CULTURE

Right to the (ball)point
Ted Bishop's fascinating new book explores our relationship with ink

"The Social Life of ink
Culture, Wonder, and Our Relationship with the Written Word"

By Ted Bishop
Viking Canada, 400 pages, $29.95

REVIEWED BY
Iain Reid

A few years ago I made the decision to switch from pens to pencils. I'd always been loyal to my blue-ink pens but had become self-conscious of my (often) ink-stained fingers from leaky pens. So I switched to the classic yellow pencil. But something strange happened. I couldn't get rid of my pens. Even the cheap ballpoints. I had no practical reason to keep them, but I still have them all in the Milwaukee Brewers coffee mug that sits on my desk.

In an interview from 1973, Roland Barthes admitted, "I have an almost obsessive relation to writing instruments. I often switch from one pen to another just for the pleasure of it. I try out new ones. I have far too many pens..."

Ted Bishop can relate. Bishop, a professor of English literature and film at the University of Alberta, cites Barthes in his new book, The Social Life of Ink. Like street lights, ink is one of those social constituents that's concealed by its ubiquity. Because it's been everywhere, for so long, we've stopped seeing. But as "pixels have replaced pigment," Bishop has decided now is the time to take a closer look.

The book is the realization and acceptance of his seemingly lifelong fascination. Bishop is endearingly obsessed. And that's what's called for if a 300-plus page book about ink is going to engage: a sincere, unabashed obsessive as guide.

The book is part cultural history, part memoir, and part travelogue. Some of the book's greatest strengths are found in the series of characters associated with the ink and pen innovation, from the idealist inventor, Biro, and his hope for a "pen that worked like a press," to the perfectionist, Marcel Bich, and his inexpensive, disposable Bic ballpoints.

Bishop's project (a self-dubbed "pilgrimage") takes us to Turkey and Argentina, China, Tibet and Central Asia. As part of his experimental research, Bishop has a memorable ink-making session in Texas, and visits an inkstick factory in She Xian that still makes inksticks by hand, "using designs that dated back to the Ming dynasty."

Some of the most interesting parts are, unexpectedly, those detailing the technical aspects of ink making, and the varying recipes from different regions. "These ink recipes from a thousand years ago have the density of poetry; they take you into a strange world where men and women grind the rind of pomegranates and conduct love affairs with ink from the gall of the turtle."

Throughout his travels and research, Bishop wonders if we are nearing the end of ink. He settles, optimistically, on the idea that ink's cultural footing is just shifting. The Internet, long thought to be the end of ink, has actually, according to Bishop, helped connect communities of ink and pen lovers throughout the world. In recent years there's been a growing resurgence in use of specialty ink and fountain pens. Ink is moving from being a utilitarian item to a specialty one.

I (excitedly) discovered that my beloved blue ink isn't just blue anymore. Instead, "you explore a range of micro-tones." Including, from one manufacturer, American Blue, Midnight Blues, Cosmic Cobalt, Daphne Blue, Ebony Blue, Supershown Blue, Lake Placid Blue, Sonic Blue, etc. (He had me at Midnight Blues).

The narrative, although not stodgy, isn't entirely void of cliché (from the section on the history of tattoos: "the whole notion of tattoos had gotten under my skin"). But Bishop's writing is clear, researched, unpretentious, and moves along with a gentle humour. It's never pedantic or showy. The prose, regardless of topic, is consistently accessible.

Bishop is an academic, but this isn't a scholarly work. His hope here is to reach many, not a few. The success of the book has less to do with a reader's initial interest in ink and pens and more to do with the author's sincere devotion to, and enthusiasm for, a substance most of us use but, like so many things, take for granted.

"It took me years to realize it," writes Bishop, "but like Barthes, I 'absolutely require' writing - not to compose, not to write in the literary sense, but to move a pen across the page... the pleasure of the page now mingled with the impress of thought."

Iain Reid's most recent book is The Truth About Luck.