

UMBERTO ECO

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JEAN-CLAUDE
CARRIÈRE

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About the Book

These days it is almost impossible to get away from discussions of whether the 'book' will survive the digital revolution. Blogs, tweets and newspaper articles on the subject appear daily, many of them repetitive, most of them admitting they don't know what will happen. Amidst the twittering, the thoughts of Jean-Claude Carrière and Umberto Eco come as a breath of fresh air.

There are few people better placed to discuss the past, present and future of the book. Both avid book collectors with a deep understanding of history, they have explored through their work the many and varied ways ideas have been represented through the ages. This thought-provoking book takes the form of a long conversation in which Carrière and Eco discuss everything from what can be defined as the first book to what is happening to knowledge now that infinite amounts of information are available at the click of a mouse. En route there are delightful digressions into personal anecdote. We find out about Eco's first computer and the book Carrière is most sad to have sold.

Readers will close this entertaining book feeling they have had the privilege of eavesdropping on an intimate discussion between two great minds. And while, as Carrière says, the one certain thing about the future is that it is unpredictable, it is clear from this conversation that, in some form or other, the book will survive.

About the Authors

Jean-Claude Carrière is a writer, playwright and screenwriter, who recently collaborated with Michael Haneke on his award-winning film *The White Ribbon*. He has worked with many of the twentieth century's great directors including Peter Brook, Milos Forman, Buñuel and Jean-Luc Godard, and is the author of *Please Mr Einstein*.

Umberto Eco has written works of fiction, literary criticism and philosophy. He came to fame with his first novel *The Name of the Rose*, a major international bestseller, and has since published four other novels, along with many brilliant books of essays. His sixth novel, *The Prague Cemetery*, is due out from Harvill Secker in 2012.

Jean-Philippe de Tonnac is a writer and editor. His interviews with Umberto Eco, Jean-Claude Carrière and Stephen Jay Gould were published in the book *Conversations About the End of Time*. He is also the editor of several collections of essays, not yet translated into English, which include *A Universal Dictionary of Bread* and *An Encyclopaedia of Knowledge and Belief*.

Also available in English by Jean-Claude Carrière

Please Mr Einstein

Also available in English by Umberto Eco

Baudolino

The Island of the Day Before

Foucault's Pendulum

The Name of the Rose

Five Moral Pieces

Kant and the Platypus

Serendipities

How to Travel with a Salmon

Travels in Hyperreality

On Beauty

On Ugliness

The Book of Lists

Also written together (with Stephen Jay Gould and Jean-Philippe de Tonnac)

Conversations About the End of Time

JEAN-CLAUDE CARRIÈRE
& UMBERTO ECO

This is Not the End of the Book

A conversation curated by
Jean-Philippe de Tonnac

Translated from the French by
Polly McLean

HARVILL SECKER • LONDON

Preface

In *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, Victor Hugo puts these famous words into the mouth of Archdeacon Claude Frollo: 'The book will kill the building ... When you compare [architecture] to the idea, which ... needs only a sheet of paper, some ink and a pen, is it surprising that the human intellect should have deserted architecture for the printing press?'

Well, the great cathedrals – those 'bibles in stone' – did not vanish, but the avalanche of manuscripts and then printed text that appeared at the end of the Middle Ages did render them less important. As culture changed, architecture lost its emblematic role. So it is with the book. There is no need to suppose that the electronic book will replace the printed version. Has film killed painting? Television cinema? However, there is no doubt that the book is in the throes of a technological revolution that is changing our relationship to it profoundly.

This extended conversation between Jean-Claude Carrière and Umberto Eco, which took place over the course of several sessions at their two homes, did not begin as an attempt to make emphatic pronouncements about the effects of the widespread (or otherwise) adoption of the electronic book. It was intended, rather, as a discussion about the nature of the book itself. The two men's experience as collectors of rare and ancient books has led them to argue here that the book represents a sort of unsurpassable perfection in the realm of the imagination. Whether we prefer to consider the invention of the book as dating from the first codices (about the eleventh century BC) or from the more ancient papyrus scrolls, it is a tool

that has remained remarkably true to itself for a very long time, over and above the changes in its form.

But what is a book? And what will change if we read onscreen rather than by turning the pages of a physical object? What will we gain and, more importantly, what will we lose? Old-fashioned habits, perhaps. A certain sense of the sacred that has surrounded the book in a civilisation that has made it our holy of holies. A peculiar intimacy between the author and reader, which the concept of hyper-textuality is bound to damage. A sense of existing in a self-contained world that the book and, along with it, certain ways of reading used to represent.

Carrière and Eco also discuss the mirror that books hold up to humanity. Let's say we consider only the cream of the crop, the masterpieces around which cultural consensus has been built. Is this concentration on 'the best' faithful to the true function of books, which is simply to safeguard the things that forgetfulness constantly threatens to destroy? Shouldn't we accept a less flattering self-image, by considering also the widespread mediocrity conveyed by the written word? Do books necessarily represent the progress that supposedly helps us forget the shadows we always think we have left behind? And, in any case, how can we know that the books that have survived are a true reflection of what human creativity has produced? It's a disturbing question. One can't help remembering all the fires in which so many books have burned and continue to burn. The history of book production is thus indivisible from the history of a real and continuing bibliocaust. Not only accidental fire, but censure, ignorance, stupidity, inquisition, auto-da-fé, negligence and distraction have all been (sometimes fatal) stumbling blocks in the journey of the book. Our ancestors' efforts at archiving and conservation have been unable to prevent the permanent loss of unknown *Divine Comedies*.

One thing is certain: what we call culture is in fact a lengthy process of selection and filtering. So, are the books that remain the best of the huge legacy of centuries gone by? Or the worst? Have we retained the gold nuggets or the mud in the various spheres of creative expression? We still read Euripides, Sophocles and Aeschylus, and think of them as the three great tragic poets of ancient Greece. But Aristotle mentions none of them when he cites the most illustrious tragic writers in his *Poetics*. Were the lost plays better, more representative of Greek theatre? How can we not wonder? Contemporary civilisation, armed with every conceivable kind of technology, is still attempting to conserve culture safely, without much lasting success. However determined we are to learn from the past, our libraries, museums and film archives will only ever contain the works that time has not destroyed. Now more than ever, we realise that culture is made up of what remains after everything else has been forgotten.

But perhaps the most enjoyable part of this conversation is the homage the two men pay to stupidity. This is the crux of the connection between Carrière and Eco – the scriptwriter and the semiologist. Eco has built up a collection of extremely rare books on human error and fakery because, according to him, understanding these qualities is fundamental to any attempt to create a theory of truth. ‘The human being is a truly remarkable creature,’ he tells us. ‘He has discovered fire, built cities, written magnificent poems, interpreted the world, invented mythologies, etc. But at the same time he has never ceased waging war on his fellow humans, being totally wrong, destroying his environment, etc. This mixture of great intellectual powers and base idiocy creates an approximately neutral outcome. So when we decide to explore human stupidity, we are somehow paying tribute to this creature who is part genius, part fool.’ If we understand books as reflecting the human striving for self-

improvement and transcendence, then we see that of course they express not only our great integrity, but also our terrible baseness. Error is a human characteristic in so far as it belongs only to those who seek and are mistaken. For every solved equation, every proven hypothesis, every shared vision, there have been many journeys that have led nowhere.

Jean-Claude Carrière is just as enthusiastic about what stupidity can tell us, and has written a much-reprinted dictionary of stupidity. In the course of his conversation with Eco, these two amused observers and chroniclers of the hiccups of history ad-lib effervescently about the flops, gaps, lapses, oversights and irreversible losses that are as much a part of the past as the masterpieces. Their insights into the good and bad fortunes of the book enable us to keep in perspective the predicted changes brought about by the worldwide digitisation of writing and the adoption of new electronic reading tools. They are a humorous tribute to Gutenberg's galaxy that will enchant all readers and book lovers. Who knows – they may even make e-book fans feel nostalgic.

JEAN-PHILIPPE DE TONNAC

The book will never die

Jean-Claude Carrière

At the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2008, one of the speakers was a futurologist who argued that four phenomena would drastically change humanity over the next fifteen years. The first was oil at 500 dollars a barrel. The second was that water, like oil, would become a commercial product, and be traded on the Stock Market. The third was the inevitability of Africa becoming an economic power – certainly something we would all like to see.

The fourth phenomenon, according to this professional prophet, was the disappearance of the book.

The question is whether the permanent eclipse of the book – should it in fact take place – would have the same consequences for humanity as the predicted shortage of water, or affordable oil.

Umberto Eco

Will the book disappear as a result of the Internet? I wrote about this at the time – by which I mean at a time when the question seemed topical. Now, when I'm asked for my opinion, I simply repeat myself, rewriting the same text. Nobody notices this, firstly because there's nothing more original than what has already been said, and secondly because the public (or the journalistic profession at least) is still obsessed with the idea that the book is about to disappear (or perhaps journalists just think their readers are obsessed); therefore, journalists never tire of asking this same question.

There is actually very little to say on the subject. The Internet has returned us to the alphabet. If we thought we had become a purely visual civilisation, the computer returns us to Gutenberg's galaxy; from now on, everyone has to read. In order to read, you need a medium. This

medium cannot simply be a computer screen. Spend two hours reading a novel on your computer and your eyes turn into tennis balls. At home, I use a pair of Polaroid glasses to protect my eyes from the ill effects of unbroken onscreen reading. And in any case, the computer depends on electricity and cannot be read in a bath, or even lying on your side in bed.

One of two things will happen: either the book will continue to be the medium for reading, or its replacement will resemble what the book has always been, even before the invention of the printing press. Alterations to the book-as-object have modified neither its function nor its grammar for more than 500 years. The book is like the spoon, scissors, the hammer, the wheel. Once invented, it cannot be improved. You cannot make a spoon that is better than a spoon. When designers try to improve on something like the corkscrew, their success is very limited; most of their 'improvements' don't even work. Philippe Starck attempted an innovative lemon-squeezer; his version may be very handsome, but it lets the pips through. The book has been thoroughly tested, and it's very hard to see how it could be improved on for its current purposes. Perhaps it will evolve in terms of components; perhaps the pages will no longer be made of paper. But it will still be the same thing.

J.-C. C.

It seems that the latest versions of the e-book have put it in direct competition with the printed book.

U. E.

There's no doubt that a lawyer could take his 25,000 case documents home more easily if they were loaded onto an e-book. In many areas, the electronic book will turn out to be remarkably convenient. But I am still not convinced – even with first-rate reading technology – that it would be

particularly advisable to read *War and Peace* on an e-book. We shall see. It's certainly true that we won't be able to read our editions of Tolstoy for ever, or indeed any of the books in our collection that are printed on wood pulp, because they are starting to decompose. The Gallimard and Vrin editions from the 1950s are mostly gone already. I can no longer even pick up my copy of Étienne Gilson's *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, which served me so well when I was writing my thesis. The pages literally fall to pieces. I could of course buy a new edition, but I'm attached to the old one, with its different-coloured annotations telling the story of my different readings.

Jean-Philippe de Tonnac

Why not concede that with the development of new media better and better adapted to the demands of e-reading – whether of encyclopaedias or novels – there will be a slow loss of interest in the object of the book in its traditional form?

U. E.

Anything might happen. In future books may interest only a handful of ardent enthusiasts, who will satisfy their backward-looking curiosity in museums and libraries.

J.-C. C.

If there are any left.

U. E.

But one can also imagine that the fantastic invention that is the Internet may likewise disappear. Just as airships have disappeared from our skies. The future of the airship collapsed when *The Hindenburg* caught fire in New York State just before the war. The same goes for Concorde: the Gonesse accident in 2000 was fatal. Now that's a very

interesting story. An aeroplane was invented that could cross the Atlantic in three hours instead of eight. Who could argue with such progress? But after the Gonesse disaster, Concorde was deemed too expensive and abandoned. What kind of reason is that? The atomic bomb is very expensive too.

J.-P. DE T.

Hermann Hesse had some interesting things to say about the 're-legitimisation' of the book that he thought would result from technical developments. He was writing in the 1950s: 'The more the need for entertainment and mainstream education can be met by new inventions, the more the book will recover its dignity and authority. We have not yet quite reached the point where young competitors, such as radio, cinema, etc., have taken over functions from the book that it can't afford to lose.'

J.-C. C.

In that regard he wasn't mistaken. Cinema, radio and even television have taken nothing from the book - nothing that it couldn't afford to lose.

U. E.

At a certain point in time, man invented the written word. We can think of writing as an extension of the hand, and therefore as almost biological. It is the communication tool most closely linked to the body. Once invented, it could never be given up. As I said about the book, it was like the invention of the wheel. Today's wheels are the same as wheels in prehistoric times. Our modern inventions - cinema, radio, Internet - are not biological.

J.-C. C.

You're right to draw attention to this: we have never needed to read and write as much as we do today. If you can't read and write, then you can't use a computer. And you have to be able to read and write in a more complex way than ever before, because we have invented new characters and symbols. Our alphabet has expanded. It is becoming harder and harder to learn to read. If our computers were able to transcribe speech with precision, then we would experience a return to oral culture. Which brings us to another question: is it possible to express oneself well if one cannot read or write?

U. E.

Homer, of course, would say yes.

J.-C. C.

But Homer belonged to an oral tradition. He acquired his learning by way of that tradition, before anything in Greece was written down. Can we imagine a contemporary author dictating his novel without writing it down, and knowing nothing of the body of literature that has preceded him? His novel might be charming, naïve, fresh, unusual. But it does seem to me that it would lack what one might, for want of a better word, call culture. Rimbaud wrote his superb poetry when he was very young. But he was far from being an autodidact. At the age of sixteen, he had already benefited from a solid classical education. He could write Latin verse.

There is nothing more ephemeral than
long-term media formats

J.-P. DE T.

We are pondering the durability of books in an era when the prevailing culture seems to be tending towards other, perhaps more high-performing tools. But what about the media formats that were supposed to provide durable storage for our data and personal memories? I'm thinking of the floppy disks, videotapes and CD-ROMs that we have already left behind.

J.-C. C.

In 1985, the French Culture Minister Jack Lang asked me to set up and run a national cinema and television school, La Fémis. I put together a great technical team under the direction of Jack Gajos, and chaired the organisation from 1986 to 1996. Obviously, for those ten years, I had to be completely up to speed on every innovation in our field.

One of our main challenges was simply showing films to our students. When studying and analysing a film, you have to be able to stop, rewind, pause, and sometimes proceed one shot at a time. With the traditional reel this cannot be done. At the time we had videotapes, but they wore out very quickly and were completely useless after three or four years. It was around that time that the Vidéothèque de Paris was set up to conserve every piece of film and photography about Paris. The Vidéothèque had to choose between archiving these images on videotape or on CD – both at the time known as ‘long-term media formats’. It chose to invest in video. Other people were trying out floppy disks, which were getting the hard sell. Two or three years later, the CD-ROM appeared in California. At last, we had the answer. We watched demonstration after thrilling demonstration. I remember the first CD-ROM we saw. It was

about Egypt. We were staggered, and completely sold on it. We bowed low before this new invention, which seemed to solve all the difficulties we had been struggling with for years. And yet the American factories that used to make those little marvels closed down more than seven years ago.

On the other hand, our mobile phones, iPods, etc. are capable of ever-greater feats. We're told that the Japanese write and publish their novels on them. The Internet has become portable and wireless. There is also the promise of Video on Demand, folding screens and all sorts of other phenomena. Who knows?

It may seem as if I'm talking about things that changed over a very long time-span, a matter of centuries. But all this has taken place in barely twenty years. It doesn't take long to forget. Less and less long, perhaps. These thoughts are probably rather commonplace, but it's important not to throw out commonplace things. At the start of a journey, in any case.

U. E.

A few years ago, a CD-ROM of Jacques-Paul Migne's 221-volume *Patrologia Latina* was on the market for 50,000 dollars. As a result, only big libraries could buy the *Patrologia*, not poor scholars (having said that, we medievalists soon started gleefully copying them). These days, all you have to do is subscribe and you can consult the *Patrologia* online. The same goes for Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, which was formerly sold by the dictionary publisher Robert on CD-ROM. Today, I can search it online for nothing.

J.-C. C.

When the DVD came on the market, we were sure that we had finally acquired the perfect solution – a format that would permanently resolve all our requirements around

data storage and group screenings. Until then I had never created a personal film library. When DVDs came along, I was finally sure that I had my 'lasting media format'. How wrong could I be? They are now announcing much smaller disks, which require new players and, like the e-book, can hold a substantial number of films. Even our good old DVDs will be given the push – unless we keep the old players that allow us to watch them.

There's actually a trend for collecting things that technology is ruthlessly outdating. A Belgian film-maker friend of mine keeps eighteen computers in his cellar, just so that he can watch old work. Which goes to show that there is nothing more ephemeral than long-term media formats. Enthusiastic collectors of incunabula, such as you and I, are probably quite tickled by these banal, now rather hackneyed musings on the frailty of contemporary media formats. Look at this. This little incunabulum comes from my bookshelves. It was written in Latin and printed in Paris at the end of the fifteenth century. On the final page the following is printed in French: 'These hours for the use of Rome were completed on the twenty-seventh day of September year one thousand four hundred and ninety-eight for Jean Poitevin, bookseller, of rue Neuve-Notre-Dame, Paris.' Though the word 'use' has been spelled in an old-fashioned way, and this manner of describing the date and year has long been abandoned, we can still decipher the text easily enough. And so we can still read a text printed five centuries ago. But you can no longer read, or rather watch, a video or CD-ROM that is only a few years old. Unless you have space for a lot of old computers in your basement.

J.-P. DE T.

It's important to emphasise the increasing pace with which these new formats are becoming obsolete, forcing us to reorganise our working methods, our back-up systems, the very way we think ...

U. E.

And this increasing speed is contributing to the loss of our cultural heritage. That is definitely one of the thorniest issues of our time. On the one hand, we invent all kinds of tools to preserve our memories, all kinds of recording equipment, and ways in which to transport knowledge. This is certainly major progress in comparison to the days when you had to rely on mnemonics to remember – people had to rely on their own memories, because they didn't have everything they needed to know at their fingertips. On the other hand, we have to acknowledge that, above and beyond the perishable nature of these tools, which is in itself a problem, we are not even-handed with the cultural objects that we choose to preserve. For example, if you want to buy an original of one of the great comic strips, it is horribly expensive, because they are so rare (these days, a single page of Alex Raymond's work costs a fortune). But why are they so rare? Simply because the newspapers that used to publish them threw the plates in the bin the moment the strip had been printed.

J.-P. DE T.

What were the mnemonics that people used before the invention of artificial memories such as books and hard drives?

J.-C. C.

Take the case of Alexander the Great. He is once again about to make a far-reaching decision, and has been told of

a woman who can predict the future with total accuracy. He summons this woman, to teach him her art. She tells him that he must light a big fire and read the future in the smoke from the fire, as from a book. But she gives the warrior one warning. While reading the smoke, he must on no account think of the left eye of a crocodile. The right eye if he must, but never the left.

Alexander gave up on knowing the future. Why? Because as soon as you have been instructed not to think of something, you can think of nothing else. The prohibition becomes an obligation. It is in fact impossible not to think of that crocodile's left eye. The beast's eye has taken over your memory, and your mind.

Sometimes, as in Alexander's case, remembering and not being able to forget is a problem, a tragedy even. Some people have the ability to remember everything, using very simple mnemonics; they are called mnemonists, and have been studied by the Russian neurologist Alexander Luria. Peter Brook based his play *I Am a Phenomenon* on one of Luria's books. If you tell a mnemonist something, he will be unable to forget it. He is like a perfect but crazed machine, recording everything without discrimination. Which is actually a flaw, rather than a quality.

U. E.

All mnemonic techniques use the image of a city or palace in which each area or place is linked to the thing that must be remembered. In his *De oratore*, Cicero describes Simonides attending a dinner with many of Greece's senior dignitaries. At a certain point in the evening, Simonides takes a break from the gathering, only for the ceiling to collapse and all the other guests to be killed. Simonides is called in to identify the bodies. He manages to do this by remembering each person's place at the table.

The art of mnemonics is thus to associate spatial imagery with objects or concepts in order to link them. The

reason that Alexander can no longer behave freely is that he has linked the crocodile's left eye to the smoke he must read. The memorising arts were still practised in the Middle Ages, but it seems that they were gradually lost with the invention of the printing press. Paradoxically, that was when the great books on mnemonic techniques were published.

J.-C. C.

You mentioned the original plates of the great comic strips being thrown in the bin after publication. The same thing happened with cinema, and many films were lost for ever. It was only in the 1920s and '30s that cinema became, in Europe, the 'seventh art'. After that it was considered worth conserving films, because they belonged to the history of art. And so they created the first film archives, in Russia and then in France. The Americans, however, don't consider cinema an art. For them it is a renewable product. They are constantly remaking *Zorro*, or *Nosferatu*, or *Tarzan*, and because the previous version might be a rival to the new one - especially if the old film was good - they throw away the old film stock. In fact, the American film archive wasn't created until the 1970s! It was a real struggle to raise finance, to convince the Americans of the importance of their own cinematic history. The world's first film school was likewise in Russia. We owe it to Eisenstein, who thought it crucial to create a film school as good as the best schools of painting and architecture.

U. E.

In Italy, great poets like Gabriele d'Annunzio were already writing for the cinema at the beginning of the twentieth century. D'Annunzio co-wrote the script for *Cabiria* with Giovanni Pastrone. In America, that would have been bad for his reputation.

J.-C. C.

All this is even more the case with TV. Creating television archives seemed absurd at the outset. There was a radical change of perspective with the creation of the INA (France's National Audiovisual Institute) to preserve audiovisual archives.

U. E.

I did some work in television in 1954, and I remember that everything was screened live, and they weren't yet using magnetic tape recording. To make a recording, they used a method they called 'Transcriber', until they realised the word wasn't actually used in English-speaking TV. It was simply a camera that filmed the screen. But it was so tedious and expensive to use that they didn't bring it out much, and lots of programmes were lost.

J.-C. C.

I know a lovely example of this. A televisual incunabulum, if you like. In 1951 or '52, Peter Brook shot *King Lear* for American TV with Orson Welles in the title role. The programmes were broadcast without being recorded in any way, and nothing was kept. But as it turned out, a film did in fact exist. Someone had happened to film the television screen during the broadcast of the programme. This film is now a prize exhibit in New York's Museum of Television and Radio. In many ways that story reminds me of the history of the book.

U. E.

Up to a point. The idea of collecting books goes back a very long way, so what took place in the film world never happened with books. The cult of the written page, and later of the book, goes back as far as writing itself. Even the Romans wanted to own and collect scrolls. The books we have lost have been lost for other reasons. They have