



Brand Luther: How an Unheralded Monk Turned His Small Town into a Center of Publishing, Made Himself the Most Famous Man in Europe—and Started the Protestant Reformation

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A revolutionary look at Martin Luther, the Reformation, and the birth of publishing, on the eve of the Reformation's 500th anniversary

When an obscure monk named Martin Luther tacked his “theses” on the door of the Wittenberg church in 1517, protesting corrupt practices, he was virtually unknown. Within months, his ideas spread across Germany, then all of Europe; within years, their author was not just famous, but infamous, responsible for catalyzing the violent wave of religious reform that would come to be known as the Protestant Reformation and engulfing Europe in decades of bloody war.

Luther came of age with the printing press, and the path to glory of neither one was obvious to the casual observer of the time. Andrew Pettegree is perhaps our most distinguished living historian of the print revolution, but he launched his career as a historian of the Reformation. That double vision positions him to comprehend this epic event, not simply as a religious story but also as a story about how ideas were carried and spread in new ways, by new things—things called mass-produced books. Printing was, and is, a risky business—the questions were how to know how much to print and how to get there before the competition. Pettegree illustrates Luther's great gift not simply as a theologian, but as a communicator, indeed, as the world's first mass-media figure, its first *brand*. He recognized in printing the power of pamphlets, written in the colloquial German of everyday people, to win the battle of ideas.

But that wasn't enough—not just words, but the medium itself was the message. Fatefully, Luther had a partner in Wittenberg in the form of artist and businessman Lucas Cranach, who together with Wittenberg's printers created the look of Luther's pamphlets, which included the distinct highlighting of the words "Martin Luther of Wittenberg" on the title page. Cranach also created the iconic portraits of Luther that made the reformer such a familiar figure to his fellow Germans. Together, Luther and Cranach created a product that spread like wildfire—it was both incredibly successful and widely imitated. Soon Germany was overwhelmed by a blizzard of pamphlets, with Wittenberg at its heart; the Reformation itself would blaze on for more than a hundred years.

Publishing in advance of the Reformation's 500th anniversary, *Brand Luther* fuses the history of religion, of printing, and of capitalism—the literal marketplace of ideas—into one enthralling story, revolutionizing our understanding of one of the pivotal figures and eras in all of human history.

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Oskars Kaul?ns says

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Mary Alice says

I read this book for book club and didn't realize it was more about the Reformation's influence on printing in 16th C Germany than about Luther. As such, it wasn't bad, though I wasn't too interested. It went through Luther's life completely, but much of his doctrine was just hinted at. A disappointment for me.

Nicely written. Easy to understand. Some repetition.

Nancy says

For years the newfangled printing press was only utilized by the church, for the church. Small local publishers turned out books in Latin that had little in common with what we expect in a book today, like consistent and grammatically correct word breaks.

The development of the book as we know it was due to Lucas Cranach who created title pages with decorative elements, with the author's name prominently displayed. And he developed this format for his friend, Martin Luther, best-selling writer of the early 1500s.

Andrew Pettegree's title tells the whole story: Brand Luther: How an Unheralded Monk Turned His Small Town into a Center of Publishing, Made Himself the Most Famous Man in Europe--and Started the Protestant Reformation. The book tells the stories of a monk turned best-selling author, a one-customer book industry that found an explosive new market, and how a small town became a boom town.

I learned in my Reformation History course that Luther was a Cultural Icon, a mass-media guru who used the latest technology--and gasp, even wrote in the vernacular so non-clerics could read theology and the Bible!

In 1513 when Luther arrived in Wittenberg he thought it was a small, ugly village on the edge of civilization. Even the rival of Luther's Patron remarked, "That a single monk, out of such a hole, could undertake a Reformation, is not to be tolerated." The university printing press was the only operation in town, and its printer slow and his book inelegant. By 1543 there were six shops turning out about 90 books a year. Luther single-handedly changed the book business. How the printing industry and the Reformation were intertwined

is at the heart of this book

Pettegree has a readable style and his presentation of the history and theology was not difficult to follow. Although not a biography of Luther, or a study in Reformation history, the reader will learn a great deal about both.

Included in the book are illustrations, including the books discussed, and portraits of Luther by Cranach.

1541 Bible translated by Martin Luther, design by Lucas Cranach

I received a free ebook from the publisher in exchange for a fair and unbiased review.

Cindy says

I received an advanced copy of this book through Penguin Random House First to Read.

I am a history buff. Always have been. I have a degree in history, concentrating on women's history. But my second love in history is religious history and that's why I requested this book and was so excited to have been chosen to read and review it. Martin Luther and the Reformation are intriguing and exciting to read about. One man, having qualms with the Catholic Church and the Pope brought about a huge change in Christian history. One man and his followers. His story shows us what one person can do to change the whole of history. One person and their opinions. This book was a fantastic insight in Martin Luther, his followers and protectors, and the Reformation. I would recommend it to anyone who has a love of religious history, in particular Christian history.

John says

Martin Luther's theological revolution would have gone nowhere without the power of the printing press. His uncommon writing talent, his elegance of expression and editorial vigor as well as his personal magnetism propelled the reformation movement forward. He was heavily involved with the nuts and bolts of the printing process: typeface readability, aesthetic page design, paper quality. Having once worked as a printer in a small letterpress shop, I identified with his concerns. Luther didn't care about making money from his works (indeed, one print shop after another freely pirated his booklets). Result: two new eras were launched, the Protestant Reformation and the printing industry. Overall, I found this book a perceptive and engaging analysis of the era (1517-46). Also, I gained new insights into Luther's life.

David Steele says

How can an unpublished, obscure Roman Catholic monk move from the shadows to the world stage in a matter of years. This is the subject of Andrew Pettegree's book, *Brand Luther*. Pettegree walks meticulously through the events of the Reformer's life; events that would mark a nation and rock the world. This is *Brand Luther*.

The author sets the stage by alerting readers to Luther's fascinating background. From his birth in Eisleben to his university days in Erfurt, and his teaching days at in Wittenberg, Pettegree establishes Luther's cultural context along with vivid allusions to the theological landscape. Ultimately, his design is to show how Luther rises to prominence in a most unusual way.

Brand Luther is unique in that it captures the pathos of the 16th century. The author delves into matters that pertain to culture, theology, economics, and personal emotion - to name a few. The author has an uncanny ability of navigating readers on the path that Luther walked and placing them in the emotional state he experienced and the physical ailments he endured. The turmoil that Luther felt and the threat of impending death looms like London fog on a cold autumn evening.

The author argues that Luther's writing along with the establishment of the printing press are integral to his success, not to mention the gains of the Protestant Reformation: "Many things conspired to ensure Luther's unlikely survival through the first years of the Reformation, but one of them was undoubtedly print." The book is filled with evidence that points in this direction which bolsters the author's thesis along the way. *Brand Luther* is a serious work of history which spans nearly 400 pages but the book reads like a novel - quite an accomplishment for a scholarly work!

Essential reading for students of the Reformation!

Michelle Kidwell says

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by Andrew Pettegree

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In this book we learn about Martin Luther's place in the Reformation. This book also tells the story of books. And the impact Martin Luther had on the publishing industry in Europe in the sixteenth century.

Martin Luther was not only a theologian but a writer of great skill, as well as a preacher.

Martin Luther's early years in Wittenberg were a time of exploration and discovery.

Between 1518 and 1519 Martin Luther became a public figure. His new place as a public figure would lead to trips outside of Wittenberg both short and longer more arduous journeys.

We learn in this book that the Reformation brought books into the hands of those who could only dream of owning books before the Reformation.

This book not only talks about Martin Luther's place in the Reformation but the role he and his writings played in bringing life to the printing industry.

I give this book five out of five stars

Happy Reading and Merry Christmas

Monical says

Can you imagine a world without books? Me, either. This book was mainly about the impact that Martin Luther and the beginnings of the reformation had on book printers and book dissemination. Gutenberg, inventor of movable type, went bankrupt due to a lack of a market. Pettegree indicates that prior to Luther, books were mainly for academic purposes (and in Latin) although a major market was ecclesiastic, either for use in church services, or in times closer to Luther's, for printing of indulgences, the ultimate in "get out of jail" certificates, that were a major source of funding for both the Pope and for local churches. As you may recall, Luther's initial revolt was against these indulgences. Luther was extremely prolific and published in German, and apparently injected new life into the printing business since his publications were often short (easy to print and to sell) and very popular. The book was not especially well written-- there is lots of repetition, and poor explanations of the complexities of the times (sometimes it seemed that Pettegree assumed his readers would already know a lot of that, but it is obscure to me). It was a tough slog, but I finished, and I learned quite a bit about 16th century printing, politics and religion; but it will take more investigating to consolidate the information.

Richard Levine says

Surprisingly interesting. This certainly isn't a traditional biography of Martin Luther, nor does it delve too deeply into theology -- and in both respects, that was (for my purposes) all to the good. What author Andrew Pettegree focuses on instead, as indicated by the subtitle, is how the emerging technology of the printing press was critical to Luther's success, and how Luther was critical to the development of print publishing in 16th C. Germany. If that sounds like a somewhat arcane topic . . . well, I guess it is. But Pettegree writes clearly and well, and really knows his stuff, so although at times the book may be a bit repetitive and over-packed with details about 16th C. printing, in the end I felt that Pettegree provided some keen insights about the beginnings of the modern era in the West -- or perhaps I should call it the Era of the Printed Word -- that I should have learned in high school.

I have a distant memory that my high school textbook mentioned among the *Important Events* of Western Civilization the invention of the printing press, the Reformation, and the beginnings of the use of vernacular across Europe, but I don't remember understanding the significance of these events or how they related to each other. Pettegree puts these pieces together, focusing on Luther as a writer/communicator/propagandist whose appreciation of the importance of print technology helped him become the most famous man in Europe. First, far better than his contemporary friends and foes, Luther quickly learned how to use printed books and pamphlets to spread his views widely and effectively. He obsessed not just about the words he

wrote but about the timing, accuracy, visual appeal, and effective distribution of these printed works. Second, by writing in plain German, rather than in Latin, he increased his potential audience many, many times over. This was good for the local printers' pocketbooks, but it also was critical for Luther because it meant that many of his countrymen (notably including the elites who could help protect him and further his views) -- not just other Church men -- could understand his arguments. Just a few decades before Luther's birth, books were extremely rare and expensive objects that were hand copied, and therefore owned by only the wealthy few; but during Luther's lifetime hundreds of thousands of copies of his writings were printed and distributed throughout Germany. And a Church that for centuries was used to conducting academic theological debates in Latin did not always have a ready response.

Mary says

A somewhat scholarly but nevertheless fascinating account of how Martin Luther became a best-selling author by brilliantly using the fledgling German printing industry to spread the idea of the Protestant Reformation, thereby simultaneously transforming both the world of printing and the world of the church.

Jeremiah Gumm says

Pettegree provides a fresh perspective on the history of Martin Luther and the Reformation coming at it from a unique perspective--the printing industry of Luther's era. One of the best new historiographical contributions to the lead-up to the 500th anniversary celebration of the Reformation this year.

David says

An interesting idea connecting print and Luther together as both were on the rise.

Jordan says

Fascinating angle on the Reformation. *Brand Luther* surprised me in every chapter, and it's been a long time since I've read a book with so much interest. Well researched and written, evenhanded and fair to the figures involved (even Johann Tetzel, who has spent the last 500 years being thrown under the bus by everyone on all sides of the Reformation), Pettegree's book was a pleasure to read, and ably demonstrates the context of Luther and his relationship with printing, how it shaped his role in the Reformation, and how he, in turn, transformed the printing business. Highly recommended.

Gunter Nitsch says

I had no idea before reading this book about the impact Martin Luther had on the German printing and publishing industry. Highly recommended!

Jane says

Fascinating first half, second quarter was somewhat boring and too much into the weeds, last quarter pretty good.
