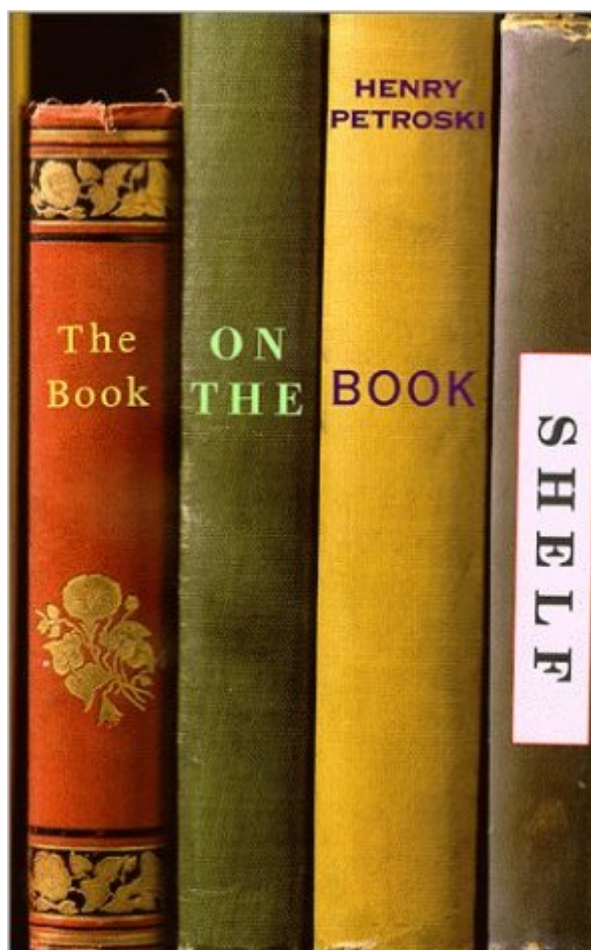


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# The Book On The Bookshelf



## Synopsis

He has been called "the poet laureate of technology" and a writer who is "erudite, witty, thoughtful, and accessible." Now Henry Petroski turns to the subject of books and bookshelves, and wonders whether it was inevitable that books would come to be arranged vertically as they are today on horizontal shelves. As we learn how the ancient scroll became the codex became the volume we are used to, we explore the ways in which the housing of books evolved. Petroski takes us into the pre-Gutenberg world, where books were so scarce they were chained to lecterns for security. He explains how the printing press not only changes the way books were made and shelved, but also increased their availability and transformed book readers into books owners and collectors. He shows us that for a time books were shelved with their spines in, and it was not until after the arrival of the modern bookcase that the spines faced out. In delightful digressions, Petroski lets Seneca have his say on "the evils of book collecting"; examines the famed collection of Samuel Pepys (only three thousand titles: old discarded to make room for new); and discusses bookselling, book buying, and book collecting through the centuries. Richly illustrated and wonderfully written, this is the ultimate book on the book: how it came to be and how we have come to keep it.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

We may think that how books are stored is a mundane topic. But Petroski shows how both the book and its means of storage co-evolved, with features we take for granted about books (e.g., labels on spines, or titles) being in part due to the need to store them in growing numbers. It was fun to have

an engineer's perspective on this issue, though his overall scholarship is impressive. There is something new and interesting here for all but the most specialized readers.

This book is thoroughly researched, well illustrated and written without engineering jargon so that the general reader will enjoy the story of the book and the shelf. I will forever look at libraries with renewed appreciation for not only their content but their structure. This book is a good complement for those bibliophiles who have read *A Gentle Madness* by Nicholas Basbanes.

*The Book on the Bookshelf* is Henry Petroski's sly look at how books are stored, and have been stored for centuries. It's sly, in part, because to tell you this he has to tell you the history of the book itself, and this of course leads him off in different directions. You learn much about not only books, and bookshelves, but scrolls, printing, various sorting systems, printing and spelling conventions over the years, and various other minutiae. If you're interested in this sort of thing, like I was, it's very interesting. I was fascinated to read, for instance, that the British publishing industry changed about a decade ago, and began printing their titles on the spines of books oriented the same way we do it. Previously they had printed the titles upside down (from our point of view) and the two books I'm referring to are old enough to display this. I'd noted it, but never knew why they were like that. Now I do. I'd recommend this book to anyone who's interested in books, publishing, and the history of those things. I will warn you that the author does tend to get into his subject, digress a bit, and run away with his topic now and again, but I generally found this characteristic charming rather than annoying.

I came across Henry Petroski's "The book on the bookshelf" when I was researching re-decorating options for my own library; and bought it, thinking I was buying just another work on general booklore and memorabilia. What an agreeable surprise when I discovered this is not such a book, but an exploration on the evolution of the bookshelf. For someone like me at that point in time, it was kismet. Petroski takes us from the earliest historical evidence of the existence of bookshelves and libraries; exploring ancient lands, such as Egypt and the great lost library of Alexandria, the storing of scrolls in Ancient Rome, the chained manuscripts that monks copied and sweated over for months during the Middle Ages; to our modern computerized systems. Library design is studied and analyzed to the last detail using as examples the oldest, most celebrated libraries of our time, such as Oxford's Bodleian Library, Spain's El Escorial, the Vatican Library, and our very own Library of Congress. He even dares to imagine the "library of the future", fully digitalized, with computers at the

base of each set of book stacks at the user's disposal for fast, easy researching of titles. He writes as a scientist and his ability to create a resolutely valid hypothesis out of what many would call an insignificant theme is remarkable. The book closes with an appendix on myriad methods on how to organize one's own private library bookshelves, an extended bibliography, and a full reference list of excellent engravings, blueprints and photos reproduced throughout. As a booklover and collector, I found "The book on the bookshelf" interesting and with a fresh point of view on a usually languid, most talked about subject.

I enjoyed this meticulously researched history of the physical design of books, bookshelves and libraries. Petroski follows the evolution of book storage from pigeonholes used to store scrolls to modern space-saving "moveable-aisle" stacks. In the process, he also covers the changes in the physical design of books themselves and the ever-present challenges faced by libraries throughout the ages as more and more books appear on their shelves. An appendix covers a host of possible methods of organizing your personal book collection - this section is easily the most amusing part of the book. Petroski includes interesting anecdotes and helpful illustrations to liven up this sometimes dry subject area. While not a gripping book, it definitely succeeds as a thoughtful study full of interesting nuggets of history. It's obvious that obsessive book lovers throughout the ages have put a lot of thought into storing their collections. If you're not particularly interested in why books were once shelved spine in, or how library layouts have changed over the years, then this book will probably not hold your interest. Personally, I have fond and vivid memories of libraries, especially the one from my childhood. This book definitely has me looking at libraries in a whole new light - I'll never be able to walk into one again without studying the way it's laid out.

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