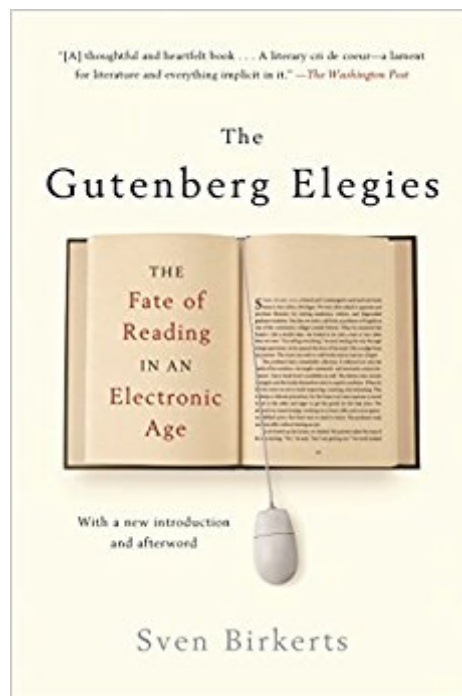




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The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate Of Reading In An Electronic Age



Synopsis

A reissue of the book that first examined the future of reading and literature in the electronic age, now with a new introduction and Afterword. In our zeal to embrace the wonders of the electronic age, are we sacrificing our literary culture? Renowned critic Sven Birkerts believes the answer is an alarming yes. In *The Gutenberg Elegies*, he explores the impact of technology on the experience of reading. Drawing on his own passionate, lifelong love of books, Birkerts examines how literature intimately shapes and nourishes the inner life. What does it mean to "hear" a book on audiotape or decipher its words in electronic form on a laptop screen? Can the world created by Henry James exist in an era defined by the work of Bill Gates? Are books as we know them—volumes printed in ink on paper, with pages to be turned as the reading of each page is completed—dead? At once a celebration of the complex pleasures of reading and a bold challenge to the information technologies of today and tomorrow, *The Gutenberg Elegies* is an essential volume for anyone who cares about the past and the future of books.

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Customer Reviews

I encountered this book as part of my sister's college courses. I loved it; she struggled with it, but eventually grasped the point (and got an A+ on her essay, if memory serves). But I was looking through the essays and comments by other reviewers, and I wondered -- Did we read the same book? I didn't see a technophobic don't-read-it-online argument; I found an intriguing series of comments on what happens to when readers encounter something alien, and what happens to a

culture when what used to be "normal" is now "alien." Were any of the rest of you forced to attempt Chaucer's Tales in the transliterated, but still semi-original Middle English? Did you find it difficult? The literary difference between Chaucer and 1900 is approximately the same difference between 1800 and now. We've gained a lot -- you can have my Mac when you pry it out of my cold, dead fingers -- but we've also lost some things that we used to take for granted. For example, have any of you slaughtered an animal for meat, or even watched someone else do it? Have any of you used an outhouse every day of every year, because there wasn't an alternative? Have you experienced the fear that comes with the knowledge that any illness or injury, no matter how minor, might kill someone? Have you lived in a culture wherein a woman taking a walk at night, or traveling unaccompanied, was assumed to be having illicit sex? (Think about the woman who marries Proteus at the end of Shakespeare's *Two Gentleman from Verona*: Do you really think she would have agreed to marry him if she had any other choice?) All of that was once normal. It's not any more. Our books have changed along with our culture.

by Andrew Stauffer University of Virginia

Sven Birkerts doesn't approve of what you're doing right now. Reading (or writing) an on-line review of his recent book, *The Gutenberg Elegies*, is like discussing an exercise program over hot fudge sundaes: we are participating in the burgeoning electronic culture that Birkerts urges his readers to resist. He recommends we turn off the computer, stop our superficial surfing through web sites and TV channels, curl up somewhere with a good book, and -- here's the hard part -- actually read the thing. Birkerts argues that reading books has become difficult for us, precisely because of our saturation with electronic communications media. Television began the destruction of reading; the computer and its electronic attendants have arrived to finish the job. As Birkerts' argues compellingly, the decline of the printed word means the transformation to the reading experience, which involves the deep and deliberately slow processes of imaginative thought. Such experience is undone by our desire for increasingly rapid movement across large arrays of text and images -- a desire both inflamed and fulfilled by evolving systems of electronic communication. In *The Gutenberg Elegies*, Birkerts claims his place in a long and noble line of embattled humanists who have refused the seductions of the technological. According to Plato, the Egyptian god who introduced writing as a new technology praised its usefulness as an aid to memory and wisdom. The king of Egypt, however, took a different view.

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