book, I hold its pages up to the light and often find among the fibers of the paper little circles made by drops from the hand of the vatman as he made the sheet--or bits of shirts and petticoats that failed to be grounded up adequately during the preparation of the pulp." And to escape the vagaries of the present, there is always the temptation "to retire to a rare-book room and count watermarks".

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. darnton needs an editor

By Stuart K Patterson

Darnton is a good source on the crucial opening of the whole question of digitized books. Unfortunately, he reiterates his position here through three essays opening the volume that overlap more than they offer new or alternative views of the control that Google began asserting over the works they putatively wanted to save and make available. Still, overall, this is a crucial perspective in the firmament of debate about the future of books.

The era of the printed book is at a crossroad. E-readers are flooding the market, books are available to read on cell phones, and companies such as Google, Amazon, and Apple are competing to command near monopolistic positions as sellers and dispensers of digital information. Already, more books have been scanned and digitized than were housed in the great library in Alexandria. Is the printed book resilient enough to survive the digital revolution, or will it become obsolete? In this lasting collection of essays, Robert Darnton, an intellectual pioneer in the field of this history of the book, lends unique authority to the life, role, and legacy of the book in society.

From Publishers Weekly

Is the age of the printed book coming to an end? If history is any guide, notes Harvard University Library director Darnton, not any time soon. In this collection of previously published essays, an unashamed apology for the printed word, Darnton, an eloquent writer and one of the world's foremost historians of the book, offers a fascinating history of our literary past and a penetrating look at the disruptive forces shaping the future of publishing. Almost no topic is untouched, from the role of libraries to metadata, the print traditions of Europe, piracy old and new, Darnton's own forays into digital initiatives and the efficacy even the beauty of our changing literary landscape over centuries of development. This book clearly has a main character, however Google. The search giant appears often. While the individual essays are brief, in sum, the book offers a deep dive into the evolution of the written and published word. Darnton offers little cover from the winds of change, but for book lovers and publishing professionals he offers the comfort that comes from understanding the past, and hope, as he places the Internet among a litany of disruptive innovations the book has survived. (Oct. 27) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. Chronicle of Higher Education, August 29, 2010

A useful text with which to muse on this subject is Robert Darnton's *The Case for Books: Past, Present, and Future* (PublicAffairs, 2009). In it, the onetime newspaper reporter, distinguished scholar of the Enlightenment and the history of the book, and director of Harvard's libraries, swings between explanations and concerns about Google Book Search, and how the situation with books today looks in the perspective of history. Many of his observations give pause.