

What Part is This?

A review of the book: *The Finger: A Handbook* by Angus Trumble
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, First Edition 2010

By Geoffrey Detrani

Back in the day (1989, actually) when the world was morphing from cold war conflict to the age of the “new world order”, the writer Francis Fukuyama questioned whether we might be witnessing the end of history. Not the end of our recorded story; but rather, the end of the mega story, the big picture, the conflict between major political-historical forces that pushed the minor human narratives to periphery.

It didn't take long for Fukuyama's trumpet blast of triumphalism to sound tinny and off key. But this change did seem to coincide with an era of micro-historical focus. If big historical subjects and players were no longer fashionable subjects, how about the small ones? How about the life of a village rather than the nation state? Or the story of a building or an object as it changed through time? Or, the history of the body and its individual parts?

The growing genre of socio-anatomical micro-histories has given us histories of hair, blood and the heart, the penis, the vagina, and of the smile. Now, the author of the history of the simile, Angus Trumble, presents a history of the finger – a consideration of the essential digits of the hand as they relate to learning, to communication and economics, to battle, play, artifice and art.

We know that it is the all-important thumb that is the hand's manipulation enhancer – the thing that lets us grasp, make tools, clench a paint brush, type an email, or fashion a nuclear weapon. It is the digit that sets us apart. But what about the other digits?

In *The Finger*, Trumble, an art historian by trade, thumbs through a trove of sources (the book is copiously footnoted) in history, medicine, art, science, economics and literature to arrive at a compendium of facts, anecdotes and observations that fill in the contours of that question.

Catering to my childish self, I first flipped through *The Finger* looking for “the finger,” that bit of sign language that says, “Fuck you”. It has a place in this story, of course, and the reader learns that the ancient Romans used it just as we do today (“digitus infamis, digitus impudicus”), but in Trumble's boyhood Australia, the middle and index finger were used together to enact this most emphatic of gestures. Alas, America's cultural influence has squashed that bit of difference – Australians now say “fuck you” with the single “upwardly oriented distal phalanges of the middle finger” just like us. The world is getting smaller.

Beginning with the fundamentals, Trumble highlights the role the fingers play in human development. A baby's use of the outstretched index, or “pointer” finger, to signal

interest or direct attention is universal and linked to the acquisition of language and knowledge. This trait, it seems, is partly learned, partly innate. Fingers play a critical role in communication. Sign language for the deaf is obviously indebted to the fingers and their dexterity for its fluency. Trumble tells interesting stories of how this dexterity has allowed the non-deaf (cloistered monks, etc.) to communicate in sign thereby breaching socially imposed mandates of silence.

In Trumble's accounting, fingers have had a hand in: the expression of divinity (Christianity and Buddhism), the development of numeracy (Romans could count to one million using the fingers of both hands); the blossoming of commerce and accounting (and the obviously related growth of banking and finance and, therefore, capitalism); the proffering of affection and facilitation of play; the progress of war (the trigger finger); the expression of fashion and class differentiation (the glove as social plumage); the development of personal augmentation and embellishment (Eleanor Roosevelt was the first First Lady to have her nails done).

While some passages drag, and some points are belabored, it's with otherwise dexterous prose that Trumble grafts onto the body of anatomical-historical literature this tale that prompts us to reconsider the humble, resourceful fingers. Their story goes hand in glove with humanity's larger one.