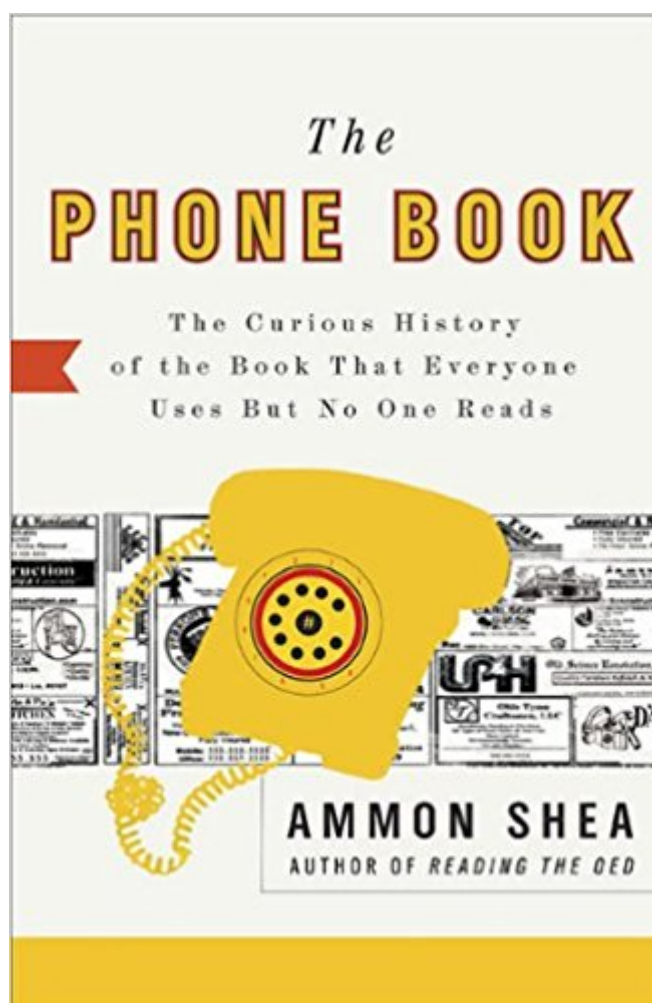


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# The Phone Book: The Curious History Of The Book That Everyone Uses But No One Reads



## Synopsis

Read Ammon Shea's blogs and other content on the Penguin Community. A surprising, lively, and rich history of that ubiquitous doorstep that most of us take for granted. Ammon Shea is not your typical thirtysomething book enthusiast. After reading the Oxford English Dictionary from cover to cover (and living to write about it in *Reading the OED*), what classic, familiar, but little-read book would he turn to next? Yes, the phone book. With his signature combination of humor, curiosity, and passion for combing the dustbins of history, Shea offers readers a guided tour into the surprising, strange, and often hilarious history of the humble phone book. From the first printed version in 1878 (it had fifty listings and no numbers) to the phone book's role in presidential elections, Supreme Court rulings, Senate filibusters, abstract art, subversive poetry, circus sideshows, criminal investigations, mental-health diagnoses, and much more, this surprising volume reveals a rich and colorful story that has never been told-until now.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

There has never been, the author tells us, a book written specifically about the telephone book, which is weird, when you think of it, considering it's one of the most used, most reprinted, most versatile books in history. According to common wisdom, the first phone directory was published in 1878 (although an earlier list of phone subscribers from 1877 could also be called the first directory). The telephone itself, as we all know, was invented by Alexander Graham Bell (although one Elisha Gray may have done it earlier). The story of the phone number itself is fascinating, its invention

being spurred in the late nineteenth century by the threat of a measles outbreak in Lowell, Massachusetts, its very existence being decried in the 1960s by the Anti-Digit Dialing League. This is not merely a history of a book; it's a history of the culture surrounding the book, and it will make you look at that big, heavy tome with new admiration. --David Pitt

Ammon Shea is the author of two previous books on obscure words, *Depraved English* and *Insulting English* (written with Peter Novobatzky). He read his first dictionary, *Merriam Webster's Second International*, ten years ago, and followed it up with the sequel, *Webster's Third International*. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

If you like weird subjects you will love this book. Ammon Shea knows how to write funny stuff.

A great piece of adoxography

A good find on [.com](#). If you are looking for a book that cannot be found on the internet or stores, go to [.com \(books\)](#). You may be very surprised at all of your options.

*The Phone Book: The Curious History of the Book That Everyone Uses But No One Reads* by Ammon Shea was written in 2010 but even at seven years old I take issue with the statement that everyone uses it. Shea should know upfront that I am a rotary-dial-loving non-cellphone-owning telephonophile, yet when I need to look up a number even I look for it on-line. I admit it would be handy to have an up-to-date phone book as I keep all of my directories downstairs in the cupboard above my fridge, yet my computer is upstairs so I always have to go up a flight to make a call when I don't already know the number. However even if I did have a current phone book, it would be murder on my eyes as the size of font has shrunk to minuscule proportions in the last few years. Phone books in my youth also had fewer columns per page and were thus much easier to read. What I do share with Shea is a love of phone books. As a child I was genuinely excited when the new Toronto and Mississauga-area phone books arrived. I turned over the pages of the massive Toronto directory looking for unusual last names. I still remember a heckuva lot of them, like Ggoome, someone listed with the surname and initial Ee E, and the stalwart listing Q'Part Mrs, whom I actually phoned in order to enquire specifically about her last name. I cannot recall a word of that conversation from forty years ago, yet I addressed her as if her last name was French, hence que - PAR. All the Pizza Pizza franchises used to be listed alphabetically by the street they were on,

and every single one of them had the same number, 967-1111. I also remember the Royal Ontario Museum controversy, or should I say, The Royal Ontario Museum controversy, as Canada's preeminent museum was listed in the white pages under T. Why am I so interested in phone books? I love words, names, lists of words and names, and ordered lists of words and names to be particular. The phone book is a book with my name both figuratively on it as well as literally in it. I started reading *The Phone Book* on a train ride from Helsinki to Joensuu and finished it two days later on the flight home to Toronto. Shea covered many topics--often, too many--starting with the debate over the true inventor of the telephone. An introduction such as this could be deemed necessary as a lead-in to the main topic at hand, telephone books. But Shea often drifted off-topic, taking up pages discussing the effect of scents on his senses and how synaesthesia draws him to buy books. There was no reason to go on and on about the fetish he has for the smell of books (he denies that it's a fetish, but I am calling a spade a spade here). I got the feeling pretty soon that these tangential topics were merely page fillers for what would have been an otherwise shorter book (202 pages). The first phone book was not even a book. It was a list of fifty names published in 1878. In the earliest days of telephones, one didn't need to know any phone numbers, as an operator used to connect callers on a switchboard. In the early twentieth century tests were conducted on phone book layouts to ease as well as accelerate number lookups. Column width, indentation, print size and many other factors were analyzed to produce the most effective print layout. Even as early as the fourth decade of the last century did people look to the phone book for exploitative commercial reasons. Shea wrote of one midwest business that looked to use the Manhattan directory to create its own mailing list: "Templin [directory supervisor of the New York Telephone Company in the 1930's], not a man to take kindly to such deliberate misuse of his book, flat out refused to assist, saying that he had 'no intention of aiding them in their nefarious schemes.'" If only we had Russell Templin around today to deal with telemarketers. The phone book can be blamed for one of the greatest election miscalls in American history. The November 3, 1948 headline in the Chicago Daily Tribune, "Dewey Defeats Truman", can blame its own telephone exit polls on the phone book for this inaccurate result: "In 1948 the telephone was not yet as ubiquitous a household fixture as it is today; it was more an implement owned by the upper class, the members of which greatly favored Dewey. The pollsters took what they thought to be the pulse of the electorate by calling random numbers taken from telephone books across the country. Except that they weren't truly random--as soon as they chose the telephone book, they unwittingly skewed their results in favor of the people who owned telephones and who happened to be more inclined to vote for Dewey." In addition to the white-paged residential listings of phone books, Shea provided a history of

the yellow pages and explained why its pages were traditionally yellow. He compared the Manhattan pages of 1979 to those at the time of writing, thirty years later, and had many interesting observations about the state of technology and how it affects advertising. The yellow pages of Manhattan, keep in mind, so we're not talking about a small rural town, had no listings whatsoever for funeral preplanning in 1979, yet 23 listings in 2009. The yellow pages of 1979 had more than a dozen pages of ads and listings for typewriters, yet in 2009 there was "but a single store that has chosen to run an ad in the small corner of the current telephone directory that deals with typewriters. It reads, 'YES! We still repair IBM Selectric and Wheelwriter Typewriters'--with an enthusiasm that feels born of desperation."Shea is charming when he takes the reader on a trip down memory lane as he relives his childhood through a copy of a phone book. After having found a directory that was around when he was a boy, Shea lets his fingers go walking through the list of names and he discovers people--and memories--that had been dormant for decades. He can take a different path each time he opens the book, so each trip down memory lane is a "Choose Your Own Adventure" story. He invites the reader to do the same:"Find an old phone book from some point in your life and take a trip through its pages and your past. Skim the pages or examine them closely. You needn't read it as one reads a book--the plotline is your own, and you can experience it however you prefer."There are organized groups that wish to ban the phone book on account of its colossal waste of paper and resources. Shea writes about these groups yet offers in defence how profitable it is for the yellow pages to remain in print. As long as it makes money for the publisher and advertisers, we will still have print yellow pages. Offering the public a choice, such as opting in if you wish to receive a phone book, or alternatively opting out if you don't, do not seem to be very effective. Shea provided statistics on municipalities that offered these choices with only minimal percentages taking the opt-out preference.Shea is a bibliophile at heart who would be a poor second-hand bookseller, as I am afraid he would buy everything everyone brings in to try to sell him. Yet after stating how tragic it is to throw away books, he does admit to a need (however prejudiced) to dispose of books:"I am not entirely in favor of abstaining from throwing books away. Indeed, there are many books that I feel deserve nothing more than a quick trip to the trash heap and should very likely have never been published in the first place. Astonishing numbers of new titles are published every year--the figure is estimated at over 250,000 in the United States alone. Surely some of these titles should never have seen the light of day. And yet it still tugs at my heartstrings to see so many telephone books thrown away, often still encased in their cheap plastic wrap, obviously not just unwanted but not even judged worthy of perusal."What Shea finds so sad is the tendency to throw away old phone books. Even the phone companies encourage this, in order to ensure that their

latest editions are available. No one keeps old phone books because they are obsolete within a year, as well as being of exceptional girth. Sadly, Shea found that some libraries even disposed of their old phone book collections because of lack of use. In the end, Shea calls for the continuation of the printed phone book for a reason beyond mere childish sentimentality: "Whenever there is a discussion, or a debate, about why it is that telephone companies continue to print the white pages, there is invariably mention of the fact that some small portion of the population does not have access to the Internet or that some people who have used the telephone book all their lives just don't understand how to make the transition from newsprint to hyperlink." But there will always be some portion of the population that does not keep up with the current technology, whether it is because they are Luddites by choice or because technology has simply passed them by. This in itself is not enough of a reason to insist on continuing to use the white pages. "It should be enough that some people just prefer to have the feel of paper on their hands when they are reading something. I know I do." I would gladly take in the latest copy of the local phone directory if the phone company knew that there were still customers who used them.

I also purchased Ammon Shea's *Reading the OED: One Man, One Year, 21,730 Pages* and haven't gotten too far into that because I can't put down *The Phone Book: The Curious History of the Book That Everyone Uses But No One Reads*. I usually enjoy books like this that, in the grand scheme of life, are useless but really are interesting because they challenge you to learn about things you normally hear nothing about. Most interesting to me as I started to read the book is that in 2010, not everyone even uses the phone book anymore. I honestly cannot remember the last time 1) we had a phone book delivered, 2) the last time I reached for the old one. I almost felt a nostalgic, "I better read about it now before everybody forgets" draw to the book. The invention of the phone and how it became a part of our every day life has always interested me, and this book gives some good insight into the invention of the actual device and how that gave importance to the phone book and other directories. The stories of the first phone books (didn't even have phone numbers!), to the president having to step out of his office to make calls, to the handwritten Chinatown phone books in San Francisco are all highly entertaining to me. I'm a trivia nut (every Wednesday night!) so maybe these stories are superfluous to the average Joe, but for me they really struck a chord. This book will not be for everybody. Be forewarned. I would pick it up at a store and peruse the first 10 pages or so (as I did) or download a trial on your Kindle before purchasing. If it grabs you in the first 10 pages, dive headlong. It's a quick read and you'll find yourself struggling to put it down before bed. EDIT: As you continue through the book, the format seems to slightly change. The later chapters feature

much shorter anecdotes and it seems more like a collection of separate essays that don't necessarily flow from one to another. Because of this, I've changed from 5 stars to 4.

I have a rule not to write reviews on of books I haven't bought on . But this book (which I checked out at the library) is so special that I am duty-bound to get the word out. What I like best about Ammon Shea's "The Phone Book" is the meandering. When I walk, I like to poke around and detour to new and fascinating places. "The Phone Book" also does this. Ammon Shea not only gives us a history of the phone book, but meanders into places such as Huey Long's roquefort cheese salad dressing (which he used in a filibuster), the spectacular stench of the garbage in front of a New York City A&P during the 1975 garbage collectors' strike, and the role of cuttlefish ink in creating a Chinese-language phone book. Most of you have a phone book in your home. Pick it up and read it with fresh eyes (and, better yet, try to find old phone books). You'll find an eternity of stories inside.

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