

*Blind Impressions: Methods and Mythologies in Book History.* Joseph A. Dane. Material Texts. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. viii + 220 pp. \$65.

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Celebrated book historian Joseph A. Dane leads readers through a maze of bothersome, often-unstated issues tending to disquiet anyone and everyone considering the material history of books. The title tells all: aficionados of print culture consider that they read with an uncanny and even prescient sense of touch. Their eyes caress the printed page much as the blind run their fingers over dots of braille, while at the same time they cast a fuzzy gaze on the manufacture of its paper, the ridges and valleys left by the impressions of metal type, and, comparatively, the variations of the printed matter that for specialists in Renaissance studies give the lie to the idea that efficient reproducibility assures dissemination of a single and same thing. Dane shows how impressions left by the wooden press in the age of the incunabulum hardly resemble those of the iron counterpart.

Hence the guiding concept in this assemblage of nine essays contends that a “book-copy” is the very object cataloged in the vaults of special collections, whereas the “book” remains an abstraction: “Book-copies suffer damages, books do not” (173). Readers of

book-copies attend to the provenance of endpapers, manuscript annotations on flyleaves (including scraps cut from books in the waste of a printer's studio), the sewings of bindings, the quality of the spines and nerves of what they touch, the odor, and, no less, the sound of how it crinkles and cracks when opening a copy under a vellum cover.

*Blind Impressions*, avows the author, has neither a narrative nor guiding principle. It sets out less to prove than to enjoy. A mosaic of reflections, it studies how typography must be studied in light of paleography; why certain dates, right or wrong, are assumed to be benchmarks of book history; the ideology (our imaginary relation to real modes of production, not a credo or an assemblage of beliefs) of "typographical value" shared or contested among fetishists of incunabula; catch titles in English books up to 1550; the vagaries of book history (contra Elizabeth Eisenstein and D. F. McKenzie) and its relation to concepts and practices of lists and listing (although no reference is made to what Grafton and Rosenberg make of Eusebius in their *Cartographies of Time*, nor to what the late Jack Goody had done with lists from the perspective of anthropology); composing sticks; editions printed in red and black inks; the link between an idea or myth of the book to history in which mental and physical "impressions" are in play; and, compellingly, the dematerialization of book illustration in the age of digitalization.

Dane clearly writes — and writes clearly and incisively — for those of his métier, hands-on historians with whom he spars with eager delight. Outsiders have much to learn from the detail and precision with which the living matter of early modern books, especially those in the current of Caxton, are treated. A lively and enthusing read.

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