

A History of Reading in the West
Guglielmo Cavallo

Extraordinarily informative. More than most readers will want to absorb.

This is a collection of essays by philologists specializing in different periods of history. The chapter titles tell the story:

1. Archaic and classical Greece: the invention of silent reading
2. Between volumen and codex: reading in the Roman world
3. Reading, copying and interpreting a text in the early Middle Ages
4. The scholastic model of reading
5. Reading in the later Middle Ages
6. Reading in the Jewish communities of Western Europe in the Middle Ages
7. The humanist as reader
8. Protestant Reformations and reading
9. Reading and the counter Reformation
10. Reading matter and 'popular' reading: from the Renaissance to the 17th century
11. Was there a reading revolution at the end of the 18th century?
12. New readers in the 19th century: women, children, workers
13. Reading to read: a future for reading

The book expects you to know the arcane vocabulary of book printing. What is a quarto, what is an octavo, and as you see in the chapter titles, what are volumen and codex. They do not favor the uninitiated with a glossary. This is a book for serious scholars.

The beauty of the book is that the 36 page introduction pretty much tells the story. It will satisfy the curiosity of the lay reader. Therefore, if you can find this book in the library, you will be able to digest the gist of the story in an hour's reading.

It is an excellent piece of work for its intended audience and purpose. But in less you know going in that you are part of that audience, you may find it somewhat heavy going.