In the 17th century, visitors to the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford in England were required to take an oath before admission. Enjoined against wandering, browsing or perusing a manuscript without a monitor looking over his shoulder, each scholar pledged not to "steal, change, make erasures, deform, tear, cut, write notes in, interline, willfully spoil, obliterate, defile, or in any other way retrench, ill-use, wear away or deteriorate any book or books."

Two hundred years after the invention of movable type, books had power. They were coveted -- and feared.

Andrew Pettegree, head of the School of History at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, provides a learned and lucid account of the transformation of knowledge in the post-Gutenberg world, 1450-1600. The celebration of print for saving and spreading the accumulated wisdom of the human mind, he claims, represents a part of a more complex reality.

Books gained readers in fits and starts, as zealots grinded axes and axioms during political conflicts and religious wars. With good reason, the great humanists of the Renaissance dismissed and disdained many of the "grubby small books and pamphlets" that "underpinned the economics of the industry."
As books became more familiar and affordable, Mr. Pettegree reveals, in a fascinating discussion of the reading habits of 16th-century Europeans, a new market in recreational literature emerged.

Lengthy, episodic, half-familiar epic tales (including "The Song of Roland," Ludovico Ariosto's "Orlando Furioso" and Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales") were not designed for private reading but for a tradition in which leisure was spent in the company of others.

Set on an expansive geographical canvas, they could be read aloud to stimulate conversation about travel, morality and social mores. Composed almost without exception in vernacular languages, rather than in Latin, these masterpieces, Mr. Pettegree indicates, "celebrated and enlarged the capacities of the common tongue."

The "search for order" that characterized the Renaissance also played a crucial role in the print revolution. The expansion of schools increased literacy and created a robust market for textbooks.

An extraordinary number of dictionaries appeared in every format and language. Alphabetized indexes, organized by title and subject, became a standard feature of books, often advertised on the title page as an inducement to purchase.

The quest for encyclopedic knowledge produced an avalanche of geography, history and science books. Extant copies of Nicolas Copernicus' treatise, advancing his controversial theory that the Earth rotated around the sun, indicate a close engagement with the text, even by readers who were careful to register their disagreement with him.

But print, Mr. Pettegree emphasizes, was not always a force for enlightenment. Readers gobbled up accounts of Amerigo Vespucci's voyages to the New World because they featured sea monsters and cannibals.

Despite huge increases in publishing in the 16th century, Mr. Pettegree concludes, many fields "saw no significant increases in scientific understanding." And much "of the toxic energy" in the murderous battles between Catholics and Protestants "came from the printed page."

The Renaissance book world, then, was shaped less by the idealism of scholars and the discernment of consumers than by "pragmatic businessmen for whom the only books that mattered were those that turned a profit."

Gutenberg's successors did, indeed, bring book ownership to a whole new public. But neither they nor the political and religious authorities of their day were able to figure out how, short of censorship, to protect readers from fabricators, demagogues and incendiaries. Or from themselves.

Neither have we, four centuries later.

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