Simone Murray, **Introduction to Contemporary Print Culture: Books as Media**, London, UK: Routledge, 2021, 256 pp., $44.05 (paperback).

Reviewed by
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Simone Murray's *Introduction to Contemporary Print Culture: Books as Media* is a textbook in three parts, exploring multiple aspects of print culture, including its development, economic and cultural influences, and future directions. Murray, at the time of publication, served as associate professor in Literary Studies at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, and as an elected fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. Her book provides an engaging discussion of print culture, first by highlighting four different theoretical approaches to analyzing and understanding the topic and its academic influences, secondly by describing the life cycle of a book vis-à-vis editing, publishing, retailing and consumption, and thirdly by considering the future of the book in a digital world.
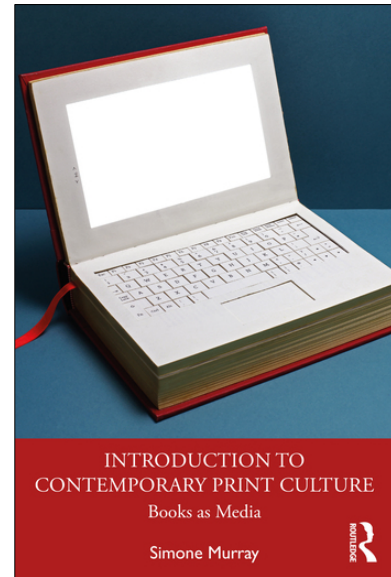
The author's key emphasis throughout the text is that it is impossible to separate the role of books from that of other media in the contemporary world; their deeply intertwined relationships must be considered holistically, with regard to legal and commercial practices and consumer behaviors. The term "print culture," Murray contends, must encompass the full variety of these factors (p. 1). Indeed, Murray eschews strictly defining "print culture" in favor of discussing ways in which other cultural and book historians have conceived of the term, opening the conversation to readers and emboldening them to formulate their own definition of print culture. Murray consistently emphasizes the dynamism of print culture. Nestled in the crux of disciplines like literary and communication studies, yet simultaneously rejecting certain aspects of their basic principles, print culture structures and restructures itself as contemporary media grows increasingly digital.

Since it is both informed by and juxtaposed against its sister disciplines, a sound investigation of print culture might take into consideration multiple methods of analysis. Part 1, "Theories and Methodologies for Understanding Print," lays the theoretical groundwork of print culture, with Murray neither advocating for nor against any one method, instead offering that each informs the other in print culture studies.

The first chapter, "Medium Theory," prompts the reader to examine the book as its own medium and question how the codex format has shaped how we read and write, how society operates, and even how we think. Murray challenges the reader to go beyond the Eurocentrism of Western medium theory, highlighting as an example its tendency to marginalize or ignore East Asian printing, in particular. Chapter 2, "Book History," further calls to attention the materiality of the book (or perhaps the illusion of materiality, blurring the boundaries between a text and the reader's interpretation), focusing, in particular, on the ways in which book production, circulation, and consumption have changed over time and contribute to the social fabric. Book

history models seem compatible with print culture insofar as both are highly interdisciplinary. However, as Murray points out, book history has largely failed to adapt to digital developments in print culture, its view of what counts as history being too narrowly focused. After all, how do we decide where to draw the line between past and present? Chapter 3, "Political Economy," pushes readers to critically interrogate the economic systems that inform print culture and influence the consumption of print media, including the global publishing industry structure, while chapter 4, "Cultural Policy," illuminates the role the state can play in either enabling or hindering book production and consumption. With these two chapters in particular, Murray guides readers to build a new awareness of the political and social systems that drive print culture, and thus influence contemporary modes of thought.

Murray's elucidation of these four methodologies is important to understanding the ways in which the study of print culture fits into the broader scheme of related literary fields. Part 2, "Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Books," is particularly informed by the third and fourth chapters of Part 1. An introduction to the many facets of the book industry, Part 2 builds upon the context provided in Part 1, explicating the avenues through which print culture is disseminated, enacted, manipulated, and rooted in contemporary culture.

Murray contrasts the uber-conglomerate publishing of chapter 3 with the independent, alternative, and micro publishers of chapter 5, arguing that each is necessary to ensure that a wide variety of ideas enter society. It is important to note, here, that independent publishers are not necessarily small—they may, in fact, be multinational businesses. Nevertheless, independent publishers still generate vastly different economic footprints than, or may serve distinct audiences from, those associated with the publishing world's powerful Big 5 (Penguin Random House, Hachette, HarperCollins, Simon & Schuster, and Macmillan). This critical need for variety filled by an abundance of publishers has often been metaphorically termed "the marketplace of ideas"—a "conception of public life wherein rational, self-maximizing individuals set up their ideological market stall in the hope of attracting customers" (p. 52). A key distinction between independent publishers and large conglomerates, Murray highlights, is independent publishers' likely rejection of the capitalist assumptions of the "marketplace of ideas" metaphor under which publishing-at-large operates (p. 92). Murray instead provides the alternative metaphor of an ecosystem, likening the complex interdependence of species within a healthy ecosystem to the ways independent publishers unite in the struggle to diversify in the face of huge corporations. Independent and small presses regard themselves as cultural advocates in their willingness to produce books spanning a range of genres, thus acting as champions of voices outside the mainstream and ensuring biodiversity within the publishing ecosystem—or, in this case, bibliodiversity.

As the divide between capitalism and ethos is evident in the publishing sector, so too is it in book retailing. The tensions between micro and mega book publishers that Murray describes in chapter 5 can be compared to the battles waged between chain and independent bookstores in chapter 8. Murray states that "booksellers have traditionally controlled public access to books, and, by extension, to the marketplace of ideas" (p. 98). Bookstores are businesses, but they do more than just sell books, Murray reminds us. A book, by its very nature as a communications medium, is imbued with the ability to make a profound cultural impact. It can effect change or affirm the status quo. Who, then, is allowed to participate in this crucial transaction of knowledge to the public? Should retailers be judged by the ways in which they commodify book culture for profit? Murray deftly facilitates these questions of how book culture and its consumption are socially and culturally mediated within the overarching conversation of Part 2.

Murray, rightly, does not solely focus on the printed, physical book in her assessment of print culture. Where relevant, Murray includes examples of the ways in which digital media have become embedded in the book world. Murray references digital publications throughout both Part 1 and Part 2, with special emphasis placed on the way digital books and e-readers are finding (or, perhaps more accurately, have found) their footing in both the publishing and retail industries. Part 3, "Book Futures," covers digital books in detail in chapter 11's "Digital Books." The advent of the Internet raised speculation in the 1990s about "the death of the book" and gave rise to debates regarding the future of the printed codex form (p. 203). Murray articulates four positions within this conversation (the Technophorics, Book Defenders, Biblio-optimists, and Ambivalents) thoroughly yet concisely, explaining each in a way that may stir nostalgic delight in contemporary readers. But, one may wonder, are the conversations of today that often pit printed books against digital books much different? Whether met with excitement or not, as Murray posits, "By this point in the twenty-first century, book culture *is* digital culture. Any attempt to isolate the two mediums amounts to a false distinction" (p. 199). At Murray's urging, readers are left to ponder this new reality of print-digital interconnectedness in the final chapter, "The Dream of a Universal Library: Digitising Knowledge." Ultimately, despite mass digitization efforts, the increasing ubiquity of e-books, and electronic library catalogs, a perfect, readily accessible repository of all of print culture remains impossible due to issues of sheer quantity.

Murray's textbook tackles a complex topic with precision and clarity. An essential introduction for undergraduate students of print culture in any literary field, Murray carefully maps out the ways in which print culture permeates the sociocultural landscape. The author leaves room for readers to think critically about each topic she delineates, and includes learning exercises for students to practice identifying and articulating elements of print culture encountered in everyday life. Murray's invocation to readers is to situate themselves within print culture not as mere observers or passive consumers but as direct participants who are aware of the many converging factors that influence it.