

**A CONVERSATION WITH ALIX CHRISTIE, AUTHOR OF  
*GUTENBERG'S APPRENTICE***

**Q: How did the idea for your novel originate?**

A: My grandfather taught me how to print when I was a teenager, and I've been a devotee of letterpress ever since. I own a wonderful old cast-iron press that currently resides in San Francisco. Then one day in 2001 I read a story in the *New York Times* that turned out to be the spark that set me going on this novel. Scholars at Princeton had made a big splash in the book history world, reporting that Gutenberg's first types might not have been as advanced as people thought. I tucked that scrap away, and when I moved to Berlin, Germany, a few years later, I started looking into the history of this incredible book, the Gutenberg Bible, the first major volume made with metal type. What I discovered blew my mind—a whole new picture of this earth-shaking invention that hardly anyone knew about.

**Q: Most people think of Gutenberg as a lone genius, but you tell a different story – of collaboration between three essential people. Where did you find this radical new theory?**

A: As Hilary Mantel says, writers of historical fiction stand on the shoulders of giants – the scholars who actually excavate the past. What I learned was that over the past 25 years, experts in early printing have significantly updated the standard narrative on Gutenberg, but this is not widely known. Through all kinds of new research, the two partners in Gutenberg's workshop – his financier, Johann Fust, and the scribe and printer Peter Schoeffer—have been rescued from Gutenberg's long shadow. One major piece was a biography of Schoeffer originally written in 1950 that was translated into German in 2003, with a brilliant foreword by a German bibliographer that credited Schoeffer with much of the Bible's artistry. Another was an art historical study of those illuminated Bibles commissioned by Fust, all painted in a similar fashion, which showed his key role in the whole project. Finally a French historian, Guy Bechtel, wrote a groundbreaking survey 20 years ago that gave both men their proper due. Meanwhile, in America, high technology was revealing long-hidden secrets about the physical Bible itself: analysis showed which kinds of paper had been used when in the production process, which pages were printed when, depending on the composition of the ink, and, most controversially, how Gutenberg may have in fact cast his first type not in a metal mold, as long believed, but initially in temporary molds made of sand or clay.

**Q: In researching and writing this novel, what surprised you most?**

A: I was stunned to learn that such an extraordinary undertaking had fallen so spectacularly apart. These men made a thing that changed the world, yet it destroyed them, and they wound up fighting bitterly in court. Fust and Schoeffer have been vilified for centuries for "ruining" Gutenberg and stealing his invention. But some historians think the truth could well be the opposite. What's clear is that a craftsman as gifted as Peter Schoeffer -- who with Fust published the magnificent three-color *Mainz Psalter* only two years later -- must have worked closely with his master, Gutenberg. The story of their rise and fall is thus inevitably tragic.

**Q: Before Gutenberg's press, most Europeans could not read, and only the very wealthy had access to books. How did the press spread knowledge to the masses?**

A: Very quickly, within a generation, there was an enormous glut of books; presses sprang up in 250 European cities over the next fifty years. Prices dropped and the Church starting losing control over what people learned. It wasn't only the great books, but news and tales and self-help manuals that caused people to begin to think for themselves. The printing press rapidly spread new challenges to church authority, most famously that of Martin Luther. Man's entire conception of himself changed with the Reformation. The awareness of himself as an individual was radically new, and led eventually to democracy, which is why last year a panel of historians for the Atlantic

Monthly chose the printing press as mankind's most important invention since the wheel.  
<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/11/innovations-list/309536/>

**Q: When your characters first see the printed word they are shocked – not just at the novelty, but from fear of what it may mean. How are these medieval people like or unlike us today, standing on the brink of great technological change?**

A: This is the part of Peter Schoeffer's story that interested me most. I felt that he incarnated a kind of ambivalence toward—and grudging acceptance of—new technology that many of us who love books feel today. As a scribe, he struggles with fear of the machine that will sweep away his entire world. At the same time, he understands the press's promise. His goal, which I think we should bear in mind, is to try to preserve the highest artistry of the old ways within the new. Medieval misgivings were also religious in nature—a fear that humankind had over-reached, that this inventiveness was not godly so much as a kind of devilry. Though not so overtly religious, there is something of this too in our present questioning of our own digital technology. There is an uneasiness, a concern among some, that these magical devices are changing something essential in our nature.

**Q: In your opinion, what are the tradeoffs between the physical versus the electronic book?**

A: The whole dilemma of change is that we know full well that something is gained, but something is also lost. What's gained with e-books is ease, speed, rapid sharing – all great things to spread ideas, like the early pamphlets and popular yarns the first printers enabled. Yet the physical book persists, and for good reason: we are attached to it, quite literally. Science tells us that we retain more from print, we remember better. The act of touching and turning pages inscribes the contents at a deeper psychic level—a truth that scribes in their monasteries knew a thousand years ago, as physical conduits for God's Word.

**Q: Does the Gutenberg Bible tell us anything about our relationship to physical objects, or beauty?**

A: It's impossible not to respond to the incredible craftsmanship of these hand-printed early books. We seem to be hard-wired for beauty, or quality. I am struck by the renaissance I see everywhere of the hand-made: we seem to have a persistent hunger for well-crafted things, from artists' books to handbags to a sleek iPod Touch. Maybe it's a response to the abstraction and distance of the digital realm, or the cheap consumer products that engulf us. We are still physical beings who not only enjoy, but need to experience natural materials and forms. The useful can still be beautiful, as Steve Jobs insisted; Peter Schoeffer to the end of his life was a gorgeous calligrapher.

**Q: Your novel shows how apprenticeships worked in the heyday of the medieval guild system. What lessons can businesses and individuals take from this today?**

A: Aristotle said, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit." Apprenticeship is this steady, repetitive process of learning and transmission, the handing on of knowledge. There are no short-cuts. I apprenticed twice as a printer, and again as a novelist; you only have to look to Europe to see the effectiveness of this approach as a way of maintaining expertise in highly technical fields. You still see woodworkers in medieval-inspired outfits roaming around Germany, doing their "wander years." Of course it flies in the face of the "everything now" and instant tech millionaire culture we live in. A lot of recent social science, though, is stressing the importance of failing and getting back up again, of grit and perseverance as the main drivers of success. That's apprenticeship – the school of hard knocks.

**Q: Which writers have influenced your writing?**

A: I was a teenaged Tolkien nerd, and then obsessed with the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel. My first loves were Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, the Bröntes, Flaubert, and George Eliot. I admire canvases that conjure whole worlds. The writers who most inspire me now are Hilary Mantel, W.G. Sebald, Elena Ferrante. Mavis Gallant. Virginia Woolf. Marilynne Robinson. Don DeLillo. The list could go on.

**Q: What makes your novel relevant to readers?**

A: A novel is relevant if it moves you or makes you think. That said, I do hope readers feel they have been given some insight into a hugely important historical event they hadn't known much about before. And if they come away thinking about the meaning of books in their own lives, whether they read on a screen or on paper, that will be enough relevance for me.