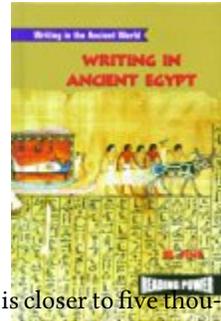


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jil Fine. *Writing in Ancient Egypt*. New York: PowerKids Press, 2003. 24 pp. \$17.25 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8239-6506-9.

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One of the most intriguing aspects of ancient Egyptian civilization is its language. For centuries, people have marveled at the beautiful and complex writing system created by the ancient Egyptians. Hieroglyphs permeated almost every aspect of life in ancient Egypt. Not only were temples and tombs decorated with carved and painted inscriptions, but hieroglyphs were also found on objects of daily life from furniture to mirrors to jewelry. Writing was more than just a mere day-to-day practicality for the ancient Egyptians; it was also imbued with a magical aspect. Words had power. The Egyptians believed that images that were carved and painted would exist forever. Thus, carved offerings on the wall of a tomb, for example, would magically “come to life” should the real thing cease to be left for the spirit of the deceased. Certain hieroglyphic signs served amuletic purposes and would protect the one who wore them.

People often think of the Egyptian language as mystical or mysterious. The aesthetic beauty of the hieroglyphic writing system is appreciated, but the way in which the language works is not often understood. Unfortunately, this book does little to explain the way in which the language worked.

Divided into five chapters, this book discusses several aspects of ancient Egypt and its writing system. None of the chapters gives very much detail, and in some cases the information given is either incorrect or vague. For example, in chapter 1, “Ancient Egypt,” the author notes that Egyptians lived along the Nile five thousand years ago. This is a bit of an understatement. We know from the archaeological record that settlements in Egypt date to at least 5000 B.C., and there is evidence for some even earlier. Perhaps the author meant to say that the unification of ancient Egypt under one ruler occurred around

3100 B.C.E., thus giving a figure that is closer to five thousand years ago.

The reader is told that “much of the land was desert” and that the Egyptians “depended on the river for farming and travel,” yet the author does not describe the annual inundation of the Nile which provided rich fertile soil for growing crops. This annual cycle was very important to the Egyptians.

The author also explains that the Egyptians created a 365-day calendar. She does not explain that this is not the same 365-day calendar that we now use, but rather that the ancient Egyptian year was divided into three seasons of four months each, each month with thirty days. There were also five extra feast days at the end of each year.

Egypt is not mentioned in the text as being a country located in Africa, nor does the map show Egypt’s place within the continent of Africa (p. 4).

The next three chapters deal with different scripts used by the ancient Egyptians: hieroglyphs, hieratic, and demotic. The author repeatedly uses the incorrect term “hieroglyphics” rather than “hieroglyphs” (pp. 6, 7, 10, 18, 22). As a beginning student in Middle Egyptian class, one of the first things we were taught was that the term “hieroglyphic” was an adjective and that “hieroglyph” was a noun. Therefore it is fine to speak of “hieroglyphic signs,” but to refer to “hieroglyphics” is grammatically incorrect. It is a common mistake that one sees all the time. Nevertheless, it makes me cringe every time I see it.

The image on page 8 does not tell about daily life in ancient Egypt. It is part of a funerary papyrus that describes underworld events that the deceased might encounter after they died. On page 11 we are told that “hi-

eroglyphic” means “sacred carving” in Greek. While this is correct, it is interesting to note that this is not what the ancient Egyptians themselves called their language. They referred to hieroglyphs as *medou-netcher*, or literally, “god’s words.”

In the chapter of hieratic writing, the author tells us that the Egyptians used pens cut from reed. Pens were not commonly used until the Roman period. For most of their history, the ancient Egyptians used reed brushes.

Analysis of black inks from ancient Egypt shows that almost all were carbon black. Carbon inks are made from mixing a partly burned organic material such as wood or oil with a binding material such as a gum. It might be confusing to children to say that the ink comes from “the ashes of burnt wood” when kids are used to thinking of ink as a liquid substance. Egyptian writing is often described in terms children can understand: hieroglyphs are like printing in our alphabet, hieratic is like cursive writing and demotic is like shorthand. Not many children (or adults) are familiar with shorthand these days, so maybe a close enough metaphor would be the abbreviations found in text messaging such as: “c u l8tr,” “lol,” and the like. It should also be noted that the image on page 17 is not a good clear example of Demotic writing. Most of what is seen on the right side of the papyrus is actually Greek.

In the fifth and final chapter, the author discusses the end of the use of hieroglyphs and discovery of the Rosetta Stone. Again, there are some errors and omissions in this chapter. For example, Alexander the Great was not a Greek King. He was Macedonian by birth, but conquered the Greek city-states as well as much of the then-known world. There is no mention of Champolion’s decipherment of the Rosetta Stone in 1822. This seems to be a rather glaring omission in a book about Egyptian writing as this event was the turning point for the understanding of how the ancient Egyptian language worked.

It should also be understood that only during certain periods of Egyptian history were kings (leaders) buried in pyramids. Most notably during the Old Kingdom (2625-2130 B.C.) when the pyramids at Giza were built. This trend for pyramid building continued into the Middle Kingdom (1980-1630 B.C.) as well. The caption leads one to believe that all kings were buried in pyramids. One only has to point to the tomb of one of the best-known pharaohs, King Tutankhamun of the New Kingdom, to

see that this is not always the case. King Tut was buried in the Valley of the Kings in a tomb hidden in the cliffs. These hidden tombs had become a feature of royal burial since about 1600 B.C. (and perhaps even earlier).

The glossary also includes some definitions that are imprecise or inaccurate. For example, anyone who has studied Demotic could tell you that the script is far from “simple.” Perhaps it can be best understood as being derived from a simplified or abbreviated version of hieratic.

When one checks the weblinks listed in the back of the book, there is only one website listed. While the one that is listed is quite good and full of fun things for kids, I find it hard to believe that this is the only site that would be helpful to teachers or interesting to children.

The author of this book is the author of a number of other works on ancient writing in the Writing in the Ancient World series. Other areas covered by this series include ancient Mesoamerica, ancient Phoenicia, ancient India, ancient Mesopotamia, ancient China, and a general work on writing in the ancient world. This author has also written books for children on such varied topics as *Life Inside the Naval Academy*, *Bomb Squad Specialists*, *The Chunnel*, and the *Shackleton Expedition*, which leads me to suspect that neither ancient civilizations nor ancient writing might be her specialty.

As an Egyptologist, I feel badly that I cannot recommend this book, since I know first hand that little kids are fascinated with all aspects of ancient Egypt including hieroglyphs. Unfortunately there are not many books for this age group (four to eight) which focus on ancient Egyptian writing. Educators or parents who are interested in introducing the language of ancient Egypt to their students would be better served using one of the books by David Silverman, Peter der Manuelian, or James Rumford.[1] While the reading level for these books is not the same as for the book being reviewed, the information contained in them is accurate and attractively presented.

#### Note

[1]. David Silverman, *Language and Writing in Ancient Egypt* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Natural History, 1990); Peter der Manuelian, *Hieroglyphs from A to Z* (New York: Scholastic, 1996); and James Rumford, *Seeker of Knowledge: The Man Who Deciphered Egyptian Hieroglyphs* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003).

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