

A LESSON ON ENGLISH



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BOOKS

BY SARA TUSEK

Books as symbols

The book (I mean the physical book itself, the object made of paper, ink, cardboard and glue) is a symbol of learning. Even in an era when electronic media (television, computers, the Internet, cell phones, PDA's, and so forth) have for all practical purposes overtaken the book as a channel for real-time information exchange, books still exert a powerful cultural influence.

Most people would not burn a book. Few will throw a book away. Even the "airport novels" we buy to read on the plane are recycled—we leave them on an empty chair, then the airport cleaners pick them up and take them home or put them in the employees' lounge.

There's something about a book that symbolizes reliability, importance and permanence. It's as if a book is tangible evidence of the human effort to communicate across time and space. Books deserve respect simply for their contribution to the laborious, never-ending task of building and preserving an enduring human civilization.

Books as sources of information

Many books are seen primarily in terms of the information they contain. Textbooks, manuals, encyclopedias, and general non-fiction books are sources of facts, figures, theories, strategies, scientific findings, research results, and back-

ground history on a huge range of topics. The information in books is perceived as being more reliable than that found in magazines or newspapers; the binding gives an air of authority that may be quite undeserved.

In truth, the speed at which information is available makes the bound book obsolete the moment it is published. Up-to-date information can often be best accessed through websites, blogs and social networks. Not all of this "breaking" information is reliable, but over time an electronic media source can prove itself, if what it publishes immediately is confirmed by later data. No bound book can possibly keep up with all the changes being made at every moment.

Yesterday's fact may be today's outdated idea: witness the debate over whether the sun revolves around Earth or vice-versa, the number of planets in the solar system, the age of Earth, the timeline when dinosaurs roamed Earth, the geographical and historical development of human civilization, or the exact nature of matter in the universe.

More problematically, debates over the meaning of information and events make it difficult to publish books whose theses do not become antiquated or even offensive; for example, a book written 100 years ago about race relationships in the American South would seem at best quaint (and at worst racist) to today's reader. As a source of information, the book is not at all perfect, and may be misleading or simply false. Yet we still read them.

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FACTS ABOUT BOOKS: HOW MANY?



In 2005, according to UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), the nation that published the most new books was the United Kingdom (206,000 new titles).

Second most was the United States (172,000 new titles). China was third (136,266 new titles), Germany fourth (96,000 new titles), and Spain was fifth (86,300 new titles). The Czech Republic, with a population of only 10,000,000 published 11,244 new titles, making it number 22 world-wide.

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830-13 A1A North, #317
Ponte Vedra Beach FL 32082
www.ili.cc



Sara and Jarad Tusek and Klaus

"A Lesson on English" is a series of short lessons created for people who want to become fluent in conversational English. The lessons are practical and useful for students learning English in a traditional classroom setting or on their own.

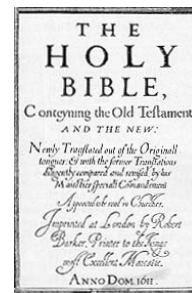
The Christian Bible

At almost the same time as England's Shakespeare was contributing to the development of modern English came the printing of a book which has had an even greater effect on society and culture: the "Authorized" or "King James" translation of the Bible in 1611.

For almost the first time, anyone who could read English had access to the Bible in his own language, and in words which were easily understood.

The beauty of the language in this translation has never been equaled. Though today, because language has changed, it is difficult in places to understand, even for native English speakers, many people still use it. And as with Shakespeare, many phrases and quotations from it have become part of the English language. People often use them without knowing they come from the Bible.

For example: *Turn the other cheek*, *Go a second mile*, *Straight and narrow*, *A Job's comforter*, *Don't cast your pearls before swine* and *The love of money is the root of all evil* are all phrases taken from the Bible.



BOOKS FROM P.I

Books as objects

Everyone knows what a book looks like. It's rectangular, with a cover that's thicker than the pages, full of printed pages and maybe some pictures. Right?

Not really. Books can be huge and heavy, like coffee-table books, or tiny and precise, like the hand-bound mini-books beloved by Czechs. Covers can be colorful fabric, glossy stiff paper, soft matte paper, or plain cardboard. Pages can be packed with close black printing on white, or just have one centered reproductions of a magnificent painting per page.

You can buy books by the yard (yes, by the yard—three feet of random books with harmonious bindings) to fill up the empty bookcases in your new McMansion house or apartment. You can buy rare books worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, or you can go to a book swap with your battered old books and come home with different battered old books.

It's very hard to throw away a book. Go to a public library used book sale and you can buy old, completely outdated books such as *Travel Guide to the USSR* or special-interest books like *Gardens of Elvis Presley's Graceland* for a dollar a bag. Who really wants a chemistry textbook from 1967, or an atlas from 1983? But who can throw them away without a feeling of guilt at being wasteful?

Books as metaphors

In one sense, a book is a metaphor for the ability of humans to interact with each other on a level above the simply temporal and spatial. People can usually communicate well enough with those who occupy the same time and space—the people who are next to them at the moment. There are plenty of ways to communicate with someone who's next to you that don't require a book (or words, for that matter)—a smile, a poke on the arm, a raised eyebrow. Communication among people who are together in time and place is not all that difficult.

The ability to communicate over distances (distances of either time or space) is crucial if cultures are to be preserved.

Books are ideally suited to this task, as they are portable and not dependent on technology which may or may not work properly. The book is the perfect means of communication that transcends time and space; thus it provides a handy, readily-understood metaphor for crossing time/space boundaries.

Books as fun

If you love books, they are an unfailing source of joy and entertainment. How else can you take a very inexpensive journey to a far-away land, back in the distant past or in the remote future?

Where else can you meet such interesting people to eavesdrop on as they live their fictional lives? What more pleasant way to feel connected with the human race even when you can't physically be with someone? For those times of isolation (self-imposed or not) caused by ill health, lack of means to travel, ignorance due to lack of education, or any other shortcoming, the book provides a means to connect and communicate. Books are more than the sum of their parts: they are, in a real sense, the essence of civilization.