The Idea Machine: How Books Built Our World and Shape Our Future
By Joel J. Miller
Prometheus Books, 2025.
Pp. vi, 335. $34.95 hardcover.

Anyone who reads large numbers of books over their lifetime eventually finds their way to the vast literature of books about books. If books play a large role in your life, you naturally become curious about books themselves and the effects books have on other people. The subgenres of books about books include so-called bibliomemoirs, or books about how reading in general and certain books in particular have shaped an author's life; books on books as physical objects, such as tracing innovations in book technology over time, e.g. the evolution of the scroll to the codex; books on how reading affects readers, such as novels increasing our capacity for empathy; books on how other changes in our world affect books and reading, including a flood of books over the past decades on how the internet and our digital and virtual environments shape the future of books and reading; and, lastly, books on how books themselves shape our social environment, for example, through the spread of ideas. Excluding bibliomemoirs, these subgenres fall under what scholars term the "history of the book." Strangely, when you survey this vast literature—I have some one hundred and fifty and counting such books in my own library—you find relatively few books about how books shape our social environment. This may be because most people writing in this area are writing more from a humanities background as opposed to the social sciences. In any case, as a result of this relative dearth in the literature, it was with great excitement and anticipation that I began to read Joel Miller's book *The Idea Machine: How Books Built Our World and Shape Our Future*.

As the primary title suggests, Miller views the book as the physical means by which people have both concretized their ideas and spread them to other people, including future as yet unborn people who one day—even thousands of years later—can pick up a book and begin reading, bringing the idea back to life. Miller suggests a broad definition of a book, writing "The book is a portable collection of written ideas, designed to elevate the human mind beyond its natural limits of experience, memory, distance, and time; it's a vessel for numbers, narratives, laws, and lyrics; it facilitates history, politics, philosophy, religion, science, and self-discovery; it enshrines traditions while providing direction as they shift and grow; it informs the ignorant, reminds the learned, travels far, and cheats death" (pp. 7-8). This definition means Miller considers clay and wax tablets, scrolls, and the codex all under the heading of books, albeit different in form and function, or, more precisely, how well these different forms of books perform their function of concretizing and spreading ideas. Indeed, Miller's narrative proceeds along two distinct yet interlocking paths. First, he aims to guide the reader through the history of the book as a physical object, and second, he shows the reader how books spread ideas. A book spreads ideas not only through the reading of the text it contains but also through the form of the book itself. For example, the text in an ancient scroll was written as continuous lines of characters with no spaces between words and punctuation. This *scripta continua* style made reading Homer, for example, a difficult and slow process, which Miller illustrates nicely to the reader with an example (p. 77). With innovations in spacing and punctuation during the Middle Ages, however, reading became easier and faster, which ultimately allowed the literate to read more books—more ideas—facilitating their spread.

Miller begins his book by proposing a model through which to think about the history of the book and its role in spreading ideas. Imagine a graph on a two-dimensional plane

representing an idea's expression and specificity. As you move along the x-axis of expression, you increase how well you articulate and share an idea. As you move along the y-axis of specificity, you increase how sharp and well formulated the idea is. If you are close to the origin, you have a vague and private idea. If you are high along both the x- and y-axes, you have a precise and public idea, for example, when the idea is published in the form of a book. Miller argues, however, that books introduce a third dimension to this simple framework, namely a z-axis measuring time. Ideas concretized in the form of a book are able to outlive their author because they are preserved in physical books. As Miller writes, "With the z-axis, the idea grid becomes more than just a map of how ideas grow. It's a map of how they live, how they reach across time, and how they remain part of our collective consciousness. The x-axis of expression and the y-axis of specificity show us how thoughts take shape, but the z-axis reveals how they endure, adapt, and transform. And books are the information technology that allows ideas to make this journey, inviting new interpretations and shaping the world we inhabit" (p. 14).

Miller's three-dimensional model of ideas is as simple of a model as you could think of, but I cannot stress strongly enough how incredibly rare proposing such an analytical framework is in the literature on the history of the book. Miller mentions his ties to people working in the humanities, but his book stands out for its analytical depth because it rests on the foundation of his model—an approach that is more familiar in the social sciences—which gives the reader a tool to think about cause and effect in the history of the book.

Because, ultimately, *The Idea Machine* is a history of the book. Miller divides his narrative into two halves. The first half describes the history of the book from its earliest beginnings—why do we even need books and writing to learn and think—through its first and intermediate forms—clay and wax tablets to scrolls to the codex—and to its modern form and mass dissemination because of the printing press. Miller tells the history of the book through the lives of major figures throughout history, which gives every chapter a new story to tell while pushing the history of the book forward. One never tires, for example, of sitting next to Montaigne in his tower as he writes his essays surrounded by his curved wall of books, a story Miller uses to introduce his chapter on the challenges faced in a world with too many books for any one reader.

The second half of the book then turns to major examples of books spreading ideas. Miller chooses familiar examples, such as the use of books to spread the Scientific Revolution, James Madison's study of books on early Republics and other types of governments to formulate his arguments during the debates on the U.S. Constitution, and the role *Uncle Tom's Cabin* played in galvanizing public opinion against slavery in the United States. Miller's numerous examples throughout the book are what bring his prose to life and make his book such a joy to read.

But, for all the examples in the book, there is still something deeply important missing. Miller is an optimist. He believes in the power of books to ultimately spread good ideas that improve our world. I agree. I just want to know more about what he thinks about bad ideas and the role books have played throughout history in spreading them. Miller does acknowledge the case. The closest he gets, however, to thinking about bad ideas is when he discusses *not* having access to books, such as banning printing in the Islamic East in the fifteenth century, which arrested scientific progress, and banning slaves from reading in the southern states, which slowed the spread of liberation ideas. Moreover, Miller concludes his book by making the familiar libertarian case for free and unfettered access to books in a democratic and pluralistic society, acknowledging the risk that progress from such access is not guaranteed.

Okay, so perhaps we do know something about what Miller ultimately thinks about bad ideas and books. But my point is that we—intellectuals and readers of books—idolize Montaigne and his tower. Give me also Stalin and his dacha. Or Hitler and his libraries. Both dictators and their libraries have received book length treatments (see Geoffrey Roberts's *Stalin's Library: A Dictator and His Books* (Yale University Press, 2022) and Timothy W. Ryback's *Hitler's Private Library: The Books That Shaped His Life* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2008)). Or give me Karl Marx and the Reading Room of the British Museum. There are books that have spread ideas which have led to mass suffering and the deaths of millions upon millions of people. Indeed, The Idea Machine is one of the most consequential technologies in all of human history—both for good and for bad.

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