This book features anecdotes and opinions concerning the history of spectacles, and especially spectacle frames, and their relation to aspects of British, and to a lesser extent, American, popular culture. The dust jacket describes the author as a “freelance writer, author, broadcaster and cultural commentator for nearly two decades.”

The author discusses various aspects of the history of spectacles from their invention for the correction of presbyopia in Italy in the late 13th century to more recent times. His take on the sometimes-hypothesized earlier invention in China is that if there was some prior form of glasses in China, their function was for shading the eyes rather than for optical correction.

Two hundred years or less after the invention of spectacles, minus lenses for myopia were incorporated into them. A notable person among the first to wear glasses for myopia was Pope Leo X, born Giovanni di Lorenzo in 1475 into the famous Medici family of Florence. According to the author, Leo was not the stereotypical introverted myope, but instead was one with “rather extravagant material tastes…and an immensely enthusiastic huntsman.”

A 1600 painting of a Spanish cardinal and officer of the Inquisition may be the first depiction of cords extending to the back of the head to hold spectacles in place. Among the important 17th century events discussed are the invention of the telescope by Hans Lippershey in the Netherlands and the 1629 start of the Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers in England. The author looks at prominent 18th century opticians Edward Scarlett, Peter Dollond, James Ayscough and Benjamin Martin, and their contributions, and then moves on to Benjamin Franklin’s bifocals, quizzing glasses, monocles and pince-nez.

Some of the 19th century matters examined are the impact of Donders’ book on refraction, beginnings of the acceptance of glasses by ophthalmologists, the emphasis on professionalism by the English refracting optician John Browning, and the founding the British Optical Association.

An emphasis of the book was the style of spectacle frames worn by various entertainers and public figures and their relation to the popularity of particular frames. This extended from the round plastic frame worn by silent film star and comedian Harold Lloyd to the frames worn by Bo Diddley, Buddy Holly and Michael Caine, the round wire frame worn by John Lennon, and the aviator-style frame worn by Gloria Steinem.

Another emphasis was how spectacles and their wearers were portrayed in novels and movies. This can be seen as changing somewhat over the years. Writing in 1916, author P. G. Wodehouse recommended to novelists that pince-nez could be worn by good college professors, bank presidents and musicians, but no bad men, and monocles could be used by good dukes and all Englishmen. The 1960s saw the beginnings of designer spectacles and magazine features on spectacles as fashion accessories. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, celebrities such as Gloria Vanderbilt and Sophia Loren had lines of eyewear in their names. In the 1980s, Luxottica made a deal with Armani for a line of spectacles frames.

A short review can’t give a full representation of all the tidbits of information to be found in this book. It can be recommended to those seeking a light-hearted, wide-ranging tour through the popular cultural history of spectacles. The book contains 27 black-and-white illustrations. A bibliography is included for those who wish to do further reading or potential sleuthing for sources for some of the statements made by the author.