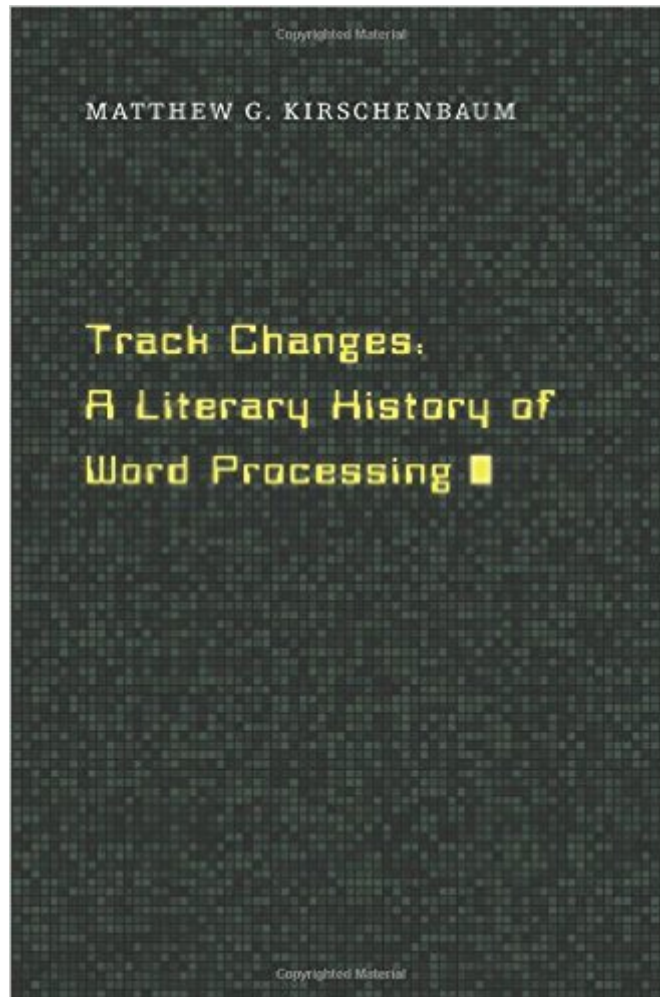


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# Track Changes: A Literary History Of Word Processing



## Synopsis

The story of writing in the digital age is every bit as messy as the ink-stained rags that littered the floor of Gutenberg's print shop or the hot molten lead of the Linotype machine. During the period of the pivotal growth and widespread adoption of word processing as a writing technology, some authors embraced it as a marvel while others decried it as the death of literature. The product of years of archival research and numerous interviews conducted by the author, *Track Changes* is the first literary history of word processing. Matthew Kirschenbaum examines how the interests and ideals of creative authorship came to coexist with the computer revolution. Who were the first adopters? What kind of anxieties did they share? Was word processing perceived as just a better typewriter or something more? How did it change our understanding of writing? *Track Changes* balances the stories of individual writers with a consideration of how the seemingly ineffable act of writing is always grounded in particular instruments and media, from quills to keyboards. Along the way, we discover the candidates for the first novel written on a word processor, explore the surprisingly varied reasons why writers of both popular and serious literature adopted the technology, trace the spread of new metaphors and ideas from word processing in fiction and poetry, and consider the fate of literary scholarship and memory in an era when the final remnants of authorship may consist of folders on a hard drive or documents in the cloud.

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## Customer Reviews

Disclaimer: I'm a computer geek, an aficionado of both computing history and the history of the

written and printed word (writing systems, the history of printing, typesetting, and typewriting), and a voracious reader of multiple genres (belles-lettres/classics, pop fiction, popular and scholarly nonfiction, the occasional monograph) so the title of the book immediately spoke to me. Your mileage may vary depending on which of these categories apply to you. The book delivers what it promises: a scholarly but readable overview of how word-processor technology has been adopted (or not) by authors of various genres; word processors' widely varying effects, positive and negative, on the craft of those writers, as reported by the writers themselves; and its impacts, positive and negative, on literature scholarship. For example, if modern Track Changes features are turned on, or if using cloud-based document processors like Google Docs that effectively track revisions explicitly and automatically, scholars of literature have a new goldmine of detailed instrumentation of the writer at work; but for earlier word processors lacking such features (basically any word processor before the late 1980s), author "manuscripts" (document files) reflect only the final product, without any of the crossings-out or margin annotations that have made historical handwritten manuscripts (no longer a redundant phrase!) such as the USA's founding documents such a compelling window into the workings of the authors' minds. Indeed, because of legacy computer issues and the limited life of magnetic media, some such manuscripts have become permanently inaccessible. I learned quite a bit, and I manage to forgive the author's periodic indulgence in wordplay that seems intended to test your erudition (or prove his) rather than illuminate a point—*an academic writing habit I dislike, and I say that as an academic myself.* For example, although it seems obvious in retrospect, I had always assumed professional writers would be among the earliest to adopt such a "power tool" for writing (I've done a nontrivial amount of professional writing myself), and at the same time, as a student of computing history I have always known that word processing technology was always targeted not at such professionals but at an office environment, for memos, letters, and business documents. Merely putting those facts together suddenly makes it more interesting to ask how professional writers adopted this technology. What I learned was that many didn't, and that among those who did (or tried to) there was a wide range of attitudes towards how and whether it improved or otherwise modified their writing process and quantity of output, and whether it fundamentally enabled new ways of approaching writing (for better or worse) that would be impossible with typewriters or pen-and-paper. For example, you can use search-and-replace to change the name of a character throughout a novel, you can insert and delete and move chunks of text around freely, and so on. (The author points out that "Pride and Prejudice and Zombies" is an example of the kind of work that is unique to the word-processor age.) A number of quotations and interview excerpts from

professional writers ranging from John Updike to Stephen King made the observations concrete and illustrated the range of perspectives and observations that different writers brought to the technology. Perhaps unsurprisingly, pop fiction and science fiction authors were among the earliest adopters (though even sci-fi writers who adopted the technology early failed to predict its soon-to-be ubiquity in their visionary novels), and belles-lettres authors among the longest holdouts. As the author does a nice job of describing, of course, typewriters elicited many of the same controversies and polarizing views in their own turn, especially as the earliest models (e.g. Twain's Remington #1) didn't allow the typist to see the text as it was being printed on the page. Another item in the category of something I always knew, but never connected to its impact on professional writing: using a word processor on the one hand separates the act of composition from the act of fixing something in tangible form (printing, typing) in both time and space (you can print later than you write, and the printer may be in another room), but on the other hand blurs the boundary between composition and revision/editing, which are necessarily separate operations when working with a typewriter or handwritten text. As well, by offering options such as font changes and other formatting, word processors bring layout and typography potentially within the author's purview; some authors embraced this additional freedom and made it part of their work, others resented the extra learning effort required to navigate a "feature" they had pretty well been able to do without in the past, and yet others have embraced new "minimalist" word processors that have emerged as a reaction to feature-bloat and whose user interfaces hearken back to the days of WordPerfect for DOS, which presented the writer with a featureless blank screen and blinking cursor when a new document was opened. A particularly interesting chapter is devoted to the "gender-ness" of word processing, which from the start was aimed at secretaries, who at the time of the technology's emergence were still overwhelmingly female. The idea was to double down on the concept of the typing pool: rather than being a peripatetic do-whatever-is-necessary executive assistant, there would be specialized secretaries who would master the learning curve of word processing and compartmentalize this specific function. I didn't realize that one of the early dedicated word processors was developed by a female engineer who started her own company to manufacture and market it, and ran an advertisement aimed squarely at secretaries in the inaugural issue of Ms. magazine. Some of the material that focuses on the history of the technology itself will be familiar to students of the history of computing: for example, even as Xerox PARC was demonstrating the first functional GUI (on the Xerox Alto research prototype) and first WYSIWYG word processor (Bravo), commercial offerings didn't offer a mouse-and-windows interface but one in which the affordances were "hidden" behind nonobvious control-key combinations that made for a steep learning curve for

those new to computing. For those who don't know this history, the author does a good job telling both stories and juxtaposing them in time. I also learned that I am still a philistine when it comes to appreciating literary conceptual art. Publishing the text of classic works as viewed through Word AutoSummary, a text consisting of Wite-Out used to overpaint the letters of an existing work, or verbatim transcripts of arbitrary ephemeral texts like traffic reports to "reflect the effortless contemporary duplication and proliferation of texts without regard for the volume and mass of words" — "sorry, to me those things are just silly. (And as an academic and an artist, I'm willing to give substantial benefit of the doubt, but it was bemusing to hear that these products are presumably worthy of the term "art".) There is a lot here for writers who have an interest in how technology has affected the history of their profession (and conversely), and what their fellow writers have had to say about its effect on their craft. It's not an easy read, but if these topics interest you, it's a well constructed one.

This is an amazing read about how people write and the tools they have used (beginning with the typewriter) to create text. If you wonder about how we came to use Microsoft Word, this tells that story... but there is so much more. Filled with new, inside knowledge about some of the world's most famous authors and their computers, Kirschensbaum has written a fun-to-read exploration of 'word processing' and computing. This book tells these writers' struggles to balance the newfound abilities of word processors (such as much more immediate editing and revising) with the often idiosyncratic computer technology on which this new software ran. This book will make you think about your writing in a new way-- a great read! Dag Spicer Senior Curator Computer History Museum

Excellent historical recap, although the language might be a little obtuse for the average vocabulary. Was please to learn I was an unsung pioneer, having acquired my Osborne I within a month after it was put on sale.

In this outstanding book, Matthew G. Kirschenbaum decodes the relationship writers have had with word processing technology since the literary world began to shift from typewriters to the personal computer. If this subject matter sounds dry, happily it is anything but in the pages of 'Track Changes'. Kirschenbaum, associate professor of English at the University of Maryland, takes on the topic with depth and an accessible prose style. The result should have broad appeal to a general readership and be of special interest to writers, for there is much here to excite the literary-minded. Kirschenbaum opens by referencing one of the pop cultural touchstones of our time:

'Game of Thrones' or, more specifically, 'A Song of Ice and Fire', the fantasy novels by American author George RR Martin on which the popular television series is based. As he told a talk show host in 2014, Martin chooses to write his books on a DOS-era computer with no internet connection, using an ancient program called WordStar. Describing this combination as his secret weapon, owing to its lack of distraction and isolation from any threat of a computer virus, the author also credits WordStar with his long-running productivity. By opening with the work habits of a megaselling author and then travelling back in time, chapter by chapter, to the emerging typewriter-based storage technology of the late 1960s, Kirschenbaum eases the reader into a dazzlingly rich and absorbing history. It is fascinating to note the reluctance with which computer-based word processing was first viewed by the publishing industry. Some writers were so wary of being outed as early adopters that they chose not to disclose their new toys to their employers, or even went to the lengths of having their finished manuscripts rewritten using typewriters before submission. Although screen size and small memory capacities caused early concerns and frustrations, it was not long before science-fiction writers, in particular, thrilled to the ability to gain greater control over their text, as well as being freed from the tedium of retyping work. Kirschenbaum quotes a Harvard physicist who came to a realisation in the early 80s: 'We all knew computers were coming, but what astonishes us is it's not the scientists but the word people who have taken them up first.' Once bestselling writers such as Stephen King, Isaac Asimov and Terry Pratchett adopted word processors and publicly noted the significant improvements in their productivity, it seemed there would be no turning back. As the technology matured, computers and their inner workings became a source of inspiration for writers, too: the likes of William Gibson's 'Neuromancer', which popularised the word 'cyberspace', for example. 'Track Changes' is based on five years of research and the author's academic bent can be seen in the 80 pages of detailed notes that follow the narrative text, but never in the prose itself. This is a remarkable achievement. For a project that seems geared toward stuffiness, Kirschenbaum's writing sparkles with well-chosen anecdotes and a keen sense of humour. His enthusiasm for the topic is palpable. After a section profiling thriller author James Patterson, whose occasional media nickname is 'The Word Processor', owing to his prodigious output, produced alongside a half-dozen close collaborators, he wonders what type of technology The Word Processor himself runs. 'Surely it must be a mighty one!' Kirschenbaum suggests, before revealing the answer: 'He works his stacks of manuscripts longhand. How perfect is that?' For the author, this subject is intertwined with his own experiences as a writer,

naturally enough. It is dedicated to his parents, *“who brought home an Apple, and he notes in the preface that the book itself was written mostly in [Microsoft] Word, on a couple of small, lightweight laptops.”* The book is named for the incredibly helpful feature in Word that allows readers to see the revision history and minute variations between different versions of documents during the editing process. The origin of this feature is only addressed directly in the final chapter, where Kirschenbaum also writes: “Writers live with and within their word processors, and thus with and within the system’s logics and constraints” these themselves become part of the daily lived experience of the writers’ working hours, as predictable and proximate as the squeak of a chair or that certain shaft of sunlight that makes its way across the room.” As that illustrates, the author has a way with words, not just an appreciation for how they are processed. The final paragraph is a thing of immense beauty, too, and may bring a tear to the eye of anyone who has sat and watched as fingertip pressure applied to a keyboard instantly became words processed on a screen. Review originally published in The Weekend Australian, August 27 2016: [...]

Interesting book, but focused more on social impact of computerized text processing than on the “insider” point of view. I would have liked more stories from the early days of Silicon Valley about the actual development of such iconic word processors as WordStar, WordPerfect, and Microsoft Word.

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