

Name _____ Date _____

Books: From the Beginning

Long ago there were no books. Parents told stories to their children. The children grew up. They told the same stories to their children. Over the years, the number of stories grew and grew. Soon a person could not remember them all. He needed something to help him so some people made marks on wooden sticks. Others tied knots in pieces of colored string. Each knot meant something. After people learned to write, it was easier to keep records.

The oldest kind of writing was done with a sharp stick called a stylus. Marks were made in soft clay. Then the clay was baked until hard. Clay tablets were not books, but they were a start. Other people wrote on palm leaves and tree bark with the stylus, but bark and palm leaves didn't last.

The tough papyrus plant did last. From it, the people of Egypt made papyrus rolls at least 5,000 years ago. On these rolls they drew picture words. In time, though, people grew tired of unwinding the long rolls. They folded sheets of papyrus in half and tied them together. At last books began to look more as they do now.

By about the year 1300, parchment had taken the place of papyrus. Parchment was made from animal skins. The Christian monks made the books in those times. Their books were called manuscripts, which means that they were written by hand. The monks copied early writings onto parchment. They added pictures. The books were lovely, but it still took a long, long time to copy just one book.

Block books came next. They told stories in pictures. People who couldn't read liked them. The pictures were cut on blocks of wood. They were called woodcuts. Each block was then covered with ink and pressed onto paper. Block books were cheap and fast to make. All other books were still very scarce. Only the rich could have them.

Then came an important development. In Germany, about the year 1445, Johann Gutenberg introduced movable type. Type, or letters cut from metal, could be used over and over. Books could be made faster and cheaper. Printing took the place of writing each book slowly by hand. Printing was a new idea only to the Western world. The Chinese had been printing this way for hundreds of years. Printing quickly spread from Germany to other countries because of the speed and ease of this kind of printing, there were more books. People began to read plays, poetry, and travel books as well as Bibles and prayer books.

If Gutenberg could see a printing plant now, it would seem like magic to him. Thousands of books are printed at once. A machine printed the words of this very story. They were printed on one big sheet of paper.

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The edges were cut, and the machines did it all. Millions of people can now own and read books. In books the things man knows can be kept and shared. Knowledge and ideas are not forgotten. Perhaps this story will be read by your grandchildren. Then they too, can share the story of books.