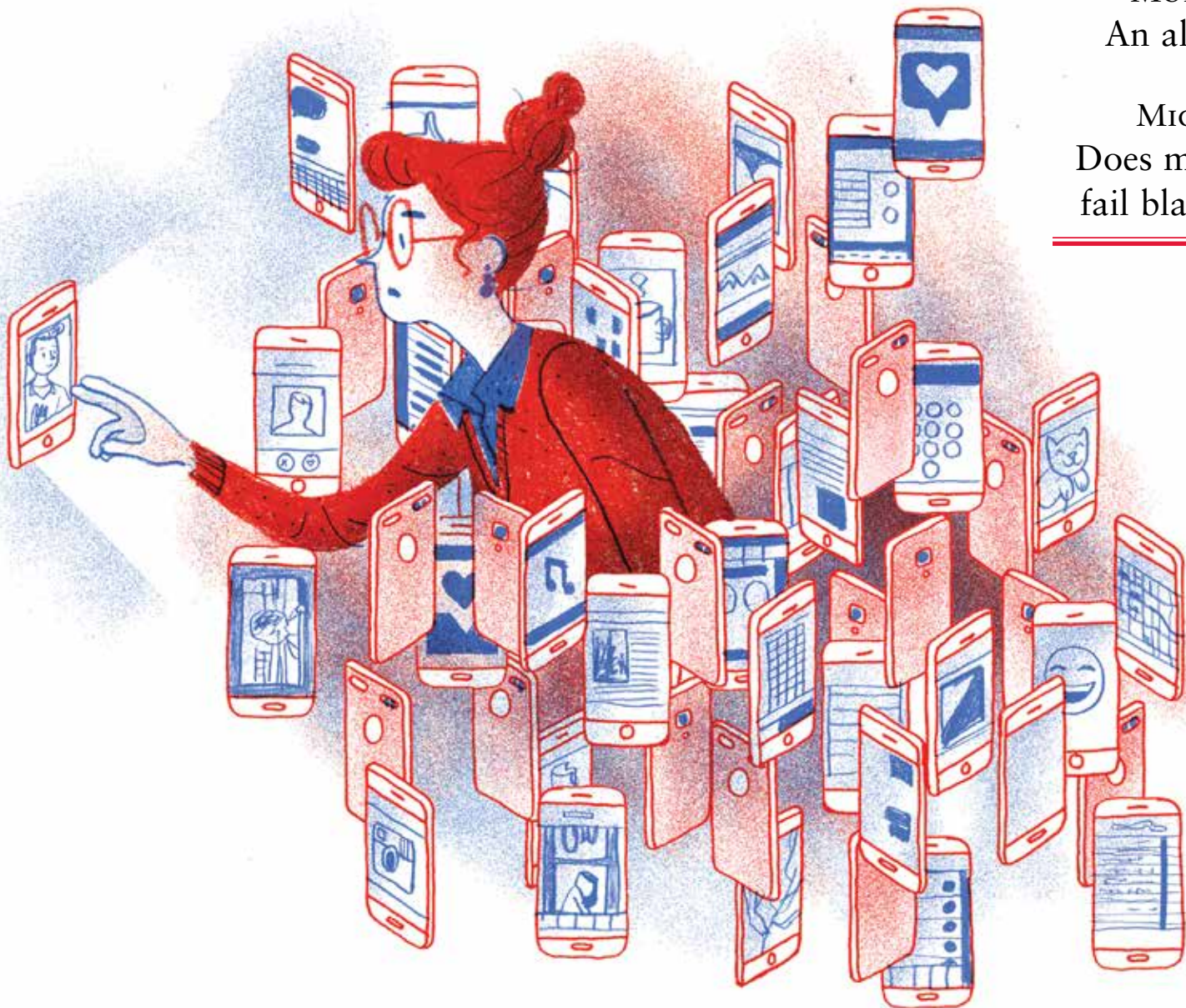


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Keep in touch

Why digital connections can't sustain health, happiness or politics



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FICTION Katherine Ashenburg reviews *The Jaguar's Children* + Norman Snider reviews *The Hunger of the Wolf*

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The Moving Finger Writes

Technology and spirituality unite in this intriguing concoction.

WAYSON CHOY

The Social Life of Ink: Culture, Wonder and Our Relationship with the Written Word

Ted Bishop

Penguin

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EVERY PERSON OVER AT LEAST THE AGE OF five has a history with pens. We cannot live without a dozen of them around the house—pens are constantly being lost, blatantly taken; pens are endlessly bought or freely given away, if not tossed away. Have you ever considered how you personally developed your relationship with pens, the layers of attitudes you have been piling up toward writing instruments? Ted Bishop's *The Social Life of Ink: Culture, Wonder and Our Relationship with the Written Word* will take you on a journey from our cave-drawing days to our present keyboard and tablet-writing age—oh, and add to this social history of ink our growing fetish for tattoos and inky symbols of all sorts as well. Along the way, he will startle and enchant you. *The Social Life of Ink* is a great read, even a brilliant one for some of us, and—no holding back—it is definitely a book for pen lovers and crazed pen hoarders. I mean—ahem—collectors.

But let's get more personal. On certain days, in certain moods, are you especially fussy about using the "right" ballpoint or the "perfect" gel pen? Have you ever felt yourself being enchanted—and, dare I say, even seduced—by a beautifully made pen, a pen that felt like no other you have ever held before? And have you ever sensed that aesthetic beat when the ink began to flow like a living river? Have you ever enjoyed how a certain pen eases you into writing more and more, as if the ink turning into words were flowing freely from the tip of a wizard's wand? And, finally, have you ever, even once, been held spellbound before a page of fine calligraphy? Then, for you, this treasure of a book is a Cartier "must-have."

With his disarming voice, Bishop, a professor of English at the University of Alberta, proves to be an adventurous narrator who shares this story-enriched history with opening chapters about pen-and-ink inventions and discoveries, then of missing persons and murders, trade wars and financial

double dealings, betrayals and unexpected friendships, soon to be intermixed with more and more of the author's own personal adventures and delightful insights—all somehow involving ink of every kind and viscosity.

His central theme is the centuries-long trajectory of ink-and-paper culture, a journey that started in ancient China, before moving first to the Islamic world and then to Europe and the Americas. Conventional storytellers would present this journey in chronological order. Not Bishop. He starts

Have you ever enjoyed how a certain pen eases you into writing, as if the ink were flowing freely from the tip of a wizard's wand?

at the end, with the span of half a millennium in Europe that separates the inventions of the printing press and the ballpoint pen. Then he veers east, where he outlines ink's earliest emergence in China, before dwelling on some of the classical refinements in calligraphic style associated with the Ming Dynasty. Finally, he visits the central Asian steppes of Uzbekistan and takes us on a tour of the deserts of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Here the various threads of his story come together.

Those of you who open this book's pages will be surprised at how much that Bishop tells us in all three stages of this journey is unexpected and thought provoking. For example, you may vaguely recognize the name Biro as being linked with the ballpoint pen, but are you familiar with the man this name honours? Bishop traces the elusive trail of the glamorous Hungarian inventor Lazlo Josef Bíró, in travels that take Bishop from Budapest to Buenos Aires. And because the story of the ballpoint pen only begins with Bíró, Bishop also tells us about the men who followed in Bíró's wake—technical improvers and wild schemers who turned his invention into an icon of modernity. Indeed, improvers and schemers appear often in the first part of Bishop's narrative, as if the main contribution of the West to the evolution of ink was to continually improve and refine the medium's technical properties.

How different the picture he paints of ink's place in Chinese history. Travelling to a factory in the remote hills of Anhui province, he describes the making of traditional ink cakes and ink sticks. Bishop is interested in far more than just the tangible features of China's ink traditions; he seeks to understand the wider cultural aspects of Chinese

calligraphy. To do so he highlights two Ming-period catalogue compilers, Cheng Chün-fang and Fang Yü-lu, whose careers reveal the extent to which the culture of Chinese calligraphy stressed a practitioner's moral worth. "A righteous heart conducts an upright brush," in the words of one evocative ancient saying.

Similar transcendent qualities reappear when Bishop arrives at the third part of his narrative. He visits Uzbekistan, one-time Samarkand, famous as a way-stop on the Silk Road that connected China and Europe. In this remote spot, there occurred one of the key events in the global spread of ink's use, when in 751 CE an Arab army defeated its Chinese counterpart. The prisoners from this battle would teach the victors the techniques of papermaking. While the use of papyrus for writing had long been known in many parts of

the globe, this new art was a novelty in the lands west of China. "The technology of papermaking revolutionized the Islamic world," notes Bishop. It would also revolutionize the European world once it reached there, although that would take centuries more, given the reluctance of European Christians to adopt this writing medium.

It is in Uzbekistan that Bishop views the oldest known version of the Quran, the Samarkand Codex, penned on metre-high pages of parchment in iron-gall ink and deposited in the country's capital of Tashkent. As Bishop notes, the style of calligraphy found within its covers would end up having its own independent influence on ink's history.

Not only did Islamic scholars devise a distinct set of conventions to govern their calligraphy, but they also injected into this work their own ideas of the divine. According to the Quran, there existed a Supreme Pen that, at the beginning of time and without human intervention, wrote down all people's fates. As Bishop notes, secular echoes of this idea may have ended up spreading westward. In *Don Quixote*, for example, a pen hangs from a wire and speaks directly to the reader to reveal the independent role that it played in the process of Cervantes's literary creation.

For Bishop, this metaphor, with its resonances of cross-cultural influence, provides a fitting emblem of the way that ink and the act of writing have shaped us. The love of ink can and does lead one to the love of things fine and transcendent. But if one intends to keep in human memory some personal history that one wishes to outlast us, Bishop reminds us all to consider that Chinese proverb that humbly states, "The weakest ink is mightier than the strongest memory." LRC

Wayson Choy is the award-winning author of 'The Jade Peony' (Douglas and McIntyre, 1995), now in its 30th printing.