

The History and Power of Writing

Henri-Jean Martin

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Cultural history on a grand scale, this immensely readable book—the summation of decades of study by one of the world's great scholars of the book—is the story of writing from its very beginnings to its recent transformations through technology.

Traversing four millennia, Martin offers a chronicle of writing as a cultural system, a means of communication, and a history of technologies. He shows how the written word originated, how it spread, and how it figured in the evolution of civilization. Using as his center the role of printing in making the written way of thinking dominant, Martin examines the interactions of individuals and cultures to produce new forms of "writing" in the many senses of authorship, language rendition, and script.

Martin looks at how much the development of writing owed to practical necessity, and how much to religious and social systems of symbols. He describes the precursors to writing and reveals their place in early civilization as mnemonic devices in service of the spoken word. The tenacity of the oral tradition plays a surprisingly important part in this story, Martin notes, and even as late as the eighteenth century educated individuals were trained in classical rhetoric and preferred to rely on the arts of memory. Finally, Martin discusses the changes to writing wrought by the electronic revolution, offering invaluable insights into the influence these new technologies have had on children born into the computer age.



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