



# Writing: The Story of Alphabets and Scripts

*Georges Jean*

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## **Writing: The Story of Alphabets and Scripts** Georges Jean

An epic spanning six thousand years - the history of writing. From the valleys of the Tigris and the Euphrates to the shores of the Mediterranean, from hieroglyphics and cuneiform to the Phoenicians and the alphabet as we know it, we follow its mysterious course through the ages. Colourful medieval manuscripts lead to the invention of printing and to the rich world of modern lettering in all its forms. Writing lies at the root of our civilisation. It is the accumulated memory of mankind.

## **Writing: The Story of Alphabets and Scripts Details**

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## Marsha says

I was curious about how cuneiform morph into hieroglyphics. I found this book at the Nelson Art Gallery...it's small and very readable. It's amazing so far.

I'd recommend this book to anyone who wants to know about writing. I wouldn't expect to learn so much from such a little book. It's fun to read, has tons of amazing facts along the way and just a blast.

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## Jamie says

I'm not sure who this book was written for. I ordered it from my library's online catalog and was expecting a more traditional book. This one is physically small, only 5x7 inches, and around 200 pages. The first 128 pages cover the history of writing and are printed on glossy paper with about 50% of the page space taken up with illustrations. After that, the rest of the book consists of writings about writing and is printed on standard book paper with black and white images.

The pictures and photos in the first section are nice, and in full color, and the text itself is at an adult level, but who would be the intended audience for a book like this? If a reader is interested enough in the subject to get a book on it, who would be satisfied with each topic being handled with a couple of paragraphs and a few pretty pictures? Looking online I found that it is part of the New Horizons series, and there are dozens of titles in this format, so there must be a market for books like this (People with short attention spans? People who only have five minutes at a time to read? People who want just enough superficial knowledge on a subject to sound educated at a cocktail party?) Very strange.

It proceeds in roughly chronological order, starting with cuneiform and moving to hieroglyphics and other writing systems such as the Cretan linear systems. It then jumps to China and India and tracks the development of their systems, and then advances through the invention of movable type and up to the Linotype era. The writing is not bad and can serve as a primer to whet your appetite for books that actually delve into the topics. The bibliography pointed me toward some other books that look like they will provide a deeper exposure to aspects of the history of writing.

The last part of the book, the writings about writing, is a jumble of mismatched little essays, each a couple of hundred words long. Some are written by typographers and graphic designer for other typographers and graphic designers, and to the casual reader can border on the nonsensical, e.g., "The shape of the paper forms another rhythmic element: it might be the symmetry of an equilateral square or the stressed rhythm of the short and long edges of a rectangle....The rhythm of the composition can be in harmony with the format of the paper or in contrast to it." Umm, okay....

So who is it for? If you're heading off to a party and want to know just enough about the history of writing to impress people who don't know anything at all about it, I guess this is the book for you. If you want to have the subject explored in depth you should look elsewhere.

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## Jennifer says

I mostly just love looking at the pictures of all the writing systems throughout the ages! A fun book to pick up and look at occasionally.

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## Akira says

Write a review...

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## Lisa says

"So, first man's house and his architecture, then its body, its structure and its weaknesses, the justice, music, the church; war, harvest and geometry; the mountains, nomadic life, cloistered life; astronomy; work and rest; the horse and the serpent; the hammer and the urn that can be upturned and strung up to make a bell; trees, rivers, roads; and finally destiny and God: that is what the alphabet contains."

Victor Hugo, Travel Notebooks, 1839

I thoroughly enjoy the New Horizons series. Always well researched and richly illustrated, with art and technical drawings, as well as artefacts and portraits, it also contains a large section of primary source excerpts and documents for further reading. That is where I found the Victor Hugo quote above, along with reflections by Roland Barthes on the importance of writing, examples of calligraphy and on the special case of writing music, on ancient Roman advertisement, propaganda and graffiti.

This short introduction into the history of writing offers an overview of the multiple revolutions in human society that were the effect of the new form of communication, from cuneiform and hieroglyphs and Chinese pictograms to our own alphabet, and from papyrus rolls and Medieval manuscripts stored in monasteries to the invention of the printing press and the mass communication of writing that started in the second half of the 15th century in Europe.

Of course it also tells the exciting story of the language specialists of the 19th century who embarked on the adventure to decipher long forgotten languages, with the Rosetta stone as a symbol for human history and its various facets: found in Egypt during the Napoleonic era, part of the stormy political developments of that time, it ended up in the British Museum, where it is now admired for its role in deciphering the hieroglyphs. Why was it possible? Because of the multilingual message carved into the stone, an early case of global citizenship which required propaganda texts to be written in three different text forms. Ancient multilingualism made it possible to regain lost knowledge of the Ancient Egyptian world through an international linguistic effort in the 19th century. What a thriller!

From deciphering Mesopotamian clay tablets to typing Goodreads book reviews on computer tablets, there is a straight line of improving communication, in order to document, and influence the world through words that can be stored.

It is a rewarding journey to have a look at the developments that led to our text overflow today, as it seems to satisfy so many human needs, and ultimately define us as a species.

The stories people tell, carved in stone or posted on a social media platform, are a crucial part of what makes us special. And the most fascinating detail of all, to be found in another favourite book on the power of reading, Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain, our brain was never wired to learn how to read and to write, but it happened anyway. Maryanne Wolf tells the unbelievable story of what actually happens in our brain during that process that we now take for granted. Reading and writing are true wonders, in every respect!

Highly recommended!

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### **David says**

A pretty fun book, even if it was written by someone with a highly suspect name. (You know what they say about never trusting someone with two last names)

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### **Daphnée Kwong Waye says**

I know that you can find of the information about the history of writing on the internet, but this small book, with its glossy pages, sweet perfume, smooth surface, and amazing illustrations simply beats the digital way of reading. Moreover, since it's small and very easy, light-headed to read, I'm no doubt going to browse through it endlessly until the end of my time.

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### **Özlem Güzelharcan says**

Yazinin bulunusu ve evrimine dair harika bilgiler harika fotoğraflarla, kuse kagitta bu kitapta canlaniyor. Hiyerogliflerden mağara resimlerine ve cesitli alfabelere dair ayrintili bilgiler iceren Georges Jean'in bu derlemesi benim gibi yazi muptelalarinin basini dondurecektir.

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### **Natalia says**

I'm pleased with this book. Nice and enjoyable reading with good graphics, nothing too profound.

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### **Ευθυμ?α Δεσποτ?κη says**

?να βιβλ?ο που θα ?ταν π?ρα πολ? ενδιαφ?ρον αν δεν ?ταν τυπωμ?νο ?ναρχα και μπερδεμ?να

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**verbava says**

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**Jenny Nguyen says**

This is a small but comprehensive introduction to the 6000-year history of writing . I appreciate the author's efforts to look at this long history in both the Western and Eastern world, comparing and raising hypotheses on the connection and co-existence of different languages and their writing. The abundance of illustrations is a great and necessary feature of this book. Indeed, one may feel the need to research further if wanting to truly grab the essence of each writing. There are some places where the captions (for illustrations) are obscure, some places where these images are not directly related to the texts. Still, this is a pleasure non-fiction read I truly enjoyed.

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**Bengi says**

A very good book on how writing evolved and developed.

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**Emma says**

Some of the historical information is a little dodgy.

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**Kate Lawrence says**

Very informative and abundantly illustrated small book about how we as a species learned to write and reproduce our writing. The earliest writing--dating from 4,000 BCE in Sumer--was developed as a way to keep track of agricultural commodities. We can thank the Phoenicians for the idea of the alphabet; before that, writing corresponded to words or syllables instead of sounds. With an alphabet, the number of symbols a person needed to memorize in order to read and write was drastically reduced and simplified. A final chapter introduces us to the leading scholars of the 19th and 20th centuries who were first able to decipher ancient scripts.

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