



Ian Spellerberg. *Reading and Writing Accessories: A Study of Paper-Knives, Paper Folders, Letter Openers and Mythical Page Turners*

Ian Spellerberg. *Reading and Writing Accessories: A Study of Paper-Knives, Paper Folders, Letter Openers and Mythical Page Turners*. New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2016. 128 p., ill. ISBN 9781584563501. US \$60.00 (paperback).

Should twenty-first century readers be placed before the bureau of a Victorian scholar, they would be faced with a variety of unrecognisable instruments that have been rendered obsolete according to the standards of our modern age, an era when the computer reigns supreme in providing a minimalistic workspace. In his aesthetically pleasing work, Ian Spellerberg examines the impact that three of these stationary objects (the paper-knife, the paper folder, and the letter opener) had on the history of reading and print culture, while also inquiring about the trivial existence and uncertain use of the page turner.

Spellerberg divides his publication into two parts. Dedicated in its entirety to the paper-knife, the three chapters that make up the first part explain the appearance, history, design, and multiple uses of this titular tool. A paper-knife is a tool used to cut paper into smaller pieces, and, moreover, to separate the pages of a book that have not yet been detached from each other during the binding process, uncut pages being a common feature of book production in previous centuries. The tool itself is a broad blade with a rounded end and handle, usually varying in size from nine to fifty-four centimetres (34-35). Along with detailed descriptions, Spellerberg provides the reader with a plethora of beautiful images of paper-knives from various time periods and regions. The images gathered range from the stately ivory paper-knives that once belonged to Queen Charlotte and Pope Leo XIII, to the more humbly adorned ones of famed nurse Florence Nightingale and beloved British author Charles Dickens.

Chapters four to six are grouped together as *Part Two: Paper Folders, Letter Openers and Page Turners*. Spellerberg starts the second part of his work with a chapter focusing on the paper folder, a device which, as the name suggests, is used to fold paper, whether to prepare it for being cut into smaller pieces with a paper-knife or to conform to the strict Victorian dimensions of a letter. Closely resembling the paper-knife, the paper folder is a narrow tool with two rounded ends but no blade. Furthermore, like the paper-knife, the paper folder was made of various materials, such as ivory and sterling silver, and manufactured by high-end companies, including the world-renowned jewellery company *Fabergé*. By contrast to Spellerberg's section on paper-knives, which constitutes more than half of the book, the brief twelve-page chapter on the page folder leaves the reader wishing to know more. Smaller chapters seem to be the staple of the second part of this monograph, as the following two



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are only eighteen and ten pages. The first of these chapters discusses the letter opener, a pointed knife-like stationary tool which, even in the twenty-first century, many readers still use. Although the tool shares with the paper-knife the common function of cutting paper, the two devices are not identical, as the letter opener is used solely for slitting open the flaps of envelopes. The final chapter of Spellerberg's work questions the trivial existence of yet another blade, the page turner, a tool supposedly used to turn the pages of books or newspapers so as to not smudge the ink. Even though he gathers a wealth of evidence to support this argument, Spellerberg concludes that page turners did not, in fact, exist, being rather the figment of our romantic imagination.

This work is unique in its single focus on these seemingly mundane Victorian instruments and constitutes an important contribution to the otherwise little known tools and accessories that form an important part of writing culture. In addition to the well-researched and eloquently presented content of Spellerberg's monograph, the design of the book should be equally applauded. Readers are provided with a dazzling array of visual material that enhances their reading, including photographs and reproductions of century-old advertisements and patents. Though beautifully presented, the book could have been improved by more detailed references, as from time to time the citing of sources is vague and inconsistent. Examples can be found on pages 100 and 101, where a list of anecdotal claims attesting to the existence of the page turner is provided. Sixteen individual anecdotes are cited, yet the sources are insufficiently logged: for example, "[f]rom a book" (100, 101), from "[a]n internet blog" (100), and "[f]rom an antiques and collectables shop" (101). This minor criticism should not diminish, however, Spellerberg's admirable scholarly contribution to our understanding of reading and writing accessories. Due to its meticulous and engaging reflection on these little-known stationary instruments, as well as its beautiful presentation, Spellerberg's work will undoubtedly make a superb addition to both public and private libraries.

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