‘Of the three volumes in Steven Roger Fischer’s hugely ambitious and sedulously executed trilogy, the first two dealt with language and writing. This one, however, is the most suggestive and open, dedicated not only to the technicalities of his subject but to the everyday experience of communication . . . Fischer lets his historical readers speak for themselves, ceaselessly seduced by textual magic.’

– The Independent

‘Starting from the Bronze Age and ending with modern emails and a possible future of e-books, Steven Fischer’s A History of Reading takes in a wonderful diversity of things’ – Nature

‘It’s an exciting story, which the author tells clearly and chronologically’ – Daily Telegraph

Also by Steven Roger Fischer:

A History of Language
A History of Writing
Island at the End of the World
Islands
A HISTORY OF READING

Steven Roger Fischer

REAKTION BOOKS
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IT IS HISTORY’S LATEST REVOLUTION. A work still in progress, it has already touched every country, city, village, office and home. The cerebral prosthetic’s access to news, knowledge and others has suddenly endowed humankind with seeming omnipresence and omniscience. If for centuries black ink on bound paper pages had objectively educated and civilized, this new electronic platform, palm-held or worn, has subjectively connected and yoked, delivering the rush of belonging. For ‘d-reading’ – the new digital reading – has enthralled netizens whose powers and actions are currently presenting wondrous and worrying things.

It is a further stage of reading. When nearly six hundred years ago Western Europe first began printing books, a growing body of shared facts fashioned new ways to think and analyse from diverse read sources, at which historic juncture passive compliant reading became active creative reading. Yet in any public space, transport, business or classroom today, one sees heads bent in silent isolation, lost to an electronic screen that has replaced active thought and exchange. Digital addiction is rife. Especially with young people, texting is habitually replacing spoken language. Pre-schoolers and nursery school children try to swipe the pages of their first physical book.

Command of books always meant success. Now digital devices command. There are those who allege that digital literacy will ensure social survivability. But surely more important than what the young
are passively accessing is the way we teach them to actively think and learn – acquiring such qualities as creativity, agility, the ability to adapt and change, to recognize opportunity and to understand what one is best suited to do. In this process, constant digital reading, as it is currently constituted, could actually be a personal and social impediment, if not danger.

As papyrus scrolls ceded to parchment codices, and these to printed paper books, now phones, tablets, laptops, desktops, wearables and other electronic conveyances are enticing *Homo legens* to places unvisited and unimagined.

Reading. Everyone – young and old, past and present – has had to admit its primacy. For an ancient Egyptian official it was a ‘boat on water’. For an aspiring Nigerian pupil 4,000 years later it is ‘a touch of light in a deep dark well’. For most of us it will forever be the voice of civilization itself.

Today’s white-collar worker spends more time reading than eating, drinking, grooming, travelling, socializing or on general entertainment or sport – that is, five to eight hours of each working day. (Only sleep appears to claim as much time.) The computer and Internet? Texting, Facebook, Twitter and so much more? All belong to the new reading revolution.

Yet reading embraces so much more than work or Web. What music is to the spirit, reading is to the mind. Reading challenges, empowers, bewitches, enriches. We perceive little black marks on white paper or an electronic screen and they move us to tears, open up our lives to new insights and understandings, inspire us, organize our existences and connect us with all creation.

Surely there can be no greater wonder.

Globalities series), *A History of Reading* is the story of this wonder. It describes the act of reading, its practitioners and their social environments, and reading’s many manifestations on stone, bone, bark, wall, monument, leather, wax tablet, papyrus scroll, parchment codex, paper book, screen and e-paper. Though the present volume focuses on the West’s reading history, it also describes the development of reading in China, Korea, Japan, the Americas and India. Through such a history it is hoped one might gain a better understanding not only of what reading has been in the past and what it is today, but how it may continue to inspire and empower the world in future.

Though reading and writing go hand in hand, reading is actually writing’s antithesis – indeed, even activating separate regions of the brain. Writing is a skill, reading a faculty. Writing was originally elaborated and thereafter deliberately adapted; reading has evolved in tandem with humanity’s deeper understanding of the written word’s latent capabilities. Writing’s history has followed series of borrowings and refinements; reading’s history has involved successive stages of social maturation. Writing is expression, reading impression. Writing is public, reading personal. Writing is limited, reading open-ended. Writing freezes the moment. Reading is forever.
Amenhotep-Son-of-Hapu, an eminent Egyptian scribe, reading a partially opened papyrus scroll. The statue dates from the 14th century BC.