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History of the Book, summer 2011
Professor Antonetti
Final: book review

Baron, Dennis. (2009). *A Better Pencil: Readers, Writers, and the Digital Revolution*. New York: Oxford University Press.

In his 2009 book *A Better Pencil*, Dennis Baron aimed to describe how the digital revolution has changed the way we read and write. He did so by outlining the history not only of the book, but of the written word. A daunting task, to be sure—Baron began his book in ancient Greece where Plato records Socrates' criticism of writing as making people more forgetful and allowing for no interaction with the words. While such a long history could easily run on, Baron's book comes in at just under two hundred fifty pages (excluding works cited and index), making it accessible to both casual readers and scholars alike.

Dennis Baron is no stranger to the written word, either on page or screen. As an English and linguistics professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, he is well-equipped to discuss the changes that technology has wrought upon reading and writing. His tone was accessible, light, and often funny. He included anecdotes at points in the text, but they were used to illustrate his points, not just for frivolity. In addition, he used subheadings within the chapters to visually and textually break down his ideas. In this way, one can scan through the book more easily to find a key point. The illustrations are small and black-and-white, but they show readers what he is writing about, especially when he talks about typewriters and the first computers. These serve as visual aids for those not familiar with older writing technologies.

Baron took an evolutionary view of writing in *A Better Pencil*. He outlined the initial suspicion about the written word to its use as a memory tool and now a means of communication. Similarly, he traced writing technologies to where they are today. For example, graphite was originally used by farmers to mark their sheep and by builders to indicate their measurements, but then evolved into the pencil. Computers were originally mathematical machines, but grew to include text applications as well. Each new technology builds on what came before, and each is the next best thing.

Most of Baron's book focused on the computer and the new communication avenues it opens through email, social networking, blogging, and instant messaging. He also looked at how these new communication avenues affect us—for example, how an error on Wikipedia can temporarily change the country's historical landscape, or how the internet created whole new genres of writing, writing conventions, and etiquette. He dispelled what he calls "TeknoFear" by pointing out how new technology has allowed more writers to emerge and be more creative. Self-publishing via blogs or websites has exploded and books centered on online activities have emerged, especially in young adult literature (e.g. Lauren Myracle's *TTYL*).

While the book is often clear, one chapter is as clear as mud, or in this case, clay: Chapter 5, "Writing on Clay." Baron began by describing how his students have become so used to using computers for their work, and a good way to recognize how automatic their habits have become is to write with unfamiliar technology. He then briefly mentioned how the Sumerians wrote on clay with a stylus, then he filled up an entire page with an assignment he gave to one of his classes—writing on clay. The rest of the chapter goes on to illustrate how his students completed their clay-writing assignments

and how writing on computers was initially as unfamiliar to people as clay-writing was to his class.

Baron's larger argument is there: we don't recognize how accustomed we've grown to technology until it is gone, and new ways can be hard to master. However, it could have been framed in a much better way, because most of the chapter is filled with the minutiae of how students softened the clay, what shapes they made with the clay, and similar details. Why not save the Sumerians for their own chapter and devote the argument of "you don't know what you've got till it's gone" to the particular quirks of hard drives, flash drives, floppy disks, and other data-saving devices? Lumping this in with clay (pun intended) broke the flow of Baron's book and made it look amateurish, as if he had to use his class as an example because he couldn't figure out how to make the argument stand on its own. The rest of the anecdotes in the book blend in and help reiterate Baron's points, but this one did not.

A Better Pencil was an especially interesting read in light of the Indiana Department of Education's recent decision to phase out the teaching of cursive writing in schools. Keyboarding will replace cursive instruction within the next school year in Indiana as part of the adoption of the Common Core curriculum, an effort led by forty-six state governors to agree on common curriculum standards and allow children to be tested on them (Elliot, 2011). In his book, Baron reminded the reader that cursive writing was taught in order for students to enter the business world with a standardized way of writing. Now, that standard is the computer. For Baron (2009), it's just another step along the path of technology: "Children are taking control of the design of their school writing even as they learn to write, and handwriting, which often posed an insurmountable

aesthetic stumbling block for some young writers, has been replaced in many curricula by keyboarding” (p. 229). This is in contrast to Kitty Burns Florey, who wrote in her 2009 book *Script and Scribble: The Rise and Fall of Handwriting* about the numerous authors who wrote their books by hand, including J.K. Rowling and Stephen King (pp. 121-122). She waxed nostalgic about seeing manuscripts by her favorite authors preserved in libraries and looked glumly into the future, predicting, “Someday the job applications and charge card receipts of the famous may be all that that’s preserved in manuscript collections” (Florey, 2009, p.128). Finally, she asserted that the slow process of learning to write may help students deal with larger frustrations later in life (p. 156).

Who is right in the handwriting argument? It’s not evident because both Baron and Florey made compelling arguments for their respective sides. However, if this book review is any indication, Baron was on the right track about a new standard for writing. I sit at a computer with nary a pen or lined piece of paper in sight, and when I finish, this review will travel into the electronic ether to be read. Baron wrote, “In fact, just about everything that is not book length is being read digitally by someone, and many texts skip the print stage altogether and exist only in virtual format” (p. 231). This review is a case in point.

Despite a few small errors in judgment (unnecessary repetition, overuse of class clay-writing anecdote), Baron delivered a solid introduction on reading and writing in the digital age. Because of the ever-evolving nature of the topic, the book may not stand the test of time, but for now, it is an interesting and timely read. Overall, Dennis Baron took a positive view of the new ways in which we read and write. Instead of looking at the

past with misty eyes, he looked into the future through anticipatory eyes reflecting the glow of his computer screen and asked, “What’s next?”

References

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