How books will save the world

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To the person on the other side of the page



Disclaimer and timestamp

I'm writing this book in 2026, the year in which artificial intelligence is really taking off, turning the world upside down. Some describe this moment as the peak of the digital revolution, but others see the near future as scary and uncertain. Will AI take over our jobs? Will the world be ruled by robots? Or worse: will humanity ultimately destroy itself? Or is it much ado about nothing? Nobody knows, and opinions differ. One thing is certain: AI is dominating the conversation right now, triggering some interesting, complicated and sometimes hilarious discussions and behaviours.

I'll share my thoughts on AI in the final chapter, but as a disclaimer, I want to say that I used AI tools for research, as a sparring partner and for spelling and grammar. I did all the writing myself.

If you're reading this ten years from now, this disclaimer will probably sound as bizarre as 'I wrote this book on a laptop' (assuming laptops still exist). AI will probably be fully integrated into everyday life, and maybe you'll commute to work by hovercraft. The good news is that you're clearly still reading, which means this book has served its purpose. Unless, of course, you're a robot.



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About the author

Marthe Van Campenhout is a writing coach, ghostwriter and publisher. She loves making complex ideas simple and relatable through storytelling. After years in PR, communication and marketing, she found her way to the work that feels like home: helping experts, visionaries and other thinkers get their stories and books into the world.

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PROLOGUE

While writing this book, I got caught up in a discussion on a social media platform, as sometimes happens. A parent had posted about their frustration that their kids no longer read books. Someone had reacted with a comment: *"So what? Why would that be a problem?"* to which I replied that certain findings suggest there's a link between cognitive decline in younger generations and the fact that they read less. The answer was: *"Do you really believe that? So what you're actually saying is that people who don't read are stupid?"*

To which I responded: *"That's not what I said at all. But I do believe that reading and writing are superpowers that help us think deeper and bring more nuance, something we're currently losing, as you clearly demonstrated with your comment."* The conversation continued, and the other person came up with some facts and statements to prove that there's no real consensus on general cognitive decline among the younger population. Even though I didn't really appreciate his tone, what he said stayed with me. At some point, I even started to doubt the whole foundation of this book.

But now I'm grateful for that conversation, because being openly challenged on this very topic made me realise that, for the purpose of this book, it doesn't matter whether there's scientific or other proof that we should read and write more. Despite all the research, statements and opinions on which the pages you're about to read are partly based, the truth is much simpler than any statistic will ever capture: the superpowers of reading and writing aren't about intellect. They're about presence, creativity and a way for us to make sense of ourselves and the world.

And this is how I would encourage you to engage with what follows: not just as a case to be built, but as an exploration of something you probably already know, but might see differently through the lens this book offers. Because that's what books do: they allow one person to shine their light on things, and invite another person, the reader on the other side of the page, to look at them from their own perspective. That perspective, in turn, may lead to something new to build on.

Isn't that how we evolve as humans?

Happy reading!

SETTING THE SCENE

Does the world need saving?

I confess: one of the reasons I chose the title for this book is its high level of clickbait. These days, you have to make a big entrance to grab people's attention. Sorry (not sorry). It obviously worked; after all, I got you here today.

Do I really believe that the world needs saving? No, I don't. First, I'm an optimist. I know and trust that things tend to unfold better than we fear, individually and collectively. Second, I don't think the world itself is in danger. However, I'm seriously worried about humanity and what's currently happening to us as a consequence of the digital revolution.

We're almost all addicted to our smartphones; we spend more time scrolling than chatting to each other, and – this is what worries me the most – more and more young people are struggling with anxiety and depression. Then there's artificial intelligence: evolving so fast, challenging everything we thought we knew and making us even more dependent on technology.

I'm both intrigued and worried by the opinions of thinkers such as social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, who argues that social media has shattered the shared language and common reality on which democracy depends,[1] and journalist James Marriott, who warns that the smartphone has triggered such a profound collapse of literacy and deep thinking that it threatens the very cognitive foundations of modern civilisation.[2] I also share leadership expert Brené Brown's fear of a two-tier world,[3] where the elite are nourished by deep reading, critical thinking and philosophy, while everyone else is distracted by an endless feed of addictive, shallow and numbing content that requires nothing of them.

So yes, I believe we could be in trouble. But as an optimist, I also believe there's a powerful way to counter the negative and polarising effects of smartphones, social media, AI and 'everything digital'. You've probably already guessed that I'm talking about reading and writing, and, of course, books, those magical objects in which both come together.

Before we dive into all of that, I want to clarify that I'm not against digital development. I use my smartphone daily, consider watching funny cat reels on Instagram one of my healthier habits, and embrace AI in my daily work. I don't think we have to ditch all of that. But I do feel we have to be careful with 'dosages' and consumption. If social media and other digital platforms and tools are the sugars of mental consumption – addictive, instantly gratifying, but usually strangely unsatisfying – and should for that reason be consumed consciously and not excessively, I like to think of books as the healthy fibres that help us digest and process it all. Like broccoli, but with a much better taste and without the smelly farts.

What to expect from this book

Maybe you already love reading but have never once considered writing. Maybe you do write, but rarely make time to read. Maybe this is the very first book you've picked up in years (or ever), or been given by someone who cares deeply for you. Whatever your relationship with reading and writing, my intention with this book is for you to fall completely in love with at least one of them, preferably both. Not because 'it's good for you' (although it is), but because I'm convinced reading and writing are the superpowers that will guide us through the exciting yet very challenging time we're living in. They've already changed the world – we'll get into that – and I believe they're about to matter more than ever.

During my research for this book, I found an abstract by Jonathan Haidt[4] for a book he planned to call *Life after Babel* but later split in two. The

first part was published in 2024 as *The Anxious Generation,*[5] which looks at the shift from play-based to phone-based childhoods among Gen Z and Gen Alpha. In this abstract, he called it *"a dark book"*, with the intention to *"shock readers, knock down their current mental frameworks, and then help them build new mental constructs appropriate for our shape-shifting time."*

Much of the literature on the consequences of the digital revolution is dark and shocking, and I get why. This is serious and alarming stuff. Without denying that – we'll talk about it in Chapter 2 – I prefer a different and lighter approach. Partly because that's how I like to approach life, and partly because I believe the only way forward is to offer positive, inspiring answers. But mostly because I believe that books help us create the future. They shape what we pay attention to, and what we pay attention to shapes what becomes possible, becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. And last but not least: I'm just a sucker for happy endings.

Fibre is my middle name

About a year ago, I decided to eat more fibre. I already knew it was good for me, but I needed a little extra motivation. So I read the book *Fiber Fueled*.[6] I discovered how much fun it is to eat up to thirty different plants a week and cultivate our microbiome, that amazing garden in our gut containing nearly 40 trillion-something microbes that all work together to help us digest our food. Today, 'fibre' is my middle name. I eat greens, fruits and everything fibrous because the insights I read in the book have helped me lock in my healthy habits.

I hope this book will have a similar effect on your reading and maybe even your writing habits. Knowing something is 'good for you' is one thing, but understanding the fascinating mechanism behind it can be the final friendly push you need to put that knowledge into practice.

A word-loving Xennial

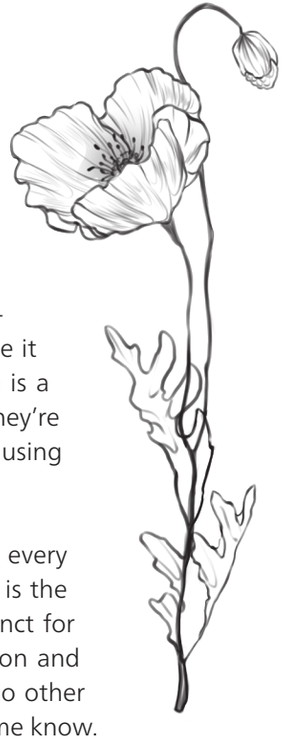
To me, words have always been pure magic. I love playing with them, and I've done so my whole life. It started in quite a literal sense, since I taught myself how to read when I was a young kid. I was feeling bored during a holiday, so I started playing with Scrabble tiles, unconsciously transforming simple words in my head into a set of letters in front of me. Of course, I only really learned to read later, at school, but the foundations were already there.

My love for words was probably shaped by the fact that I was raised in a house filled with books and stories. I can still see myself sitting on the floor, working on a puzzle. My mother is dusting the ceiling, stepping up and down a stepladder and telling me the story of the wolf and the seven little goats. I remember listening with fascination but also feeling a little scared – it is, after all, a scary story, even if it ends well.

Another great memory is when my dad took me to the library for the very first time, even though I was a little disappointed that I could only take out four books. Suddenly, my world expanded, big time. The library became one of my happy places. I didn't have many interests beyond reading, so I guess I was kind of a girly nerd. But a happy one. I turned into an opinionated, insecure, know-it-all adolescent, trying to make sense of myself, others and the world, not necessarily in that order.

I decided that I wanted to become a journalist. But after getting my Master's in Communication Science, I ended up in PR, marketing and communication. Eventually, I launched my own company, where I now work as a writer, ghostwriter, writing coach, editor and publisher. I also work for our local university as a science communicator. Over the past few years, I've worked on about eighteen books, including one under my own name on content marketing, *Het Contentspel* (The Content Game[7]). Turns out, storytelling is what helped me make sense of things.

I like the flavour of words. In my head, I have a special collection of words I cherish, because their 'taste' makes me happy. My favourite word is *coquelicot*, which is French for poppy. Just repeating it quietly makes my brain cells do a little dance. Another, more hilarious one from my collection is *talkie-walkie*, also French for – you'll never guess – 'walkie-talkie', because it illustrates how the independent-minded French, when adopting something, give it their own twist. (Future reader, a talkie-walkie is a device we use to talk to other people when they're not within hearing distance. You'll probably be using telepathy by now.)



Another word I adore, if only because I need every muscle in my mouth to pronounce it correctly, is the German *Fingerspitzengefühl*: that delicate instinct for knowing exactly what to say or do in a situation and how to say or do it. As far as I know, there's no other similar word in the world. If there is, please let me know. If it sounds good, I might add it to my collection.

My passion for words is one of the major reasons I'm writing this book. But there's another one. I'm a Xennial, which means that I'm part of the micro-generation that was born roughly between 1977 and 1983 – I'll let you guess which side of that range I fall on – and therefore half Gen X, half Millennial. Xennials were raised in an analogue environment and had a childhood with no internet, smartphones, AI or social media, but they're still 100% digitally savvy. You could say we're kind of 'bilingual': we have one foot in the pre-digital and the other in the digital age. Not only does this elegant split make us super flexible; it also helps us find the balance between the two worlds.

As a word-loving Xennial, I feel I owe it to future generations to pass on my love of and fascination with the written word, because I'm aware that today, books, reading and writing are competing with screens, and are less of a given to children and young people. I'm not even sure I'd have been a book geek back in the day if I'd grown up in the smartphone era. I'd still have been a geek, though. No doubt about that.

Now that we've established the *raison d'être* of this book, it's time to dive in. In Part I, we'll talk about the history of books: how they evolved, how they transformed Western society and the challenges we face today when it comes to reading. In Part II, we'll investigate the superpower of reading: what happens to our brain when we do it, why that helps us stay mentally fit and why reading is the antidote to some of the biggest issues society faces today. Part III is all about writing. We'll discuss the *why* and the *how* of writing, how to find out if there's a book in you and how to deal with everything AI in the process.

PART I

ABOUT BOOKS

"All good books are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened."

Ernest Hemingway, author

WHEN BOOKS GO WILD

When Cheryl was twenty-two, her mum died of lung cancer. She was devastated. After her family and her marriage fell apart, she started to drift. She had several affairs, was addicted to heroin and made several other bad choices. Even though she was an aspiring writer, she was working as a waitress in Minneapolis. One day, she found a guidebook about the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT). It described a long hiking route that runs from the Mexican to the Canadian border. She'd never done a serious hike before.

Even though she had no training, proper equipment or much money, something about the trail called to her. Perhaps, she thought, walking might be easier than standing still. When she filled in the divorce papers, she chose the surname *Strayed*, because that was exactly how she felt: she'd wandered away from her path. At twenty-six, Cheryl put on her huge backpack – it was so heavy she could barely lift it, so she called it *Monster* – and set off in the Mojave Desert alone.

The walk was harder than she'd imagined. She soon had feet covered in blisters, she lost a hiking boot on a steep mountainside, and there were nights she didn't sleep. She was hungry, lonely and scared. Sometimes she was furious with herself for having started this crazy journey. But every morning, there was only one thing to do: get up, pull on her boots and keep walking. Over three months, Cheryl walked more than 1,100 miles through California and Oregon. The trail didn't bring her mother back. It didn't erase the damage she'd done to herself. But it taught her that if she could carry Monster, she could also carry pain. She discovered that she could be afraid and still move forward. And that she could survive, one difficult day, sometimes even one difficult hour, at a time.

Years later, Cheryl Strayed wrote her memoir *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*. It was a raw and honest story about grief, addiction, love, shame and the long walk back to herself. When the book was

published in 2012, it became an instant *New York Times* bestseller. Oprah Winfrey chose it for her book club, and in 2014 Reese Witherspoon played Cheryl in the film adaptation. Because of the book and the film, the PCT became wildly popular. Thousands of people began attempting long-distance hikes, and trail organisations noticed more women travelling alone, setting out on the route – a phenomenon known as the 'Wild effect'. In *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life*, lead character Lorelai Gilmore reads the book and decides to do her own version of the Pacific Crest Trail hike while struggling with grief after her father's death, although, in true Lorelai style, she never actually makes it onto the trail.

Wild has now sold millions of copies worldwide and has been translated into dozens of languages. What began as one young woman, alone in the desert, trying to find a way through her grief, became a story that found its way around the world and helped millions of readers who felt they'd strayed find their way back, with or without doing the actual walking.

And this is just one example of a book that literally moved others. Paulo Coelho used his own experiences to write *The Alchemist*, a tale that has since sold more than 100 million copies worldwide and that holds the powerful quote: "*When you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it.*" Elizabeth Gilbert transformed the pain of her divorce and a year spent travelling alone through Italy, India and Indonesia into *Eat, Pray, Love*. It has sold more than 12 million copies and inspired many other women (probably men too) to travel to Italy and indulge in pasta and ice cream, join an ashram in India and fall in love in Bali, or simply follow their own desires.

There's literally an abundance of books in many different genres, from memoirs to management books, that cross borders, travel through time zones and find their way through generations, turning stories and experiences into shared human truth. They've touched and changed lives. Many started with just one person, sitting alone, with something they needed to see or say. So what is it about books that gives them this magical power?

CHAPTER 1

HOW IT STARTED

From cave graffiti to papyrus

The most common idea is that we've been writing – or at least leaving our mark – for about 70,000 years. We know this from handprints and paintings found in caves around the world. But researchers keep struggling to pin down exactly when that started, because new discoveries keep changing their perspective. We used to paint animals, hunting scenes, handprints and abstract marks with mineral pigments, leaving behind messages long before anyone developed anything resembling what we now call writing. These ancient 'graffiti' images already reveal something essential about human culture: the urge to tell stories, share experiences and communicate across time. Or at least try to. Because even today, scientists are still figuring out what some of them actually mean.



In a limestone cave on Muna, a small island in Sulawesi, Indonesia, researchers found a handprint on the wall at least 67,800 years old, making it one of the oldest known pieces of art in the world.[8] Was this part of a religious ritual? A rite of passage, maybe? Or was it simply the most ancient of human impulses saying: 'I was here' – the same one that makes people (I never did!) scratch their initials into the door of a shabby public

toilet? This cave graffiti already illustrates a beautiful and fascinating aspect of writing: the moment you create whatever it is you want to share, and you let it loose in the world, you somehow lose control of its meaning.

It wouldn't be until around 3300 BC, however, that we could really speak of writing. In the region that's now Iraq, society grew larger and more complex, and urban life required a system to track goods, labour and institutional power. Enter the clay tablets. These fancy new gadgets were first adopted by 'scribes' – professional writers and administrators, the clerks and notaries of the ancient world – introducing the first structured forms of writing. Clay was abundant, inexpensive and durable (it didn't need to be charged and worked without Wi-Fi), and it could be shaped into tablets that preserved markings for a long time. Scribes used a stylus to press wedge-shaped impressions into the damp clay, creating what's now called 'cuneiform' (from the Latin *cuneus* for 'wedge' and *forma* for 'shape'), one of the earliest known writing systems in human history.



All the books in the world

Around 650 BC, the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal created one of the very first libraries filled with clay tablets in Nineveh, in what's now northern Iraq. He wanted his city to become the centre of learning and beat the city of Babylon, so he plundered towns and cities for scholarly tablets during his military campaigns and sent scribes across the empire to copy ancient texts to acquire as many books as possible. The result was an impressive collection of over 30,000 clay tablets and fragments, now considered the world's oldest systematically organised library. When Nineveh was destroyed by fire, the clay tablets were baked even harder, keeping them safe for thousands of years until their rediscovery in the nineteenth century.

Some three centuries later, Alexander the Great, the Macedonian king who conquered an empire stretching from Greece to India, founded the city of Alexandria in Egypt. After his death, his empire was divided among his generals. Ptolemy I, who became king of Egypt, wanted to bring 'all the books of the world' together in one place. The Library of Alexandria became the gathering place for as many books as they could find. In ancient times, libraries were never just collections of books; they were statements of power. Today, they're a public good, open to everyone, but books haven't lost their power, and some people still want to control them, as we'll see in the final chapter.

Meanwhile, in the Nile Valley of ancient Egypt and later across the wider Mediterranean world, a new form of writing began to appear. Egyptians were sophisticated, so they wrote with style on papyrus, a writing surface made from the papyrus plant, using ink from natural pigments such as charcoal and red ochre. They rolled the sheets into scrolls, which were lighter and more portable than clay tablets. They used a script made of picture signs and sound signs. Papyrus – you probably noticed it sounds

like paper – was a real game-changer: a text could now travel more easily through administrative offices, temples, schools and libraries, and it could be copied without the weight and bulk of baked clay.

Self-help book for the dead

One of the most iconic papyrus works is the so-called *Book of the Dead*, though the Egyptians had a catchier name for it: *Pert em hru* or literally *The Book of Coming Forth by Day*. You could consider it a personalised self-help book avant la lettre, because it offered a dead person a practical guide through the underworld: which spells to use, which gods to address, which traps to avoid. It also explained how to pass 'the weighing of the heart', the ultimate test in which a person's heart would be weighed on a scale against the feather of Ma'at, the symbol of truth and justice. If your heart was heavy with wrongdoing, it would tip the balance and Ammit, the fearsome 'devourer of the dead', would eat it, ending your existence forever. But if your heart proved light and balanced with Ma'at, you were declared 'pure' and were allowed to enjoy eternal life, together with the gods.

The birth of the alphabet

Around 800 BC, along the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, writing reached a new and very exciting level. Instead of relying on hundreds of complex signs, a simple system was invented: the Greek alphabet. You might think it was the result of a collective effort, but some experts say one brilliant individual created it, though we'll never know who.[9] He (or she?) was inspired by the system used by the Phoenicians, sailors and

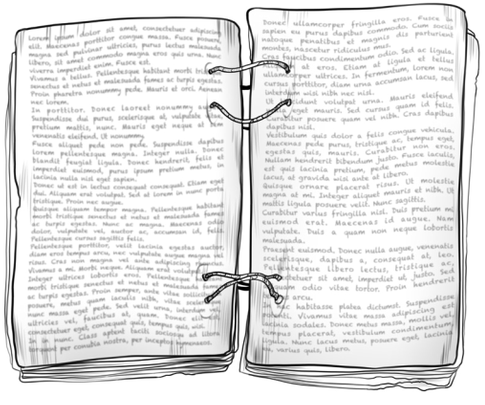


traders who lived in what's now Lebanon. They already used a shorter alphabet with twenty-two signs that only represented consonant sounds, so you had to fill in the missing vowels from context. *Knd f lk ths sntnc. hp y cn ndrstnd ths, snc m wrtng wtht vwls.*

By adding vowel signs, our clever anonymous ancestor created an alphabet that made everyday speech, philosophy and plays much easier to share. This Greek alphabet became the basis for the Latin alphabet we still use today. In the broader timeline we're moving through, you might think this evolution was just another practical tweak, but it was actually a major conceptual leap. With a compact set of letters that could be recombined endlessly, writing became easier to learn, teach and adapt. Still, reading and writing skills were reserved for the happy few with money, status and time: scribes, priests, scholars and officials. Most others were too busy farming, trading or simply getting through the day.

Between the first and fourth centuries, the Romans still used scrolls for literary, administrative and scholarly writing, all linked to elite culture.

During this period, a new format appeared: the codex, an early form of what we know today as ‘the book’. It was made from folded sheets bundled together and joined along one edge. Christians especially liked the codex, probably because it could hold several texts in one object. Unlike a scroll, which had to be unrolled and rolled back up in order, a codex was simpler to use. Readers could open it anywhere, find a passage quickly and move between sections. This made it easier to compare parts of a text, look up related passages and study. Over time, the codex introduced useful features such as page numbers, contents pages, chapters and notes in the margins. This was a big step to help readers explore a text in depth.



Monks, manuscripts and mass production

In medieval Europe, from the fifth to the fifteenth centuries, people still copied texts by hand. This was meticulous, labour-intensive work, the kind of careful craftsmanship we still call *monnikenwerk*, literally ‘the work of a monk’ in Dutch. During this period, the book that remains the ultimate bestseller to this day was copied and spread: the Holy Bible. Its stories and letters had already been written and shared centuries earlier. In medieval monasteries, monks collected, translated and copied it into combined volumes that could be read, carried and used in worship across Christian Europe. Copying the Bible wasn’t just work; it was prayer: a way to turn manual labour into pure devotion.

Some manuscripts were quite basic, made for casual, everyday reading. Others were decorated with initials, gold leaf and painted images in beautiful ink. The makers understood that a book’s shape influences how it’s read. In that sense, we can already use the word ‘publishing’: it wasn’t just about content, but also about form, and how the book was distributed and adapted for different audiences.

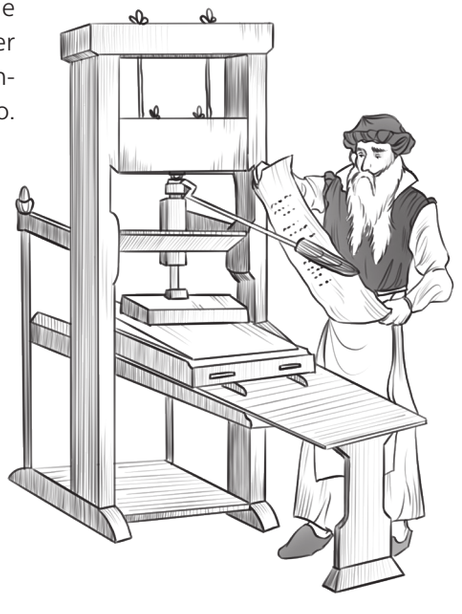
The mystery of the murderous manuscript

Imagine a Benedictine abbey in northern Italy in 1327. It’s the setting for Umberto Eco’s novel *The Name of the Rose* (also adapted into a film). The story follows two monks as they investigate a series of strange deaths in the abbey. A dangerous book is hidden somewhere in the abbey, and one monk is trying to keep its ideas from spreading. Some monks who did manage to read it die after getting poison from its pages on their fingers.

I’m not going to completely spoil this for you, so if you want to know the rest, I suggest you read the book. It’s ‘only’ 145,000 words. The story reflects the aura of mystery and authority that manuscripts had in the Middle Ages. People saw books as genuine power tools that shaped what they knew, believed and questioned, as if they had personalities of their own.

Around 1450, a fifty-something goldsmith called Gutenberg, living in Germany, built a wooden press in which inked metal letters arranged into words were pressed firmly onto dampened paper. Fust, a local businessman, had lent him some money to build a workshop and experiment with his invention. One skilled worker could now cast hundreds of identical letters in an afternoon, and a press could print in a day what a scribe needed weeks to copy by hand. Once a page was set, locked into place, inked and pressed, that same page could be printed hundreds of times over, each copy virtually identical to the last. And when the job was done, the letters didn't have to be thrown away. They were simply pulled apart, cleaned and rearranged into the next page, then the next, then the next.

Unfortunately, visionaries aren't always good entrepreneurs, and Gutenberg was no exception. He poured everything – time, money, energy and obsession – into perfecting his craft, while his financial skills weren't that '*gut*'. Eventually, Fust took over with a partner and continued to build one of the most successful printing houses in Europe. Gutenberg lost everything, but he still kept the title 'father of printing'. In 1997, *Life* magazine named his invention the most important event of the second millennium. If you ever have the chance to visit the Gutenberg Museum in Mainz, please do. I visited it with my family and local German friends when I was a child, and it was a magical experience.



Gutenberg wasn't actually the first to print books. Centuries earlier, in China and Korea, people had already experimented with printing techniques. So why does Gutenberg get all the credit? It's a combination of geography and timing. Eastern printing techniques never spread much beyond their own regions and were held back by the large number of characters in their writing systems. Gutenberg's version arrived in Europe at exactly the right moment: there was a growing hunger for books, a rising literate class and a continent about to be reshaped by powerful new ideas. Regardless of 'who was first', people worldwide had been working on the same challenge: finding ways to spread the written word so knowledge could be shared, multiplied and built on. A beautiful example of our collective intelligence at work.

School trip trauma

About forty years ago, my classmates and I went on a school trip to visit a printing company. I remember standing by one of the presses, mesmerised, watching it unveil *Het Annonceblad*, the local newspaper my parents read every Saturday, the very same paper they later used to wrap and throw away the potato peels, once they were done reading. When the tour was finished, one of the technicians explained how books were printed in the old days. They even had a traditional press running, the kind where letters were still set by hand into a lead bar. The highlight of the day, which was already amazing, was when we were asked to line up alphabetically, write our names on a piece of paper and hand it to the technician, who would then set each name, letter by letter, into a little lead bar for us to take home. As my surname starts with a V, I was near the back of the queue. It was almost my turn to hand my piece of paper to the technician when our teacher suddenly screamed that we all had to rush to the bus, or we'd be late getting back to school.

To this day, I can still feel the sting of disappointment and pure, blind envy as I watched my classmates proudly walk off with their names cast in lead. I sometimes wonder if that small childhood trauma isn't secretly the root of my publishing endeavours.

Books are burning

The printing press was a game-changer for anyone who wanted to share ideas and learn from others. Ideas no longer depended on scarce manuscripts or personal letters, so they could reach a broader audience. This boosted intellectual exchange: where once it took decades to spread a thought, it could now reach an entire continent within a few years. At the same time, the urban middle classes gained access to the written word. They bought books, formed reading circles and wrote their own pamphlets. This wider reading public helped fuel the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment: works by thinkers such as Copernicus, Galileo, Descartes and Newton could be read, compared and criticised throughout Europe and beyond, and experiments and observations could be recorded in detail so that others could build on them.

From confusion to clarity

The explosion of printed texts fuelled what we now call the 'Enlightenment': a movement that put reason, evidence and human rights at the centre of public life. Philosophers like John Locke, Voltaire, Rousseau and Kant used written texts to argue for religious tolerance, freedom of expression and the separation of powers. They believed that ordinary people – not kings or churches – should be the ultimate source of political authority.

However, 'enlightenment' also has another meaning: a state of inner clarity where people see reality as it truly is, beyond fear, ego and illusion. Examples of people who reached such clarity include the Buddha and, more recently, Krishnamurti, Eckhart Tolle, Sydney Banks and Byron Katie. Some also see Jesus in this light. The two interpretations aren't unrelated. Whether spiritual or intellectual, it means a movement from confusion to clarity. In both, written words played a crucial role: to help people see what they couldn't see before.

These new concepts constantly undermined traditional authorities and opened the door to new ways of thinking and the spread of movements worldwide. Naturally, those holding authority didn't just sit back and enjoy the show. If books could help 'ordinary' people become smarter and share their ideas, then books could also be dangerous. So leaders, popes and governments reached the same conclusion: books, as a magical way to share insights and make people more intelligent and resilient, were pure power, so they had to be controlled. This was done by banning and burning them.

But every banned book also planted a seed: the idea that writers and printers should be free to publish without permission from the church or state. It took centuries for this idea to take root. Gradually, some countries began to protect it by law. What started as rebellion became a recognised right: freedom of the press, or the right to publish written words. Sweden was the first country to introduce the Freedom of the Press Act in 1766. Many other countries, constitutions and international declarations followed. Later, this idea expanded into freedom of speech, which means everyone can express their opinions in any way, whether spoken or written. Interestingly, press freedom came first because the printed word was so powerful that it forced society to legislate for the idea of freedom itself.

I wish I could say that today, freedom of the press is a given, but unfortunately, in some regions, journalists, publishers and even bookshop owners still face harassment, imprisonment or violence for what they print; in others, economic pressure and concentrated media ownership quietly and subtly limit the range of voices that can be heard. That's why the

British-Albanian singer Dua Lipa opened her *Manifesto Library* inside the Livraria Lello bookshop in Porto (Portugal).[10] It brings together a collection of a hundred books that have been banned, censored, challenged or silenced in different ways: the greatest hits of literary trouble-making.

When you look at all the books banned over time, it's fascinating to see how a book that seems harmless, or even essential, to one generation or part of the world can be considered controversial in others, sometimes decades or even centuries after it was written. The reasons vary: political regimes ban books that criticise those in power, religious authorities object to content they see as offensive or immoral, and school boards pull books because of language, violence or sexuality. A great example is *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank (first published in Dutch in 1947 as *Het Achterhuis*). It's recommended reading in many European schools because it offers a personal account of the Holocaust. However, the same book has been challenged or restricted in some US schools, mainly in two later versions: the 1995 edition, which restored passages her father had left out of the first edition, and the graphic novel adaptation from 2018. Both contain passages about Anne's body, her growing sexuality and the way she feels about boys, which some parents and school boards considered too explicit.

The burning list of banned books

This shortlist is proof that getting your book banned may be the best marketing tool ever. Exact sales figures are hard to find, especially for older titles or books that circulated underground, but they range from a few hundred thousand copies to tens of millions. Most of these books are banned because of sensitive topics such as sex, violence, drug use, religion, racism, slavery or gender identity. This small selection – the real list of banned books is much longer – beautifully reflects the zeitgeist in which they were created, and because these books are so controversial, they're a valuable addition to any bookshelf.

1. Ulysses – James Joyce (1922)
The story follows Leopold Bloom, an advertising salesman, for one ordinary day in Dublin. Joyce loosely based this story on Homer's *Odyssey* and turned it into a bold experiment with obscene language.

2. Brave New World – Aldous Huxley (1932)
In a future society, people's lives are carefully controlled to keep everyone happy. It has been controversial for its depictions of sex and drug use, its treatment of religion and family life, and its racist language.

3. The Diary of a Young Girl – Anne Frank (1947)
Anne is a Jewish teenager hiding from the Nazis in Amsterdam during the Second World War. In her diary she explores her everyday experiences, sexuality, relationships and hopes for the future.

4. 1984 – George Orwell (1949)
Winston Smith lives under a dictatorship that constantly watches its citizens and controls what they can say and think. A story packed with political themes and sexual content, often labelled as anti-government and pro-communist.

5. The Catcher in the Rye – J.D. Salinger (1951)
Sixteen-year-old rebel Holden Caulfield has just been kicked out of boarding school. Instead of going straight home, he drifts around New York for a few days, still grieving for his little brother and finding almost everyone he meets a 'phoney'. A novel with explicit language and sexual content.

6. To Kill a Mockingbird – Harper Lee (1960)
In a sleepy town in 1930s Alabama, young Scout Finch spends her days playing outside, trying to catch a glimpse of the mysterious neighbour no one ever sees. Then her lawyer father, Atticus, takes on the case of a Black man falsely accused of raping a white woman. A story about racism, injustice and what real courage looks like.

7. The Handmaid's Tale – Margaret Atwood (1985)
In the Republic of Gilead, formerly the United States, very few women can still get pregnant. Those who can, the so-called Handmaids, are dressed in red, stripped of their names and forced to bear children for the ruling elite. Atwood has often said she didn't include anything in the book that hadn't already happened somewhere in history.

8. Beloved – Toni Morrison (1987)
Sethe has escaped slavery, but is still tormented by her past. Her house in Ohio is haunted by the furious ghost of her baby daughter. The novel has been controversial for its graphic depictions of violence and sexual abuse.

9. The Satanic Verses – Salman Rushdie (1988)
This story starts with two Indian actors falling from the sky when their hijacked plane explodes above the English Channel. They miraculously survive, but they're not quite themselves any more: one gets a halo, the other sprouts horns and hooves. Some Muslims consider its fictional portrayal of the Prophet Muhammad and the origins of Islam blasphemous.

10. Gender Queer – Maia Kobabe (2019)
In this graphic memoir the author describes their journey towards understanding gender identity and asexuality. The book has been controversial for its LGBTQ+ themes and sexually explicit illustrations, which some parents and schools consider unsuitable for young readers.

Books are still burning
On 1 August 2026, Russian drones hit the warehouse of one of Ukraine's largest publishing houses. Around 8 million books went up in flames. That same summer, a printing press and the capital's largest book market were targeted as well. In total, some 13 million books were reduced to ash in just a few months.[11]
Ukraine is currently reshaping its education system, breaking with the Russia-centred curriculum it has used for three decades. Russian language classes, Russian literature and the Russian version of history are being replaced by Ukrainian authors, history and heritage. Hundreds of thousands of the burnt books were brand-new textbooks for that curriculum, and many schools started the new school year without them. Ukrainian publishers and officials are convinced the attacks are deliberate, an attempt to wipe out Ukraine and Ukrainian culture.[12]

The end of the book as we know it

From the 1970s onwards, we find ourselves in a new revolution: the digital one. The rise of the personal computer, with milestones like the Apple II (1977) and the IBM PC (1981), introduced computing power into ordinary households. A crucial next step was Tim Berners-Lee's invention of the World Wide Web in 1989, which opened up the internet to the general public rather than just scientists and the military. From the year 2000 onwards, smartphones, social media and broadband internet followed each other rapidly, fundamentally changing how we consume information and communicate.

For books specifically, the launch of Amazon's Kindle e-reader in 2007 was a significant turning point, because it brought digital book reading to a much wider audience. At the 2010 Techonomy Conference, Nicholas Negroponte, founder of the MIT Media Lab, predicted that the physical book would disappear within five years. Other experts also announced with some dramatic flair that we were witnessing 'the end of the book as we know it'.

Boy, were they wrong. Yes, the digital revolution has impacted reading. We now have e-books, audiobooks, podcasts and other forms of content. But the funeral that was announced for printed books never took place. Every year, billions of physical books still roll off the presses worldwide. Global estimates suggest that around 2.2 billion books are sold annually.[13]

The printed book is a timeless concept. It doesn't need batteries, updates, Wi-Fi or subscriptions. It works everywhere. I like to compare it to the modern bicycle, invented about 140 years ago, with a design still used for today's bicycles: two wheels, a frame and a chain. The shape is still recognisable. Of course, a lot has changed. We have carbon racing bikes, mountain bikes, folding bikes, cargo bikes, electric bikes with silent motors that help you up hills. But the ordinary, classic bike still exists, and millions of people ride it every day. Because, like the book, the bicycle is a timeless concept. It takes human muscle and turns it into efficient movement in a way that's simple, robust and satisfying. It has earned its place, and keeps it, despite everything that changes around it.

That being said, it's worth considering that the way we experience books could change in the decades or even centuries to come. What we call 'the book' today is the latest stage of a long history of transformation: from clay tablets and papyrus scrolls to the codex, from handwritten manuscripts to printed pages. Each change might have seemed final at the time, only to be replaced by the next. Perhaps it's more accurate to say the idea of the book is adaptable, constantly finding new ways to exist with the printed page as the current form that's proved surprisingly hard to beat.

We've come a long way. (Have we really?)

So, here we are: we started in the caves and returned to the present. It's amazing how reading and writing have propelled our intellectual development and knowledge sharing. Of course, other inventions, such as the wheel, the steam engine and the discovery of electricity, have also shaped how we evolved as a species. But none did what books did: capture stories, ideas and visions on paper, letting them travel, touch others and, in turn, inspire readers to put their own insights in writing.

As I worked my way through this historical journey, one question kept surfacing: are there civilisations in the world today that don't have a culture of the written word? If so, how do they share knowledge? And here's the real question underneath that one: how are they doing? Are they happy? Are they maybe, in some ways, better off? There are cultures that still have a powerful oral tradition. For instance, in parts of Australia, the Indigenous people have long navigated their vast homelands without written maps or documents. Instead, they follow 'songlines': long songs that trace the path of ancestral beings across the land, naming hills, waterholes, rocks, plants and animals in exactly the order in which you'd encounter them on foot.[14]

Similar patterns appear elsewhere. Before European contact, most Indigenous nations in what's now Canada passed on their knowledge by word of mouth. As my Canadian friend Mike Caslor, a social worker with strong ties to Indigenous people, explained, wisdom wasn't stored in books but was shared by sitting with elders and listening to their stories that had been passed from older to younger generations. It was also carried in songs, ceremonies and dances. Some of these practices are still used for teaching today. At a *powwow*, a traditional gathering where people dance in ceremonial dress, young boys still learn the prairie chicken dance, which follows the courtship dance of prairie chickens. Through their footwork and head and arm movements, dancers

mimic the birds' stamping and posturing as the males compete for a female to mate with.

However, the dance is more than just an imitation of animal behaviour. In Blackfoot origin stories, it's a gift from the prairie chicken to people, passed on through a dream or a spiritual encounter. Although the details vary between accounts, these stories place the dance within a relationship between humans, animals and the spiritual world.

Linguists point out that thousands of the world's languages still have no standard written form.[15] Their speakers may learn to read and write in a national language for dealing with the authorities, but within their own world, the real intellectual work happens in conversation and performance. Seen from our book-shaped perspective, these societies might look 'illiterate' in the strict sense of the word, but they just use a different medium for communication. Instead of using paper, they use people. For most of human history, this is how complex societies have organised themselves.[16]

In the Western world, we like to think of ourselves as advanced, enlightened and progressive. Watch the news and you might wonder whether we're actually doing all that well. If you measure 'doing well' in terms of warm relationships, connection to nature and a strong sense of identity, belonging and origin, then some cultures with a tradition of oral storytelling are remarkably resilient. And yes, you could also argue that they're vulnerable today, because many still face discrimination, the loss of their land, and the harm caused by attempts to wipe out their languages and traditions. But they still exist, which says a great deal about their resilience and strength.

When oral cultures blend with written cultures, usually the exchange isn't equal. Written culture has laws, land-ownership documents, contracts, and offices that assume something counts only if it's written down. Oral cultures suddenly have to prove their claims in a system they didn't build, where the other side has already set the rules. In Canada, Indigenous communities had to deal with this when they tried to protect their ancestral lands. In 1997, the Canadian Supreme Court ruled that the law had to treat Indigenous oral histories as equal to conventional historical evidence. Without that change, communities with no written historical records would face the nearly impossible task of proving their land rights.[17]

Exploring this further would take us too far afield. What matters is that there's more than one way to share wisdom, knowledge and ideas. Each might hold different power, but each one stems from the same human impulse: to make sense of the world and pass that sense on to someone else. I'm hopelessly devoted to reading, writing and books; they are, quite simply, my medium of choice, the one I reach for instinctively. But I can't help but be a little jealous of close, connected communities that turn wisdom into songs, using rhythm and rhyme to tell a story. ✣

Vellichor /VEL-ih-kor/
noun (neologism, created by John Koenig in his Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows)

The strange melancholy of second-hand bookshops that brings a sense of nostalgia for a past we never actually lived.

CHAPTER 2

HOW IT'S GOING

Is the literate world falling?

The book *Brave New World* by English novelist and essayist Aldous Huxley, published in 1932, describes a future where individuality, family and real feeling have been traded for comfort and endless pleasure. In this world, people are trained from birth to want only what the system gives them, so they feel satisfied instead of trapped. They're also trained to hate books: certain children are given an electric shock every time they reach for one, until just seeing a book makes them uncomfortable. The rulers deliberately wipe out reading and deep thinking because people who think stop buying. Instead of facing hard truths, citizens are taught to chase distraction and instant satisfaction, which keeps them quiet and passive. They're made so comfortable that they no longer want to think for themselves.

Two other books predicted this: George Orwell's *1984* (1949) and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). In *1984*, the state doesn't just watch its citizens; it rewrites books to suit whatever the Party says is true right now, so older versions simply disappear. At the same time, the regime develops Newspeak, a stripped-down version of English designed to shrink people's vocabulary. The idea is simple: if a word doesn't exist, eventually the thought behind it can't exist either. *Fahrenheit 451* imagines a future where books are illegal. Firemen don't put out fires; they start them, burning any book they find. Most people don't care because they numb themselves with wall-sized TV screens and fast-paced entertainment instead.

All three books show surprising, disturbing parallels to where we seem to be heading. Some say we're already there. Right now, AI companies are buying up millions of books and destroying them.[18] Not to erase knowledge, like in *Fahrenheit 451* or *1984*, but to feed it to AI models for training. And social media? We've built our own version of Huxley's conditioning: gentler, but just as effective. An endless stream of short, easy content that makes deep reading feel like too much effort. A handful of decision-makers and companies manage these platforms, and their algorithms are designed to keep us scrolling instead of reading. As Brené Brown suggests in a recent podcast,[19] it looks like there's a small, elite group that reads books on philosophy, history and other intellectual topics that help them develop ideas, and they're telling everyone else to *"Just keep scrolling. Don't worry about the big words. We'll handle all the big words for you."*

In a recent article in *The Atlantic*, titled 'The End of Reading Is Here',[20] American journalist Rose Horowitch argues that we're entering a post-literate era in which deep reading of long, complex texts is being displaced by fragmented digital consumption. Her research shows that Americans now read far fewer books and demanding works, while they're being bombarded with more short snippets of text than ever before. She warns that AI tools and summarisers make writing and reading easier but strip away the mental struggle through which people clarify their own ideas and develop critical judgement.

Some horrific numbers

In her article, Rose Horowitch shares some concerning numbers about reading and screen habits in the US. I'm not going to share the whole list, but this illustrates the point she's making.

- Fewer than half of American adults read a book of any kind in 2022
- Reading for pleasure on any given day dropped from 28% of Americans in 2004 to just 16% in 2023
- Between 1984 and 2025, the proportion of 13-year-olds who said they rarely or never read for fun jumped from 8% to 29%
- Only 35% of American high schoolers tested 'proficient' in complex reading skills in 2024; roughly the same percentage scored below 'basic'
- Nearly 30% of American adults can no longer paraphrase or draw inferences from a multi-page text: up from under 20% in 2017
- Sentences in *New York Times* bestsellers today are about a third shorter than they were a century ago
- ACT reading and English scores are at their lowest point in over three decades
- Average IQ scores have been dropping roughly 3 points per decade in recent years, reversing a century-long upward trend

A decade of decline? The PISA shock

Every three years, the OECD's PISA tests[21] assess how well 15-year-olds worldwide can read, do maths and understand science. For reading, the OECD average fell from 496 points in 2012 to 476 in 2022. The 2025 results, published in September 2026, showed another decline to 461 points, the lowest score since PISA was introduced. Maths and science scores also reached record lows. These alarming figures are, in a way, a wake-up call. But there's also a silver lining, because two countries stood out. England was the only European country where scores didn't fall, and Ireland's score fell by 16 points, but is still the highest in Europe.

So what explains their success and what can we learn from them? In Ireland, culture may help explain the results. The country has a strong storytelling tradition and a rich literary history, including several Nobel Prize winners. Teachers are also highly respected: teacher-training courses fill up every year, and only students with top grades are accepted. Interestingly, Ireland's reading scores fell sharply in 2009. This 'PISA shock' prompted a major, long-term plan: longer teacher training, more time for reading in schools and extra funding for schools in disadvantaged areas. Today, many Irish schools have a library at the heart of the main building.

In England, reading and writing are important across the curriculum, not just in English lessons. Schools also encourage literacy through writing competitions, spelling contests and a 'word of the week'. Both countries recognise that there's no single solution. Their success comes from supporting reading in several different ways.[22]

A phone-based childhood

In his book *The Anxious Generation,*[23] Jonathan Haidt, the social psychologist I mentioned at the start of this book, warns that Gen Z is *"the first generation in history to go through puberty with a portal in their pockets"*. Smartphones were adopted faster than any other communication technology in history, and by 2013, they'd reached most households. Between 2010 and 2015, during what Haidt calls the 'Great Rewiring', a play-based childhood was being replaced by a phone-based one.

The figures he presents are striking and hard to ignore. From 2010 onwards, the number of American teenagers who experienced depression more than doubled, for girls as well as boys. By 2020, one in four teenage girls had been through a depressive episode, and most of that increase took place before the pandemic. The rates for anxiety followed a similar pattern in young adults, while rates in older people changed very little. Suicide rates for teenagers also rose. And this isn't just an American story. Around the same time, the same pattern appeared in the UK, Canada, the Nordic countries and elsewhere: stop the graphs at 2010, and there's no sign of a problem; let them run to 2015, and suddenly they shoot up. After 2012, loneliness at school also increased across the Western world.

Haidt dismisses the explanation that the financial crisis of 2008 was to blame; if it had been, teenagers' mental health would have deteriorated around 2009 and recovered along with the economy. Instead, US unemployment fell steadily to a historic low of 3.6% in early 2019, while teenage depression kept rising. He acknowledges that climate anxiety is a legitimate concern, but it doesn't explain the curve either. On the contrary. Historically, a shared threat, whether war, terrorism or a political crisis, tends to bring us together and give us a sense of purpose. We don't become depressed when we face threats together, but when we feel isolated, lonely or useless. And that, according to Haidt, is exactly what the Great Rewiring did to Gen Z.

Other factors play a role too, he admits, but the only explanation that fits a decline in so many countries at the same time is the sudden change in the technology teenagers used to communicate with each other. Giving Gen Z smartphones in the early 2010s, Haidt writes, was like sending them to grow up on Mars: the largest uncontrolled experiment humanity has ever conducted on its own children. One of the harms he describes is attention fragmentation: teenagers receive hundreds of notifications a day, each one interrupting their focus and concentration. This undermines the ability to do difficult or sustained cognitive work, like reading a book.