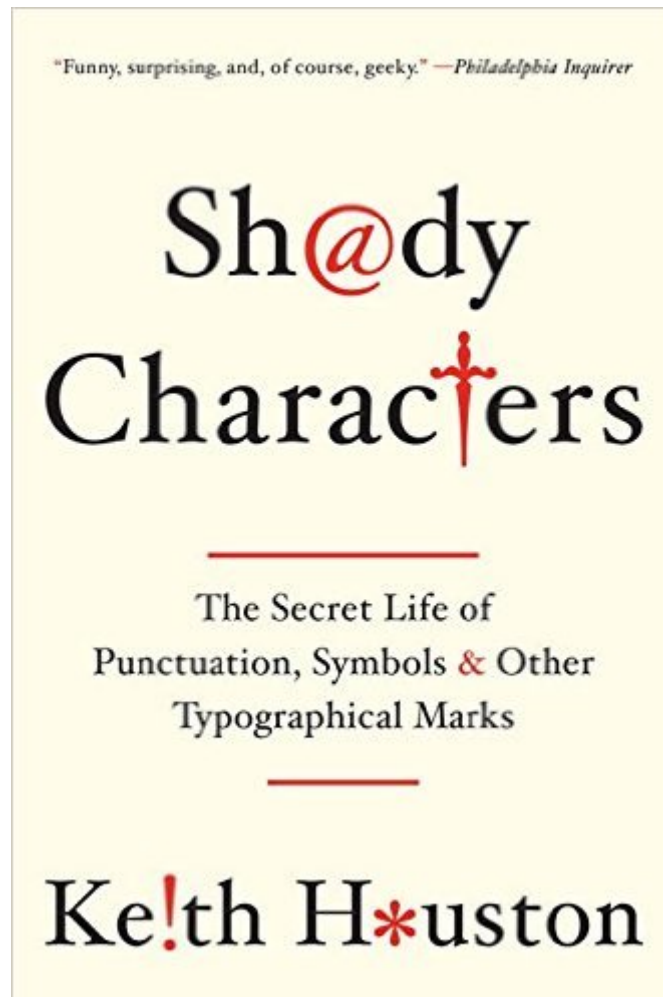


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Shady Characters: The Secret Life Of Punctuation, Symbols, And Other Typographical Marks



Synopsis

An absolutely fascinating blend of history, design, sociology, and cultural poetics • highly recommended. • Maria Popova, Brain Pickings 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 (†) • which alternately illuminated and skewered heretical verses of the early Bible • 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 (Œ) 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 (–). 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

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' * * *. [B]y 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.

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