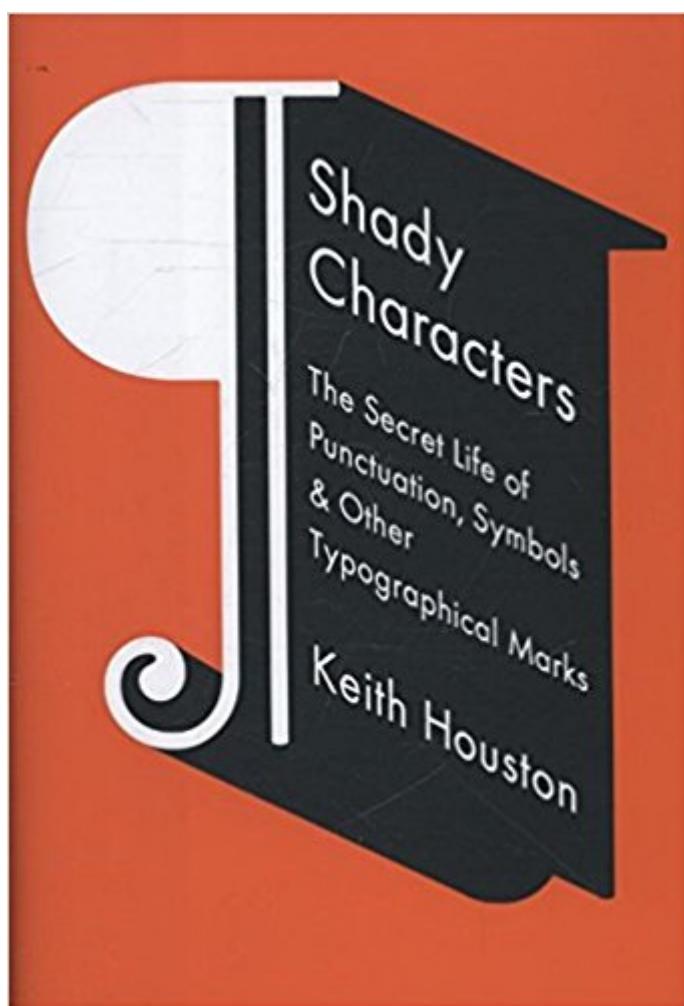


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# Shady Characters: The Secret Life Of Punctuation, Symbols, And Other Typographical Marks



## Synopsis

From ancient Greece to the Internetâ •via the Renaissance, Gutenberg, and Madison Avenueâ •Shady Characters exposes the secret history of punctuation. A charming and indispensable tour of two thousand years of the written word, Shady Characters weaves a fascinating trail across the parallel histories of language and typography. Whether investigating the asterisk (\*) and dagger (â )â •which alternately illuminated and skewered heretical verses of the early Bibleâ •or the at sign (@), which languished in obscurity for centuries until rescued by the Internet, Keith Houston draws on myriad sources to chart the life and times of these enigmatic squiggles, both exotic (Â¶) and everyday (&). From the Library of Alexandria to the halls of Bell Labs, figures as diverse as Charlemagne, Vladimir Nabokov, and George W. Bush cross paths with marks as obscure as the interrobang (?) and as divisive as the dash (â •). Ancient Roman graffiti, Venetian trading shorthand, Cold War double agents, and Madison Avenue round out an ever more diverse set of episodes, characters, and artifacts. Richly illustrated, ranging across time, typographies, and countries, Shady Characters will delight and entertain all who cherish the unpredictable and surprising in the writing life. 2-color; 75 illustrations

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

â œlf Eats, Shoots & Leaves whetted your appetite on the subject of punctuation, then you have a treat in store. Shady Characters is an authoritative, witty, and fascinating tour of the history and rationale behind such lesser known marks as the ampersand, manicule, the pilcrow, and the

interrobang. Keith Houston also explains the octothorpe •otherwise known as the hashtagâ •and and my final comment on his book is #awesome.â • - Ben Yagoda, author of How to Not Write Badâ œMake no mistake: this is a book of secrets. With zeal and rigor, Keith Houston cracks open the &, the #, the â and moreâ •all the little matryoshka dolls of meaning that make writing work. Inside, we meet novelists, publishers, scholars and scribes; we range from ancient Greeks to hashtagged tweets; and we see the weird and wonderful foundations of the most successful technology of all time.â • - Robin Sloan, author of Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstoreâ œFunny, surprising, and, of course, geeky.â • - Michael D. Schaffer and John Timpane, Philadelphia Inquirerâ œMight make you look at booksâ | in an entirely new way.â • - Andrew Robinson, Natureâ œHoustonâ |is a tireless researcher and an amiable teacher.â • - Jan Gardner, Boston Globeâ œA pleasurable contribution to type history, particularly for readers who havenâ ™t considered the ampersand in any detail.â • - Carl W. Scarbrough, New Criterionâ œFascinating.â • - Rob Kyff, The Courant

Keith Houston is the author of *Shady Characters* and the founder of [shadycharacters.co.uk](http://shadycharacters.co.uk). He lives in London.

The nonstandard characters used in the book render as microscopic; I can't find a fix for this, and it happens both on the Kindle Paperwhite and the Kindle Android app. The parts of the book that I can read are interesting, but I'm missing a lot with the rendering deficiency. Frankly I'm a bit shocked that a publisher would let this go to market in this condition. Perhaps the paper version is more legible.

Not that long ago, I was reading an edition of a Shakespeare play that retained the original formatting. I stared at the punctuation and thought how very modern it was, and just as I was reminded that I've often wondered where we get these marks we use every day, along came Keith Houston with this ray of sunshine called *Shady Characters*. I ordered it instantly and had no idea what to expect. Fortunately, it is hands down informative, earnest, witty, well-produced and so very reassuringly human in this digital age. Houston has selected the pilcrow (that backward P for paragraph), "commercial at" (@), octothorpe (pound or hash sign), ampersand, asterisk, dagger, hyphen, manicule (pointing hand), quotation marks, the interrobang (question mark overlaid with an exclamation mark) and marks to indicate irony and sarcasm. The earliest symbols show up with the Greeks and Romans; turning points include the rise of Christianity, the Renaissance and the

invention of the printing press, and, more recently, the typewriter. Computers and the internet are respectful latecomers to the party. Houston is a detective who digs for hard evidence. Typographical legends persist and he insists on finding the truth. Assumptions are dashed. His end notes and bibliography reveal that he shifted through a lot of dry, not to mention dusty, texts in search of his answers and he has done a terrific job of articulating the information. He sustains a vibrant energy to the last page. The hardcover book is attractively produced with the symbols rendered in red ink. This is Houston's first book. On the strength of it, I'll sign up for his next, whatever it is.

Most of us, when reading and writing, use and mentally process a multitude of typographical symbols without thinking about them, even though we probably do not know the names for many of those marks nor how they came about. That's the arcane and overlooked, even "shady", world that Keith Houston explores in surprisingly lively and engaging fashion in **SHADY CHARACTERS**. The mark "@" is ubiquitous, at least on the Internet, and we all use and understand it. But where did it come from? As Houston tells us, it was the brainchild of Ray Tomlinson, a twenty-nine-year-old computer engineer who in 1971 was working on the development of the ARPANET. On his own initiative Tomlinson came up with a way to direct messages to the mailbox of a specific user on a given mainframe computer, employing the then-underutilized symbol "@" on the keyboard of his ASR-33 teletype. "Half-fearing the wrath of his superiors were they to discover his pet project, Tomlinson initially kept quiet about his invention. [He told a co-worker,] 'Don't tell anyone! This isn't what we're supposed to be working on.' His concern was misplaced: e-mail became the fledgling network's first 'killer app' \* \* \*. [By] 1973, only two years after the first e-mail traveled from one side of Tomlinson's office to the other, it accounted for three-quarters of all traffic on the ARPANET." Another ubiquitous symbol is "#". Most folks nowadays would call it a "hash tag" or a "pound sign". Its formal name, however, is an "octothorpe", which was bestowed on it by Bell Labs in the development of the Touch-Tone keypad, although the symbol itself can be traced back to medieval times in connection with usages dating back to ancient Rome. In several chapters Houston ventures into the related realm of punctuation, in particular as regards the hyphen, the dash, and quotation marks. Throughout the book the reader is exposed to vignettes of history, smatterings of grammar, and precursors of technological developments -- all invariably relevant and interesting. The book also unearths various proposed symbols that failed to catch on, including several designed to signify irony (all of which shared an inherent shortcoming: "if the quality of irony in a statement is such that it must be telegraphed to the reader, is it still ironic?"). **SHADY CHARACTERS** is extremely well written. The subject is rather esoteric, even recondite, and in the hands of most

Many punctuation marks turn out to have a surprisingly long and, for the few of us fascinated by such things, interesting history. The book does a nice job of telling it. The style is brief, breezy, and popularized, though it does make reference to sources. Some of the history of punctuation involves historical trivia only distantly related to it but that the author either couldn't bear to leave out or needed to throw in in order to expand an otherwise slender volume. His knowledge of those other things, both ancient and modern, is not always as sure as his understanding of punctuation, and sometimes that shows. Another review mentions that non-standard characters are "microscopic" on Kindle and Android platforms. I can report that they are on the iPad as well.

I'm a former typesetter and a student of type and design history for 35 years. I thought I might like the book; turns out, I love it. It's written with extraordinary charm and wit, but also is so ridiculously well researched — the citations take up a substantial portion of the back of the book for further reading. Every chapter is highly enjoyable on its own, but also packed with asides and tidbits that make the primary topic even richer. If you have any love of fonts, typography, language, or history, I

think you'll adore it as much as I did.

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