pieces of Hall’s arguments can be tweaked and extended for understanding today’s assumptions about what publishing in print actually means. As a result, the book extends its utility beyond questions of text-making and authorship in 17th-century New England.—Wade Garrison, Digital Humanities Consulting Librarian, University of Kansas.


In Scribes, Script and Books, Leila Avrin has provided the rare book world with a nearly comprehensive review of the history of writing and hand-bookmaking, from the earliest evidence of logographic symbols up to the eve of letterpress printing in Europe. The text is lavishly illustrated with 350 black and white photos, figures, and maps, and has an extensive bibliography. The work was originally published in 1991 and is now available as a reprint.

In the introduction, Avrin clearly states that her intent is to synthesize the work of the many historians preceding her, not to present original research. This is not, however, a popular treatment written in a light journalistic style. (In fact, the sheer amount of detail can be daunting; it is best appreciated one chapter at a time.) Avrin, who died in 1999, was a faculty member at Hebrew University’s School of Library and Archive Studies, with a doctorate in art history. She published widely in the fields of art and antiquarian book studies.

In the opening chapters, Avrin addresses early writing systems and their evolution into the phonetic alphabets of the Western world. She then follows the history of writing, record-keeping, and the flowering of written literatures in the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Israel and the Jewish Diaspora, Greece, the Roman Empire, and the Islamic world.

In each section, Avrin provides a wealth of detail on how the physical materials of bookmaking were produced: local practices in the making of papyrus and parchment, the composition of inks, the type of stylus or pen used to produce various scripts, even the scribes’ seating arrangements. Along with these basics, Avrin touches on a dizzying array of related subjects: the economics of papyrus production, the role of the Egyptian climate in preserving materials from antiquity, the evolution of the Semitic alphabet, scribal training, Hebrew and Arab scripts as art, Arabic contributions to mathematics, and a great many other topics. Avrin’s prose is rich with etymologies for scores of ancient and specialized terms.
Entering the Middle Ages, Avrin examines the monastic production of manuscripts, calligraphic scripts, illumination styles, the shift from papyrus and parchment to paper, and decorative bookbinding. Finally, she discusses woodblock printing as a precursor to Gutenberg. Although the emphasis is always on the periods when books were only being made by hand, each technique (calligraphy, papermaking, bookbinding) is followed from its origins up to the present – for of course bookmaking by hand is very much alive today.

Avrin delves into greater depth on the topic of the Hebrew book than the other civilizations studied here. The contributions of ancient Israel to book history are not always detailed in shorter works, which is unfortunate, because the veneration of the Torah and other sacred writings have resulted in a great wealth of material for scholars. Several cultural practices are responsible for this. First, the methods for making a Torah scroll were carefully prescribed, down to the most precise detail, and are still practiced today. This means that we have a window into techniques of bookmaking in the far-distant past even when most of the original artifacts have not survived or exist only in fragments.

Second, Judaism’s reverence for the name of the God of Israel meant that documents containing the Tetragrammaton (the four-letter rendering of the name)
were never destroyed, but carefully buried in special sites. These were later known as geniza or treasure houses, as they surely are for archeologists and historians. The geniza have yielded not only prayer books and copies of the Torah (as one would expect) but business documents and personal correspondence, for the Tetragrammaton was used not only in liturgical texts, but in blessings and formulas for greetings found in essentially non-religious texts.

Finally, the centrality of sacred texts in Judaism led to the development of the Masoretes’ system for ensuring the accuracy of hand-copied texts by counting words and sentences, determining the middle word for each book, and other techniques. “The early Masoretes were motivated by a compulsion to keep account of every biblical word; it was a way of ensuring that no mistake would be made and no word lost.” (p. 123) As a result, the transmission of the Torah and other religious works was accomplished with many fewer errors than other important texts of the ancient world.

With so much material in one place, it may seem churlish to ask for more, but if Scribes, Script and Books could be expanded, one might wish for more commentary on the social implications of the development of writing: how cultures changed in the wake of the transition from orality to print, or print plus orality, as the trusted method for preserving knowledge. Avrin does remind the reader that writing systems evolved choppyly, with individual societies typically using both established and emerging systems at the same time, and this is a good start to the topic.

Another subject I wish had received more attention is Asia, and its contributions to writing and the making of books. China is mentioned only fleetingly: its place in the context of different types of writing systems is mentioned in the first chapter, and later its techniques for papermaking and woodblock printing. Block printing in China is given only brief attention because Avrin classifies all intaglio, lithographic and serigraphic processes as mechanical reproduction. Fair enough, but inscriptions were carved onto bone and shell in China for centuries, and texts were written on bamboo and silk; these aspects of Far Eastern book history warrant their own chapter.

Book history as a field of study has grown tremendously since Scribes, Script and Books was first published: coincidentally, 1991 was also the year the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing was established. Numerous book history and book arts courses are now being taught in departments of literature, history, and studio art, and Avrin’s work may be used either as a textbook or as a resource for many of these courses. Only the largest public libraries will want to consider selecting this, but most academic libraries should have a copy, especially
those in institutions with a strong liberal arts curriculum.—Ruth Ann Jones, Special Collections Cataloger, Michigan State University Libraries.


Alan Gribben’s *Harry Huntt Ransom: Intellect in Motion* was a labor that involved eighteen years of research. This full-length biography (356 pages with notes and index) serves as a comprehensive guide to Harry Huntt Ransom’s life, with a focus toward Ransom’s activities at the University of Texas at Austin (UT).

The book begins with a sketch of Ransom’s childhood and young adulthood and then transitions to detailing primarily Ransom’s professional life. During his time at UT (1935–1971), Ransom served in several capacities: moving through the ranks as professor, assistant dean, dean, vice president, provost, president, and, finally, chancellor. Most remarkably, while climbing the academic ladder, Ransom also found the time to build up the rare books collection and establish a humanities research center at UT that would bear his name, the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (HRC).