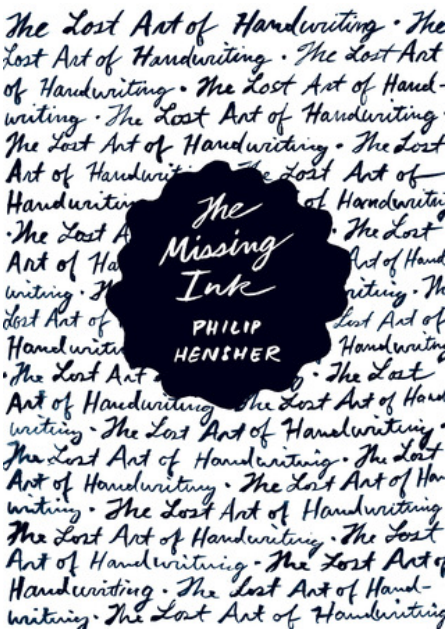

The Missing Ink: The Lost Art of Handwriting

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When Philip Hensher realized that he didn't know what a close friend's handwriting looked like ("bold or crabbed, sloping or upright, italic or rounded, elegant or slapdash"), he felt that something essential was missing from their friendship. It dawned on him that having abandoned pen and paper for keyboards, we have lost one of the ways by which we come to recognize and know another person. People have written by hand for thousands of years— how, Hensher wondered, have they learned this skill, and what part has it played in their lives?

The Missing Ink tells the story of this endangered art. Hensher introduces us to the nineteenth-century handwriting evangelists who traveled across America to convert the masses to the moral worth of copperplate script; he examines the role handwriting plays in the novels of Charles Dickens; he investigates the claims made by the practitioners of graphology that penmanship can reveal personality.

But this is also a celebration of the physical act of writing: the treasured fountain pens, chewable ballpoints, and personal embellishments that we stand to lose. Hensher pays tribute to the warmth and personality of the handwritten love note, postcards sent home, and daily diary entries. With the teaching of handwriting now required in only five states and many expert typists barely able to hold a pen, the future of handwriting is in jeopardy. Or is it? Hugely entertaining, witty, and thought-provoking, *The Missing Ink* will inspire readers to pick up a pen and write.

The Missing Ink: The Lost Art of Handwriting Details

Date	:	Published November 27th 2012 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux (first published October 11th 2011)
ISBN	:	9780865478930
Author	:	Philip Hensher
Format	:	Hardcover 288 pages
Genre	:	Nonfiction, History, Language, Writing, Essays

From Reader Review The Missing Ink: The Lost Art of Handwriting for online ebook

Mel Campbell says

I read this because I'm writing a feature on handwriting and thought it might be useful. I was sent it by the publisher when it was first released and had it lying around this whole time.

Immediately I was put offside by the author's snobbish tone. Hensher uses footnotes mainly to bitch about the people and organisations he's discussing, or to assert his own superiority to whatever he's mentioning. On page 19 he sniffs that a teacher he's quoted "evidently knows eff-all about the dangling participle", while on page 21 he uses another footnote to dismiss a headmaster's pedagogical claim: "Oh, crap. Seriously, what crap." Hensher peppers citations with sarcastic *[sic]* whenever he feels someone's grammar is lacking. Later on, he uses a footnote to complain that American taxi drivers can't understand his English accent! Come on! Does he expect the reader – who simply wants a cultural history of handwriting – to be on his side in such petty disdain?

The book itself is a curiously unstructured and unsatisfying mix of history, literary criticism and memoir. It's a shame it's so all over the place because the chapters on the history of pens and ink were really fascinating, and I enjoyed meeting the pedagogues who trained generations of young writers in particular styles. However, Hensher introduces various proponents of handwriting instruction, and varying writing styles, in an offhand way, and out of any meaningful sequence, so you don't get a clear sense of how handwriting developed and spread over time and geography as different looks and techniques became fashionable. There's no narrative, no throughway. It reads like a random notebook of ideas.

I was especially bored by the chapters about the pseudoscience of 'graphology' (claiming to understand someone's character by their handwriting), and there are also some really tiresome chapters about the role of handwriting in the novels of Dickens and Proust, which felt like a 5pm Friday lecture by your most pompous lecturer. Indeed, Hensher seems to take a dim view of young people in general and his students in particular, seeing himself as vastly superior to them because of his love of handwriting and how brilliant and pretty his writing is.

Adding to the scattershot atmosphere is the way the book is peppered with transcripts of Hensher's conversations about handwriting with his friends, family and associates, some of whom actually *praise his writing* and talk about *how much they enjoy receiving postcards from him*. "Yes, I've got extraordinarily beautiful handwriting, it's true," agrees Hensher. What kind of egomaniac puts that in their book!?!?

The preening self-regard reaches its apotheosis in an absurd chapter relating how Hensher goes shopping for a new pen with an italic nib and a refillable, pump-action, hydraulic reservoir. He can't help raging snobbishly about the staff and customers in the various shops he visits – I mean, his is a *perfectly simple quest*! At the mercy of what kind of dull, savage, screen-prodding society does this refined and wise scholar find himself? By this late stage in the book I was reading bits and pieces out to my friends in a posh voice and we were all laughing convulsively.

Lars K Jensen says

I enjoyed reading this book, although it sort of takes off in various directions at certain points.

Hensher tells us how handwriting has evolved and the various schools, both in how to write in hand - and how to teach kids in school to do it.

There are a lot of great zingers, quote material and standpoints throughout the book, however some chapters could easily be skipped by the reader. For example the one on Proust - even though the following quote: "Nobody has ever gone more deeply into the superficial than Proust did" - the same could be said about that chapter.

Also, I'm just not that interested in reading about how Hensher went from shop to shop, hunting for a certain pen.

The final chapter, on what can be done to teach yourself better handwriting and not letting it die, is what pushes this book from the third star up to that fourth 'really liked it' star.

"The worst thing that can happen to a writer is that their hand shows no individuality."

Donna says

I like micro-history -- those books that cover just one event, one product, one year. Mark Kurlansky is a great author in this field and sometimes I feel every other micro-historian is trying to copy his success.

I am also the proud owner of two fountain pens (one with blue ink, one with purple) and some very high quality paper. I love to write -- hand write -- notes in a script I can only say was influenced early on by the Palmer method and Catholic nuns. So when I saw a book with the subtitle "The Lost Art of Handwriting" I immediately put it on my library hold list.

Philip Hensher was motivated to write this book because he realized that he had never seen the handwriting of one of his very good friends and that he believed that handwriting tells you something about the other person. Whether there is any reliability in graphology or not I leave to others, but handwriting is a lost art form. I have two close friends from grade school days whose handwriting is immediately distinguished on an envelope (with much joy). There are three persons in my life whose handwriting is virtually unreadable, but again, I'd know it anywhere.

The main complaint I have about the book (and perhaps this is the fault of the editor or publisher rather than the author) is that it needs more examples of the various types of handwriting methods which he talks about. Yes, there are a few examples of copperplate and italic and the French and German styles, but not nearly enough. Especially when Hensher reviews the various penmanship methods taught in British schools, it would be lovely to have examples right on that page. And, of course, since he is a Brit, less attention is paid to those American writing exercises that I experienced.

A good book that just didn't meet all of my need-to-know in this field.

Terry Brown says

I was really hoping to enjoy this book but found myself frustrated. The book trips from topic to optic--Dickens' handwriting, graphology, the history of pens, Hitler's handwriting.... I can't say I learned much at all. The lack of coherent structure is in part the result of a completely ahistorical approach. I was so desperate for dates (Palmer method is devised when?) that I kept going to Wikipedia for help, which is not so bad considering the author cites it at one point as the only source he could find on the chemistry of ink. Really?

Nikki says

I wanted to like this, not least because I bought my mother a hardback copy a while ago because of her interest in all things pen, ink and handwriting. However, after spending most of my time reading it constructing a properly scathing review — if you're going to complain about someone's grammar, try not doing so by saying they know "eff-all"; don't disagree with people just by calling their opinion "crap"; some diversity of vocabulary in general would be nice, you hypocritical snob — I decided I'd just gently put it down. It doesn't help that I'm very much not the right audience: you can't get someone to join in a funeral dirge for a lost art of handwriting when they write notes on paper to their grandmother nearly every morning, letters to their mother semi-regularly, keep their accounts in red pen in a book, and own at least a dozen fountain pens.

It doesn't help that my mother writes and receives several handwritten letters a day, handwrites her diary, and is a moderator at The Fountain Pen Network.

A lot of what he says is true. Typing is taking over; a text may be more convenient than a hand-written note; teachers probably don't spend a few lessons a week on handwriting. Still, a friend of mine who's going to be a teacher is carefully trying to improve her handwriting to set a better example; I have two boxes full of letters between me and my partner, me and my parents, me and various friends, etc, etc. I think he's seeing a confirmation bias: he wants handwriting to be a lost art, so he finds the evidence he's looking for — and is a snob along the way about grammar and vocabulary, while his is itself pretty woeful.

Plus, if he could've avoided snide comments about butch hairstyles and fat girls with "obese handwriting", I might've liked him better.

Elif says

This book is fun if you're interested in handwriting and its absurd history.
http://kitaplikkedisi.com/kitaplar/ph...

Jane says

The final chapter of this book made it worth the read with its encouragement to embrace handwritten

communication in the same way that we embrace the slow-food movement.
Philip Henscher needed an editor with a firm hand as he wanders away from the topic with ease. What is missing from the book are sufficeint illustrations of the styles of handwriting under discussion.
None the less it was an interesting read and has highlighted the topic of handwriting whenever it is mentioned, most recently for me in Middlemarch, which I would have glossed over previously.

Jo says

Hensher looks at the history of writing and recalls his own experiences of learning to write and how it's something that's being used less and less. Amusing quick read.

Melanie says

“Handwriting is good for you,” says Philip Hensher. “It involves us in a relationship with the written word which is sensuous, immediate, and individual.”

(The incontrovertible truth of the author’s conclusion is made so much more endearing, to me, by the nonchalant use of the Oxford comma.)

This is not an author who shies from his opinions, or from sharing his vocabulary. Haruspication! Really? Oh, Philip, how do I love thee?

The Missing Ink is a very personal amble with handwriting and pens. You get history, style, art, practice, and glances into strange places, real and virtual. How delectable to learn that there is a “gloriously mad blog” out there that teaches how to improve your penmanship by changing your menu? Or that the Prince of Wales writes long letters to various government ministries, imparting his philosophy in purple ink?

The subject of handwriting analysis yields treasures. What does one have to see to believe that the penman “would jump out of an aeroplane… and drink the homebrewed absinthe of a Serbian warlord”? (And what, I wonder, would that do to my own handwring?)

Hensler devotes an entire chapter to the pen that has been my own guilty pleasure for over half of a century: the Bic Cristal. How many of these have I used until the last of the black ink, long disappeared from view and confined only within the oh-so-solid confines of the point, finally discharges its last, perfectly-black line? I hoard them against the day that some scribbling tyrant decides these pens are no longer necessary in the corporate line.

I love to read about ink colors. Hensler says, “I am not quite convinced about writing with blue ink… It is cozy and friendly, but perhaps not very serious… Beyond [blue-black or black], we are really into exotic and faintly frightening territory.”

Were I to write to the author, I would respect his preferences, but in (almost) all other ventures, I profess a great love for the purple, the turquoise, the sepia – even the occasional oxblood. I am, in most things, a child of the sixties.

(I do admit to having been chastised by a pen friend, once, for writing a red letter on yellow paper. Point, as it were, taken.)

Oxblood brings me back to Oxford. Yes, I love this book with all its whimsy, chattiness, and excellent punctuation. You – you know who you are – will also. I promise.

Gregory says

Nerd alert. Unless you are into handwriting, typography, and fountain pens you probably aren't going to enjoy this book. Fortunately for me I'm enamored of all three. Like most people I hate my handwriting. It's crabbed, and even when I remark to myself that ah... that's a nicely turned capital K...when I go back to read it later. I can't.

This book feels your pain and embarrassment in a soothing sort of way. While it was a little rambling and often went down odd little paths. SHINY. If you can bear this (which I can) then you will enjoy Mr. Hensher's book.

Shout out to Chapter 28 - My Italic Nightmare wherein the author goes on a search for a pen with an italic nib. He searches all over the boroughs and ends up with the same type of pen, a Lamy, that he already owns...but the journey is filled with adventure.

Again you probably need to have "super geek" powers to enjoy this. You know who you are...

Top Hat Reviews

Rebecca says

I love this book and was delighted to win a copy through Goodreads' First Reads!

Recently I've enjoyed two sprawling nonfiction books about the old-fashioned media of paper and ink: Paper: An Elegy by Ian Sansom, and this one.

Hensher's *The Missing Ink* is a defense of the lost art of handwriting in an age when nearly everything is type-written. Words are unspeakably diminished when they do not bear the cast of an individual's hand, Hensher feels. He traces the history of both handwriting instruction and the ballpoint pen, cites the importance of using a 'copperplate' style on official documents, and considers what significance handwriting had for authors ranging from Charles Dickens to Marcel Proust.

In the nineteenth century handwriting (especially one's signature) was essential proof of authorship and ownership; moreover, it was thought to give clues to the individual mind and psychology – the pseudo-science of graphology is, like phrenology (the study of head size and bumps), intriguing if a little bit bonkers. "I've come to the conclusion that handwriting is good for us," Hensher declares. "It involves us in a relationship with the written word which is sensuous, immediate, and individual. It opens our personality out

to the world.” That’s something an e-mail or text message could never do.

(This review formed part of an article about the lost art of letter writing on Bookkaholic.)

Stefanie says

Finally my turn at the library to read Philip Hensher's *The Missing Ink*. Since the subtitle of the book is "The Lost Art of Handwriting" and since in interviews he talked about why handwriting is important, I thought the book might be different than it was. In the introduction he suggests the book is going to be about what might be lost if the habit of writing by hand disappears. But the book turned out not to address that except briefly in the first and last chapters. As a whole, it is not much different than Kitty Burns Florey's book *Script and Scribble* which I read in 2009. Hensher's book had a lot of padding in it, snips of interviews with people talking about their handwriting, two and a half chapters on graphology, one about Hitler's handwriting, and a few others. He does provide a bit more detail on the history of teaching handwriting in schools than Florey did. In Hensher, each of the "great" reformers gets a chapter.

Hensher is also British so his perspective was especially interesting when he was talking about American handwriting. He claims Europeans can always pick out the handwriting of Americans because we are the only ones who have loops in our letters. Is this true? He spends a chapter admiring the way the French teach handwriting and thinks theirs is the nicest writing of any western country.

I enjoyed the social history aspects of the book especially all those reformers who believed that moral improvement could be had through learning to write a beautiful script. The chapter on a brief history of ink was interesting as was the history of pens. Did you know that fountain pens were available in 1710? They weren't very popular though. Manufacturing had also not yet figured out how to make a flexible metal nib which meant it was somewhat akin to trying to write with a knitting needle. Quill pens wore out fast but they had the advantage of flexibility. Now, of course, there are ball point pens and Hensher has a fun chapter on the history of the Biro.

I expected the book to be rather light and it was. And while I did enjoy the parts I mention above, I almost didn't make it past page 25. Hensher's sense of humor is often rather crude and insensitive and not funny at all. In the introduction he takes a swipe at "fat Denise" whose "obese writing" also "contains the atrocity of a little circle on top of every i." A few pages later he creates a scenario of a fender-bender in the farmlands of Indiana between a Subaru and a tractor, neither have anything to write with, the cell phone of the Subaru driver has a dead battery, and "the farmhand don't be holding with them thar smart phones nor with that new-fangled Internet." Still later in the book he makes a bad joke about lesbian hairstyles.

A mixed bag overall. If you are going to read this book, be prepared to take the good with the bad.

Courtney says

Maybe I was expecting too much from this book. Based on the title and various blurbs I had encountered, I was hoping Hensher would offer something in the vein of cultural commentary or analysis about our dwindling attachment to the physical act of writing. Instead, The Missing Ink is a motley assortment of disconnected vignettes with no real overarching structure. It's not really argumentative or following a thesis,

nor is it personal enough to be a commentary/memoir hybrid like The Butterfly Mosque. The book lacks direction and feels more like a padded out list of trivial facts than an actual exploration of handwriting. I did learn some interesting things, but I probably would have learned as much from a Wikipedia article. Yeah, I said it.

The last section was pretty good, but not worth slogging through everything else. I think my main problem with this book is that it lacks perspective and maturity. Hensher is a decent writer, but he doesn't really have much to SAY about this topic. The points he does articulate are repeated over and over and share a flimsy relevance with the rest of the book. Very disappointing.

Paul says

This is a book i was looking forward to reading thinking it would be of a similar vein to Just My Type: A Book about Fonts and Paper: An Elegy. In some ways it was, as Henshers enthusiasm for the subject is clear, but in other ways it was annoying.

The final two or three chapters on the Bic, and trying to purchase a particular fountain pen were great, but i didn't completely get the Witness chapters. And the footnotes were excessive in the extreme. If you have a foot note that goes over three pages, then surely that should have been part of the main text?

In all not bad, but as it promised so much it could have been so much better!

Catherine says

For the first few chapters or so I hated this book. I thought the author was patronizing and overly critical. But then he shared an example of his handwriting. After that I just sat back and enjoyed the amusing interviews with random people about how they learned to write or their thoughts on different types of handwriting, and the consistent criticism of people who dot their i's with hearts. Extremely silly.

I learned all sorts of interesting things about different types of handwriting and a few different cultural differences and methodologies. I empathized with the author's thoughts about when and why modern people learn the italic style, and how completely impractical it is. I too learned it when I was about 12 and in a similar emotional state and practiced it regularly. I even have an italic nib pen, though it's a Pelikan, not a Lamy.

And I love fountain pens! I just felt like Hensher was a kindred spirit. And all because he shared his handwriting. It's a completely irrational and unscientific way to judge character, and yet I do. I am perhaps one of the last of my friends who has a pen pal, however irregular our communications. We appreciate getting "real mail," and I like seeing my friend's handwriting and learning about her life in a way that requires effort and care. She writes with a ballpoint (or biro, as the British call it) and is much more legible that I am, but I think she enjoys the effort it takes to decipher my hand and learn about my life.

If cursive is disappearing from schools, I think it means a piece of our identity will disappear with it. May

new generations of children learn and adopt cursive the same way I learned italic (and still use it for special occasions). Perhaps Spencer or Palmer will make a comeback among clusters of fans, however time-consuming their methods.
