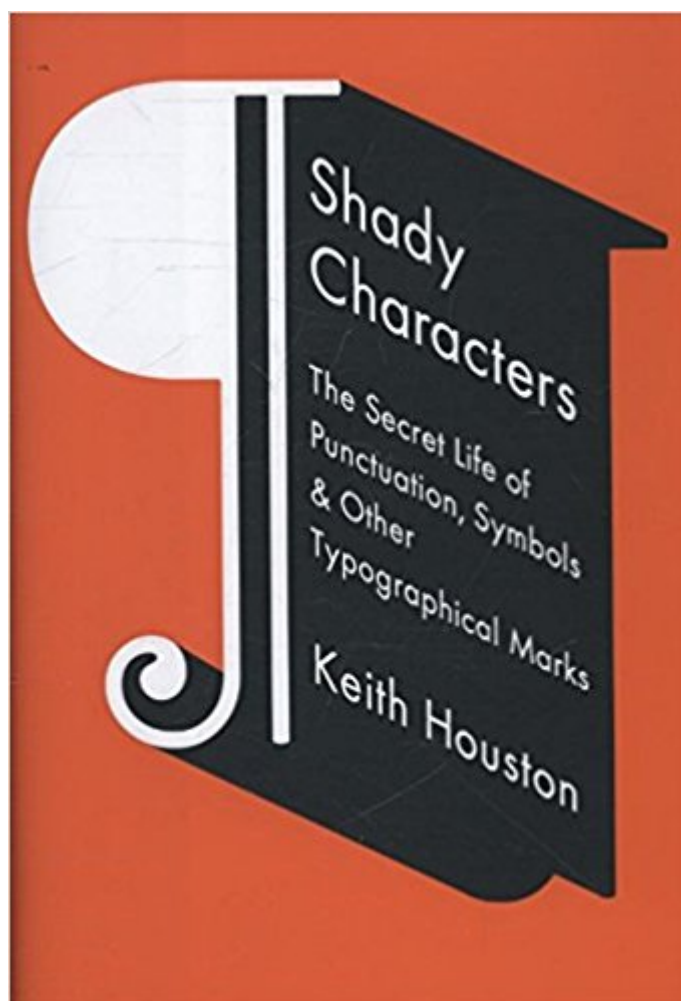


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Shady Characters: The Secret Life Of Punctuation, Symbols, And Other Typographical Marks



Synopsis

From ancient Greece to the Internet—via the Renaissance, Gutenberg, and Madison Avenue—Shady Characters exposes the secret history of punctuation. A charming and indispensable tour of two thousand years of the written word, Shady Characters weaves a fascinating trail across the parallel histories of language and typography. Whether investigating the asterisk (*) and dagger (†) which alternately illuminated and skewered heretical verses of the early Bible or the at sign (@), which languished in obscurity for centuries until rescued by the Internet, Keith Houston draws on myriad sources to chart the life and times of these enigmatic squiggles, both exotic (Œ) and everyday (&). From the Library of Alexandria to the halls of Bell Labs, figures as diverse as Charlemagne, Vladimir Nabokov, and George W. Bush cross paths with marks as obscure as the interrobang (?) and as divisive as the dash (—). Ancient Roman graffiti, Venetian trading shorthand, Cold War double agents, and Madison Avenue round out an ever more diverse set of episodes, characters, and artifacts. Richly illustrated, ranging across time, typographies, and countries, Shady Characters will delight and entertain all who cherish the unpredictable and surprising in the writing life. 2-color; 75 illustrations

Book Information

Hardcover: 352 pages

Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company; 1 edition (September 24, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0393064425

ISBN-13: 978-0393064421

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1.2 x 8.6 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 64 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #348,465 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #154 in Books > Arts &

Photography > Decorative Arts & Design > Design History & Criticism #165 in Books > Arts &

Photography > Graphic Design > Typography #234 in Books > Reference > Words, Language

& Grammar > Alphabet

Customer Reviews

“If Eats, Shoots & Leaves whetted your appetite on the subject of punctuation, then you have a treat in store. Shady Characters is an authoritative, witty, and fascinating tour of the history and rationale behind such lesser known marks as the ampersand, manicule, the pilcrow, and the

interrobang. Keith Houston also explains the octothorpe – otherwise known as the hashtag – and my final comment on his book is #awesome. – Ben Yagoda, author of *How to Not Write Bad* – “Make no mistake: this is a book of secrets. With zeal and rigor, Keith Houston cracks open the &, the #, the – and more – all the little matryoshka dolls of meaning that make writing work. Inside, we meet novelists, publishers, scholars and scribes; we range from ancient Greeks to hashtagged tweets; and we see the weird and wonderful foundations of the most successful technology of all time. – Robin Sloan, author of *Mr. Penumbra’s 24-Hour Bookstore* – “Funny, surprising, and, of course, geeky. – Michael D. Schaffer and John Timpane, *Philadelphia Inquirer* – “Might make you look at books – in an entirely new way. – Andrew Robinson, *Nature* – “Houston – is a tireless researcher and an amiable teacher. – Jan Gardner, *Boston Globe* – “A pleasurable contribution to type history, particularly for readers who haven’t considered the ampersand in any detail. – Carl W. Scarbrough, *New Criterion* – “Fascinating. – Rob Kyff, *The Courant*

Keith Houston is the author of *Shady Characters* and the founder of shadycharacters.co.uk. He lives in London.

The nonstandard characters used in the book render as microscopic; I can’t find a fix for this, and it happens both on the Kindle Paperwhite and the Kindle Android app. The parts of the book that I can read are interesting, but I’m missing a lot with the rendering deficiency. Frankly I’m a bit shocked that a publisher would let this go to market in this condition. Perhaps the paper version is more legible.

Not that long ago, I was reading an edition of a Shakespeare play that retained the original formatting. I stared at the punctuation and thought how very modern it was, and just as I was reminded that I’ve often wondered where we get these marks we use every day, along came Keith Houston with this ray of sunshine called *Shady Characters*. I ordered it instantly and had no idea what to expect. Fortunately, it is hands down informative, earnest, witty, well-produced and so very reassuringly human in this digital age. Houston has selected the pilcrow (that backward P for paragraph), “commercial at” (@), octothorpe (pound or hash sign), ampersand, asterisk, dagger, hyphen, manicule (pointing hand), quotation marks, the interrobang (question mark overlaid with an exclamation mark) and marks to indicate irony and sarcasm. The earliest symbols show up with the

Greeks and Romans; turning points include the rise of Christianity, the Renaissance and the invention of the printing press, and, more recently, the typewriter. Computers and the internet are respectful latecomers to the party. Houston is a detective who digs for hard evidence. Typographical legends persist and he insists on finding the truth. Assumptions are dashed. His end notes and bibliography reveal that he sifted through a lot of dry, not to mention dusty, texts in search of his answers and he has done a terrific job of articulating the information. He sustains a vibrant energy to the last page. The hardcover book is attractively produced with the symbols rendered in red ink. This is Houston's first book. On the strength of it, I'll sign up for his next, whatever it is.

Most of us, when reading and writing, use and mentally process a multitude of typographical symbols without thinking about them, even though we probably do not know the names for many of those marks nor how they came about. That's the arcane and overlooked, even "shady", world that Keith Houston explores in surprisingly lively and engaging fashion in *SHADY CHARACTERS*. The mark "@" is ubiquitous, at least on the Internet, and we all use and understand it. But where did it come from? As Houston tells us, it was the brainchild of Ray Tomlinson, a twenty-nine-year-old computer engineer who in 1971 was working on the development of the ARPANET. On his own initiative Tomlinson came up with a way to direct messages to the mailbox of a specific user on a given mainframe computer, employing the then-underutilized symbol "@" on the keyboard of his ASR-33 teletype. "Half-fearing the wrath of his superiors were they to discover his pet project, Tomlinson initially kept quiet about his invention. [He told a co-worker,] 'Don't tell anyone! This isn't what we're supposed to be working on.' His concern was misplaced: e-mail became the fledgling network's first 'killer app' * * *. [B]y 1973, only two years after the first e-mail traveled from one side of Tomlinson's office to the other, it accounted for three-quarters of all traffic on the ARPANET." Another ubiquitous symbol is "#". Most folks nowadays would call it a "hash tag" or a "pound sign". Its formal name, however, is an "octothorpe", which was bestowed on it by Bell Labs in the development of the Touch-Tone keypad, although the symbol itself can be traced back to medieval times in connection with usages dating back to ancient Rome. In several chapters Houston ventures into the related realm of punctuation, in particular as regards the hyphen, the dash, and quotation marks. Throughout the book the reader is exposed to vignettes of history, smatterings of grammar, and prec̃fÂ-s of technological developments -- all invariably relevant and interesting. The book also unearths various proposed symbols that failed to catch on, including several designed to signify irony (all of which shared an inherent shortcoming: "if the quality of irony in a statement is such that it must be telegraphed to the reader, is it still ironic?"). *SHADY*

CHARACTERS is extremely well written. The subject is rather esoteric, even recondite, and in the hands of most authors the book would undoubtedly be on the dry and pedantic side. But SHADY CHARACTERS is a delight to read, which is quite an accomplishment. Some of that pleasure is also due to the intelligent and intricate, yet carefully executed, typesetting. Among other things, the book uses a reddish hue for printing the various symbols being discussed as well as for miscellaneous ornamentation. (Aesthetically pleasing as the practice is, my faltering eyesight was not always able to discern the small reddish asterisks used as footnote markers.) Augmenting and enhancing the discussion are numerous illustrations. Given the relative complexities of the typography and typesetting, coupled with the haphazard copyediting that often prevails today, I would not have been surprised to encounter a host of typographical errors, but I did not find any. Kudos to W.W. Norton! This book is a shining example that publishers still can turn out error-free products if they -- and the authors -- care enough. (On the other hand, I suspect that the book bumps up against the limitations of Kindle.) There is one small writing misstep, however: In the course of discussing how the asterisk was once used by the baseball establishment to set apart and mildly denigrate Roger Maris's accomplishment of hitting 61 home runs in a 162-game season (vis-à-vis the sacred 60-home-run mark of the Babe in a 154-game-season), Houston writes that late in the 1961 season Mickey Mantle had to sit out due to injury, "leaving Maris to score a record-breaking 61st run". The proper American baseball terminology, of course, would have been "to hit a record-breaking 61st home run". But then, the author lives in Scotland.

Many punctuation marks turn out to have a surprisingly long and, for the few of us fascinated by such things, interesting history. The book does a nice job of telling it. The style is brief, breezy, and popularized, though it does make reference to sources. Some of the history of punctuation involves historical trivia only distantly related to it but that the author either couldn't bear to leave out or needed to throw in in order to expand an otherwise slender volume. His knowledge of those other things, both ancient and modern, is not always as sure as his understanding of punctuation, and sometimes that shows. Another review mentions that non-standard characters are "microscopic" on Kindle and Android platforms. I can report that they are on the iPad as well.

I'm a former typesetter and a student of type and design history for 35 years. I thought I might like the book; turns out, I love it. It's written with extraordinary charm and wit, but also is so ridiculously well researched that the citations take up a substantial portion of the back of the book for further reading. Every chapter is highly enjoyable on its own, but also packed with asides and

tidbits that make the primary topic even richer. If you have any love of fonts, typography, language, or history, I think you'll adore it as much as I did.

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