

Joseph A. Dane, *Blind Impressions: Methods and Mythologies in Book History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013). Print, 228 pp., US\$65.00, ISBN: 9780812245493.



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*Review*

*Blind Impressions* promises to provide a refreshing look at book studies, examining and rebuilding the field from the very understanding of what a book is, to what the book means and stands for within the overarching narrative of the history of the book. It is a wide-ranging study which could be read by students and experts alike – although some prior knowledge of the field (and of print culture in particular) is recommended.

Unfortunately, Dane's book does not live up to the lofty claims of its introduction but reads more like an extended personal reflection on disparate areas of book and manuscript studies. The first-person is a sometimes grating distraction from the arguments made.

The book is divided into three parts, and each part into chapters, although as each chapter discusses separate topics (although mostly within the area of book studies) and lives up to the introduction's promise of having 'no narrative arc' (3), the division contributes little to an overall thesis. Had the ideas in each chapter been developed further (a number of the chapters discuss Dane's research-in-progress or research-abandoned), they would be more suitable as stand-alone articles.

Dane does not concern himself with detailed studies of individual books because each book is 'exceptions, anomalous and a challenge to the grand abstractions of book history and bibliography' (3). However, this leads unavoidably to abstract and generalised discussions (despite Dane's repeated distaste for generalising). The stronger chapters are those which do focus on actual books or on specific methodology (such as Chapter Six and Part III.3).

Dane's work continuously challenges the reader to bear in mind two key dichotomies: firstly, the difference between the book as material object and the book as intellectual entity and, secondly, the difference between historical reality and the narratives imposed by scholarship. The first chapter is an interesting discussion about how these two binaries can be seen in print culture and the process of printing itself. Later chapters also pose big questions – what should be catalogued? Should we preserve hypertextual material alongside the text itself? Of what value are surveys of the field? How should we restore books?

Chapter Two continues the examination of assumptions made in the field of book studies – this time the turning point of ca. 1800. Dane's reflection on this as well as the solidity and immovability of the history of print when compared to the fluid and constantly redefined manuscript studies of the Middle Ages is interesting but not as academically rigorous as could be hoped. Unfortunately the sacrificing of formal study in favour of personal reflection continues throughout the middle section of the book. Even a seemingly fascinating study of catchtitles (an obscure yet common feature of printed books) in Chapter Five fails to develop the promised analysis. This chapter also suffers from questionable methodology. Dane remarks 'I... excluded as much as possible books printed on the Continent. Doubtless several Continental books leaked into my figures, due to lapses in my attention.' (96) and 'I have doubtless made many, many mistakes. I know I have mistyped STC numbers; I have left out numerous books.' (100) Surely such errors would be better fixed rather than merely acknowledging them and continuing with a flawed analysis. Perhaps these remarks are meant to create a sense of the modesty or humanity of the writer? Instead, their effect is to undermine the reader's confidence in the academic abilities of the author.

The most successful sections of this book – Chapter Six and Part III.3 – give a fascinating insight into the methods of a scholar at work and use the first-person to great effect. Chapter Six suggests an exercise for students and novices to develop

and improve basic editorial skills. Dane's students were asked to copy a poem and then produce copies of their peer's colleagues and so on in order to simulate the copying of historical texts. Dane then demonstrates how to create a *stemma* of each resulting version and how to edit a text in order to create an accurate edition. III.3 follows Dane's research into printing errors and is a valuable reminder of the danger of privileging the historical narrative over the facts and evidence.

Although this was overall an enjoyable book which raised important questions about manuscript and book history, it does not live up to the promises of its introduction all the way through. Dane's writing can be engaging at times but too often strays into the self-indulgent with its use of the first-person. The better sections should prove useful to the student of manuscript or print studies, as should the big questions posed, but they should look elsewhere for more rigorous analysis of the subject.

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