

BOOK

The Greatest Invention: The History of the World in Nine Mysterious Scripts

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SYNOPSIS [From the publisher]

“In this exhilarating celebration of human ingenuity and perseverance—published all around the world—a trailblazing Italian scholar sifts through our cultural and social behavior in search of the origins of our greatest invention: writing.”

“The greatest invention in the world. Without it, we would be only voice, suspended in a continual present. The most solid and profound part of our being is forged in memory, in the desire to anchor ourselves to something stable, to persist, knowing well that our time is limited. This book speaks of that urgent need to remain, of the bond we share with others, the dialogue we hold with ourselves. This book recounts the invention of writing.”

“Writing is an entire world to be discovered, but it is also a filter through which to observe our own, our world: language, art, biology, geometry, psychology, intuition, logic.”

“We human beings love to invent stories. Baboons, though no less fascinating than us, spend only 10 percent of their time interpreting, adopting, and imitating others’ actions. The rest of their time they dedicate to finding food and nourishment. Our percentages are the complete opposite.”

“We create things that don’t exist in nature, such as symbols. Along with histories, laws, institutions, governments. All of this is made up. And all of it hinges on the exchange of information: storytelling, forging alliances, establishing and disrupting social equilibriums, gossip.”

“When we relax, it’s as if we give voice to our imagination. Don’t the best ideas come the moment you stop racking your brain?”

“Inventing writing is not a mechanical process. It’s not a matter of precisely and intentionally choosing signs to represent sounds, to create a perfectly functional and efficient system.”

“The invention of writing—especially when we mean writing invented from nothing, from scratch—came about as a process, a series of coordinated, cumulative, and gradual actions.”

“Writing is therefore a social invention, where alignment, coordination, and feedback play essential roles.”

“All of which leads us to see writing as a cultural product, not something inherent. As a kind of technology, an object, an artifact. And yet its shapes are the shapes we find in the world around us, and in

all its contours. They follow the anatomy of our visual perception; they adapt to the things that surround us and that capture our attention.”

“*Nulla dies sine linea*, as Pliny the Elder said. No day without a line. Now lift your head, and start looking for the letters all around you.”

“When we depict something precise, with a specific name, using an icon-image, we create a sign. These signs are often called “pictograms.” The term is inaccurate and misleading, since a drawing, the moment it becomes the name for the thing represented, ceases to be a drawing. It becomes a sign. It’s already a script in embryo.”

“It’s time now we clear up a few things about the most important element in language: the syllable. There’s something mysterious about syllables.”

“At the root of all this is a biomechanical issue: we open our mouths gradually wider when we pronounce vowels and regulate the flow of their sound. The longer we hold the vowel, the more forceful it becomes.”

“Collaboration is at the root of every modicum of progress ever gained, whether that door was opened with a battering ram or with the elegance of a carefully cut key.”

“Writing is added to valuable objects to lend even more value to those who possess them. Doing so gives one a competitive advantage in society. This phenomenon is invariably linked with the desire to be seen. My object is embellished with something as rare and precious as writing (just like me, right?). Excuse my slang, but I want to be clear here: writing is rare and reserved for the few, and is therefore a way of making an object more badass.”

“This doesn’t mean that writing is an essential factor in determining a culture’s complexity.”

“Symmetry and order create a sense of control, of peace. We humans feel less like animals when we use our rationality to systematize, to tidy up our surroundings, creating a false sense of security, slapping a Band-Aid over the unpredictable. It’s tough, isn’t it, embracing true beauty, the beauty of chaos?”

“True list-o-holics write exclusively by hand – making lists on the computer is like studying on Wikipedia: nothing sticks. It’s all gone by the morning.”

“Social complexity has three levels of development. The most advanced is the state, followed by egalitarian society and then stratified society under the rule of a leader (a “chiefdom”).”

“We can now say, with near scientific certainty, that wherever there’s a state with a population of more than ten thousand, you can bet there’s a writing system.”

“Writing’s birth involves elements of chance, aspects that lists and models and rigged equations can’t categorize or explain. Some marriages work even when friends and relatives are placing bets at the ceremony on when (and not if) the couple will get a divorce. It’s the same with scripts – some scripts, anyway.”