# The Written World: The Power of Stories to Shape People, History, Civilization

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The story of literature in sixteen acts-from Homer to Harry Potter, including The Tale of Genji, Don Quixote, The Communist Manifesto, and how they shaped world history

In this groundbreaking book, Martin Puchner leads us on a remarkable journey through time and around the globe to reveal the how stories and literature have created the world we have today. Through sixteen foundational texts selected from more than four thousand years of world literature, he shows us how writing has inspired the rise and fall of empires and nations, the spark of philosophical and political ideas, and the birth of religious beliefs.

We meet Murasaki, a lady from eleventh-century Japan who wrote the first novel, The Tale of Genji, and follow the adventures of Miguel de Cervantes as he battles pirates, both seafaring and literary. We watch Goethe discover world literature in Sicily, and follow the rise in influence of The Communist Manifesto. Puchner takes us to Troy, Pergamum, and China, speaks with Nobel laureates Derek Walcott in the Caribbean and Orhan Pamuk in Istanbul, and introduces us to the wordsmiths of the oral epic Sunjata in West Africa. This delightful narrative also chronicles the inventions-writing technologies, the printing press, the book itself-that have shaped people, commerce, and history. In a book that Elaine Scarry has praised as "unique and spellbinding," Puchner shows how literature turned our planet into a written world.

Praise for The Written World

"It's with exhilaration . . . that one hails Martin Puchner's book, which asserts not merely the importance of literature but its all-importance. . . . Storytelling is as human as breathing."-The New York Times Book Review

"Puchner has a keen eye for the ironies of history. . . . His ideal is "world literature,' a phrase he borrows from Goethe. . . . The breathtaking scope and infectious enthusiasm of this book are a tribute to that ideal."-The Sunday Times (U.K.)

"Enthralling . . . Perfect reading for a long chilly night . . . [Puchner] brings these works and their origins to vivid life."-BookPage

"Well worth a read, to find out how come we read."-Margaret Atwood, via Twitter
Martin Puchner is the Byron and Anita Wien Professor of Drama and of English and Comparative Literature at Harvard University. His prizewinning books cover subjects from philosophy to the arts, and his bestselling six-volume Norton Anthology of World Literature and his HarvardX MOOC (massive open online course) have brought four thousand years of literature to students across the globe. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.chapter 1

Alexander's Pillow Book

336 b.c.e.-  Macedonia

Alexander of Macedonia is called the Great because he managed to unify the proud Greek city-  states, conquer every kingdom between Greece and Egypt, defeat the mighty

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Persian army, and create an empire that stretched all the way to India- in less than thirteen years. People have wondered ever since how a ruler from a minor Greek kingdom could accomplish such a feat. But there was always a second question, more intriguing to me, which was why Alexander wanted to conquer Asia in the first place.

In contemplating this question, I found myself focusing on three objects that Alexander carried with him throughout his military campaign and that he put under his pillow every night, three objects that summed up the way he saw his campaign. The first was a dagger. Next to his dagger, Alexander kept a box. And inside the box, he placed the most precious of the three objects: a copy of his favorite text, the Iliad.

How did Alexander come by these three objects, and what did they mean to him?

Alexander slept on a dagger because he wanted to escape his father's fate of being assassinated. The box he had seized from Darius, his Persian opponent. And the Iliad he had brought to Asia because it was the story through which he saw his campaign and life, a foundational text that captured the mind of a prince who would go on to conquer the world.

Homer's epic had been a foundational text for the Greeks for generations. For Alexander, it acquired the status of an almost sacred text, which is why he carried it with him on his campaign. It is what texts, especially foundational ones, do: They change the way we see the world and also the way we act upon it. This was certainly the case with Alexander. He was induced not only to read and study this text, but also to reenact it. Alexander, the reader, put himself into the story, viewing his own life and trajectory in the light of Homer's Achilles. Alexander the Great is well known as a larger- than- life king. It turns out that he was also a larger- than- life reader.

## A Young Achilles

Alexander learned the lesson of the dagger while still a prince, at a turning point in his life. His father, King Philip II of Macedonia, was marrying off a daughter, and no one could afford to decline his invitation. Emissaries from the Greek city- states would have been sent, along with visitors from recently conquered lands in Thrace, where the Danube met the Black Sea. Perhaps even some Persians were in the crowd, attracted by King Philip's military successes. Alexander's father stood on the eve of a major assault on Asia Minor, striking fear in the heart of Darius III, king of Persia. The mood in the old Macedonian capital, Aegae, was exuberant, because King Philip was famous for throwing lavish parties. Everyone had assembled in the great theater, eager for the proceedings to begin.

Alexander must have watched the preparations with ambivalence. He had been groomed to be his father's successor from an early age, with forced marches and training in the martial arts. He had become a famous horseman, astonishing his father by breaking an unmanageable horse when he was in his early teens. King Philip had also seen to Alexander's education in public speaking and had made sure that his son would learn proper Greek in addition to the mountain dialect spoken in Macedonia. (Throughout his life,

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Alexander would revert back to the Macedonian dialect when enraged.) But now it seemed that Philip, who had invested so much in Alexander, might alter his plans for succession. He was marrying his daughter to his brother-in-law, who might well become Alexander's rival. If the marriage produced a son, Alexander could be replaced altogether. Philip was a master at knitting new alliances, preferably through marriage. Alexander knew that his father would not hesitate to break a promise if it served his purpose.

There was no more time for musing: Philip was entering the theater. He came alone, without his usual guards, to demonstrate confidence and control. Never had Macedonia been more powerful and more respected. If the campaign into Asia Minor succeeded, Philip would become known as the Greek leader who had attacked and defeated the Persian Empire on its own shores.

Suddenly, an armed man rushed toward Philip. A dagger was drawn, and the king fell to the ground. People ran toward him. Where was the attacker? He had managed to escape. A few bodyguards spotted him outside and gave chase. He was running toward a horse. But his foot became entangled in vines; he stumbled and fell. His pursuers caught up with him, and, after a short fight, he was put to the sword. Back in the theater, the king was lying in his blood, dead. Macedonia, the Greek alliance, and the army assembled to take on Persia were without a head.

For the rest of his life Alexander would protect himself with a dagger, even at night, to avoid his father's fate.

Had Darius of Persia sent the assassin to prevent Philip's assault on Asia Minor? If Darius was behind the murder, he had miscalculated. Alexander used the murder as a pretext to get rid of his potential rivals, seize the throne, and launch an expedition to secure the Macedonian borders to the north and the loyalty of the Greek city-states to the south. Then he was ready to take on Darius. He crossed the Hellespont with a large force, retracing the path the Persian army had taken when it invaded Greece generations ago. Alexander's conquest of Persia had begun.

Before he confronted the Persian army, Alexander made a detour to Troy. He didn't do so for military reasons. Even though Troy was well situated near the narrow waterway between Asia and Europe, it had lost the importance it once had. Nor did he go there to capture Darius. In making Troy his first stop in Asia, Alexander revealed a different motivation for his conquest of Asia, one that could be found in the text he carried around with him everywhere: Homer's Iliad.

Homer was the avenue by which many people had approached Troy ever since the stories of the Trojan War had become a foundational text. It's certainly the reason I went to Troy. I had read a children's version of the Iliad while growing up before graduating to more faithful translations. When I studied Greek in college, I even read parts in the original, with the help of a dictionary. The famous scenes and characters from this text have been in my mind ever since, including the opening, which finds the Greek army having laid siege to Troy for nine years and Achilles withdrawing from battle because Agamemnon had taken Achilles'

female captive, Briseis, for himself. Without their best fighter, the Greeks are hard pressed by the Trojans. But then Achilles returns to battle and kills the most important Trojan, Hector, and drags his body around the city walls. With the help of the gods, Paris manages to retaliate and kill Achilles by aiming his arrow at Achilles' heel. I also remembered the war among the gods, Athena fighting on the side of the Greeks and Aphrodite on the side of the Trojans. And the strange backstory of Paris crowning Aphrodite the most beautiful goddess and receiving Menelaus' wife, Helen, as a reward, which sets off the war. The most striking image of them all was of course the Trojan horse with Greek soldiers hidden inside its belly, although I realized, to my surprise, once I read more accurate translations, that the last part of the war was actually not recounted in the Iliad and only briefly in the Odyssey.

When I think of the story of Troy in the Iliad, there is one scene that has stayed in my mind above all others. Hector has returned from the battle that is raging down below the city and is looking for his wife, Andromache. He can't find her at home because she has rushed out into the city in search of news of him. Hector finally finds her near the city gate. She pleads with him not to risk his life, but he explains that he must fight to keep her safe. In the midst of this high-stakes exchange, a nurse brings their son:

With these words, resplendent Hector

Reached for his child, who shrank back screaming

Into his nurse's bosom, terrified of his father's

Bronze-encased face and the horsehair plume

He saw nodding down from the helmet's crest.

This forced a laugh from his father and mother,

And Hector removed the helmet from his head

And set it on the ground all shimmering with light.

Then he kissed his dear son and swung him up gently

And said a prayer to Zeus and the other immortals.

In the middle of a brutal war that is raging right outside the gate, and of a heated exchange between husband and wife about the meaning of the war, suddenly the mood changes as the father laughingly removes the helmet that is frightening the child. It is a moment of domestic reconciliation, the helmet giving way to Hector's laughing face before he kisses his son. But the helmet is still there, sitting on the ground shimmering with light, and perhaps the child is still sobbing, a reminder that this is but a brief reprieve from the war that will end with the death of Hector and the destruction of the great city of Troy.

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All of this was in my mind when I first approached the ruins of Troy, situated high upon a hill. The citadel was once located close to the sea, but since the fall of Troy around the year 1200 b.c.e., the sea has receded due to the sediments brought by the river Scamander. Whereas in ancient times Troy had commanded the waterway between Asia and Europe, it now simply rose from a wide plane, cut off from the sea, which I could barely see on the horizon.

What was even more disappointing than the city's position in the landscape was its size. Troy was tiny. I was able to cross within five minutes what I had imagined as a gigantic, towering fortress and city. How this minifortress had withstood the mighty Greek army for so long was difficult to fathom. Was this what epic literature did, taking a small fortress and blowing it out of proportion?

As I was mulling over my disappointment, it struck me that Alexander reacted in exactly the opposite way: He loved Troy. Like me, Alexander had dreamed of the epic since childhood, when he had first been introduced to the Homeric world. He had learned to read and write by studying Homer. Pleased with Alexander's success, King Philip had found the most famous living philosopher, Aristotle, and persuaded him to come north to Macedonia. Aris totle happened to be the greatest commentator on Homer and regarded Homer as the fount of Greek culture and thought. Under his tutelage, Alexander came to regard Homer's Iliad not just as the most important story of Greek culture, but also as an ideal to which he aspired, a motivation for crossing into Asia. The copy of the Iliad that Alexander put under his pillow every night was annotated by his teacher, Aristotle.

The first thing Alexander did upon his arrival in Asia was to pay homage at the grave of Protesilaus, praised in the Iliad as the first to leap ashore when the Greek ships landed. This act proved to be only the beginning of Alexander's Homeric reenactment. Once they had made their way to Troy, Alexander and his friend Hephaestion laid wreaths at the graves of Achilles and Patroclus, showing the world that they were following in the footsteps of that famous pair of Greek warriors and lovers. They and their companions raced naked around the city walls, in Homeric fashion. When Alexander was given what was allegedly Paris's lyre, he complained that he would have preferred that of Achilles; and he took armor preserved from the Trojan War. He would conquer Asia in Homeric armor.

While Troy had no direct strategic significance, it revealed the secret springs of Alexander's campaign: Alexander had come to Asia to relive the stories of the Trojan War. Homer had shaped the way Alexander viewed the world, and now Alexander carried out that view through his campaign. When Alexander arrived in Troy, he took it upon himself to carry on the epic story- beyond that which Homer could have imagined. Alexander made Homer bigger by reenacting the conquest of Asia on a grander scale. (He also seemed to have preferred different parts of the Iliad than I did: Whereas I gravitated to the domestic scene of Hector, Andromache, and their son, Alexander identified with Achilles and his prowess in battle.)

While Alexander was at Troy, Darius of Persia sent an army that included Persian commanders and Greek mercenaries. The first clash between Alexander and the Persians,

on the Granicus River, left the Persian army defeated, and Darius learned that this young Macedonian was a bigger threat than he had thought. Seeing that he needed to take things into his own hands, Darius began to assemble a large army to put an end to this troublemaker.

Alexander's Macedonian and Greek army was smaller than the Persian force but better trained, and the Greeks had developed formidable battle tactics. Alexander's father had inherited the Greek phalanx, rows of interlocking foot soldiers who wielded a shield in one hand and a spear in the other, protecting and supporting each other. By tightening the discipline of his soldiers through training, Philip had been able to increase the length of their spears, turning the rows of soldiers into an impenetrable movable wall. Upon resuming the throne, Alexander had combined the improved phalanx with a swift cavalry that could encircle an army and attack from the rear. His own fighting style was uniquely calculated to inspire his soldiers. While his adversary Darius usually hung back when his armies fought, Alexander would lead the attack, throwing himself into the fray whenever he could. Once, when laying siege to a city, he scaled the walls before any of his men and jumped down without them, finding himself with only two guards by his side facing a swarm of the city's defenders. When his men finally caught up with him, they found him pressed hard on all sides and wounded, but still defending himself vigorously.

The two armies finally met late in the year 333 b.c.e. at Issus, near the border separating today's Turkey from Syria. The coast here quickly gave way to mountains, leaving relatively little room for Darius's large army. Confident in his superior numbers, Darius attacked
Other Books
Reprogramming The American Dream, ** #1 Wall Street Journal Bestseller ** In this essential book written by a rural native and Silicon Valley veteran, Microsoft's Chief technology officer tackles one of the most critical issues facing society today: the future of artificial intelligence and how it can be realistically used to promote growth, even in a shifting employment landscape. There are two prevailing stories about AI: for heartland low- and middle-skill workers, a dystopian tale of steadily increasing job destruction; for urban knowledge workers and the professional class, a utopian tale of enhanced productivity and convenience. But there is a third way to look at this technology that will revolutionize the workplace and ultimately the world. Kevin Scott argues that AI has the potential to create abundance and opportunity for everyone and help solve some of our most vexing problems. As the chief technology officer at Microsoft, he is deeply involved in the development of AI applications, yet mindful of their potential impact on workers—knowledge he gained firsthand growing up in rural Virginia. Yes, the AI Revolution will radically disrupt economics and employment for everyone for generations to come. But what if leaders prioritized the programming of both future technology and public policy to work together to find solutions ahead of the coming AI epoch? Like public health, the space program, climate change and public education, we need international understanding and collaboration on the future of AI and work. For Scott, the crucial question facing all of us is this: How do we work to ensure that the continued development of AI allows us to keep the American Dream alive? In this thoughtful, informed guide, he offers a clear roadmap to find the answer.
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people , history , and civilization , Martin Puchner writes that in order to tell the story of literature he had to focus on both storytelling and creative ..."