



Matthew G. Kirschenbaum. *Track Changes: A Literary History of Word Processing*

Matthew G. Kirschenbaum. *Track Changes: A Literary History of Word Processing*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016. xvi, 344 p., 22 halftones. ISBN 9780674417076. USA \$29.95 (hardcover).

The appeal for any reader of this work is Matthew Kirschenbaum's artful blend of technological history and literary history. Kirschenbaum's background in English literature along with his work in the digital humanities and print history serve him well with this approach. The work is organized into ten chapters that center on a particular topic related to the development of word processing, covering the span from the mid-twentieth century to today. Many chapters begin with a question, allowing the reader to experience the researcher's path to an answer. Each chapter is strong with narrative descriptions of technological developments and also hefty with examples from the literary world of how particular authors and their works were impacted by the technological development in question. For example, in the chapter "Think Tape," on IBM's Magnetic Tape Selectric Typewriter, we learn that likely the first novel written on a word processor was Len Deighton's *Bomber*, a work of fiction on WWII nighttime airwar, published in the early 1960s. Kirschenbaum guides us through IBM representatives visiting Deighton, informs us of his trial use of the new product, and shows us how it impacted his writing and revisions of the novel. Similarly, in the chapter "Around 1981," we learn that Amy Tan used the TRS-80 as a medical journalist, but also employed that early word processor for story writing. Significantly, it was her "day job" that provided an opportunity to use technology that she would come to embrace for her writing. We learn that Tan eventually purchased her own computer, writing her first novels on the Kaypro II and starting a users' group for authors to share tips and tricks for using that machine. While socioeconomic impacts and factors related to gender are not fully explored, the book certainly touches on these topics. For example, the chapter "Unseen Hands" explores the relationship between authors and literary secretaries, and demonstrates how the advent of word processors changed each group's role. It seems this chapter alone could easily be expanded into its own project in the future.

We are introduced to the book by way of a preface which serves as a birth story with the initial questions that sparked the start of the project: what was the first novel written with a word processor? How can and should "write" and "word processor" be defined? An introduction surveys the related research and writing, while a reflective closing, or "After Word Processing," serves as reminder from the author that the topic itself is inherently



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pluralistic in nature and thus the work is not definitive. Also in closing, Kirschenbaum provokes and prods readers with some excellent questions for future consideration, so that at the end of the book, we as readers reflect on both “processing words” and “word processing,” thus invoking continued contemplation of both the literary imagination and the impact of technology on it.

This book contributes to the growing body of work on the Digital Age as well as publishing and book history, but also, as the title suggests, makes a useful contribution to literary history, from Walt Whitman to Joan Didion, Wendell Berry to Zadie Smith. In fact, one could see this book as a platform for a literature course, where the examples referenced were read and studied in the context of their production history. Questions of authorship and authenticity are also touched upon, with references to Nietzsche, Derrida, and Barthes. Thus, teachers and scholars of twentieth-century American literature, book and publishing history, and the history of computer science and the Age of Information would find this book to be valuable.

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