The Evolution of Books

Reading is such a common pastime that it’s easy to take it for granted. Publishers turn raw manuscripts into books in vast numbers. Anyone can pop into a library or bookstore and come out with a stack of books on any topic under the sun. But while people today may have easy access to books, it wasn’t always so simple to obtain reading materials. In fact, during medieval times, only a handful of people could even read or write, and few people owned books.

Before the year 1100, most books were made by monks and were kept in monasteries or in the private collections of wealthy or royal patrons. Books were expensive to make because they were transcribed by hand. Some books were also lavishly illustrated, or illuminated. These beautiful books were uncommon and are valuable artifacts today. Many of them are worth incredible sums. In fact, one collection of forty-eight illuminated manuscripts is estimated to be worth more than $24 million—that’s half a million dollars per book!

As the demand for books grew, especially in universities, many literate people (including women) became scribes. These workers carefully copied texts, often signing each book with a personal inscription. The development of the printing press in the 1400s helped facilitate the manufacture of books, and the need for handwritten books evaporated.

While it may seem like books are everywhere, the fact is that they’ve only been common for the last 500 years or so. Next time you’re reading a book, take a moment to relish a luxury that few people in medieval times could enjoy.