Don't be misled by this volume's diminutive size—as author, professor of German and European literature, and avowed computer camp graduate Andrew Piper proves throughout, the implications of its physicality extend far beyond its dimensions. Beginning with St. Augustine and ending with the Prussian naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, Book Was There: Reading in Electronic Times guides the reader toward the book’s technological future by way of its eminent past. Librarians and archivists may be particularly taken with Piper’s discussion of ancient manuscripts and, in particular, the preserved notes of several bygone literary giants including Goethe, Nabokov, and Stendahl. Equally gratifying, though, are Piper's optimistic views on the future of handwriting, e-readers, and that frequent subject of fearful discussion, the printed book.

Despite an abundance of literary signposts, Piper, who is also the creator of several research projects that explore literary documents using computational textual analysis, structures his writing not around specific texts but rather the functions that enable and surround their use. In seven concise chapters, he outlines the way books are analogous to human hands and faces, discusses the implications of page-turning and its digital counterparts (zooming and roaming), and addresses the future of sharing and privacy. Piper likes to upend the priorities that have taken root in today's reading culture: for instance, he espouses the forgotten notion of “common right” instead of examining copyright.

He also argues frequently for the significance of the mechanical over the philosophical. In doing so he sketches out his own philosophy, and it is one that is uniquely conversant with both traditional text objects and their new media progeny. Appealingly, Piper's vision can extend as far as you want. In his discussion of new forms of sequential consumption of information, one might hear echoes of Serialism, the 20th century method of musical composition; in his description of e-book designers’ attempts to preserve the evocative tacility of books, one may hear a comment on the repurposed gestures that inform DJ culture.

Piper triumphs creatively as well as theoretically. Even his most esoteric observations mix a sense of corporeal universality with a creative individualism that is wholly relatable. He’s smart but grounded, incisive but not infallible, as when he acknowledges that “criticizing remix culture and embracing DRM puts me on the wrong side of history,” adding a self-deprecating “(how old is this guy anyway?)” (p. 105-106). He also injects a familiar sense of elapsed time into the experience: “Over the time it has taken me to write this book, [my son] has learned to read,” he notes at the close of the final chapter (p. 149). That expansive but fundamentally human touch characterizes Piper’s way of looking at the world.

Although his notes are thorough, one might wish for an index to accompany the high density of references, in particular, the long list of new media artists that probably wouldn’t be covered in a traditional survey of book history. Luckily, the pleasure of this prescient and idiosyncratic work—which would be a valuable addition to any academic or public library collection—comes, appropriately, from the reading.