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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

Column Editor: **Barry Fast** (Academic Book Center)

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Sweynheym and Pannartz Are Dead, or, Why Reading Printing and Publishing History May Be Worthwhile

by **Paul Gleason**

A review of:

The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing 1450-1800, by Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin. London and New York: Verso, 1990 (paperbound). (Originally published in French as *L'Apparition du Livre* by Éditions Albin Michel, Paris in 1958; the Verso (English) edition, first published in 1976, was translated by David Gerard and edited by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and David Wootton.). 378 pages, indexed. \$17.95 (United States); \$13.95 (United Kingdom). ISBN 0-86091-797-5.

Conrad Sweynheym and Arnold Pannartz, two Germans who had learned the trade in Mainz, introduced printing into Italy in 1465, when they set up a press in a Benedictine monastery at Subiaco, near Rome. They worked together, in Subiaco and subsequently in Rome, until 1473, producing editions of about fifty different books. Five centuries later, why should we care about the work done by these long-defunct printers and their contemporaries or, for that matter, their successors?

Perhaps the most sensible answer is that people who are involved with publishing today -- as publishers, librarians, typesetters, printers, wholesale or retail booksellers, and so on -- can better understand the contemporary scene by learning more about how the book trade got from there to here. Also, as **Karen Winkler** points out in a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article (July 14, 1993, pp. A6-A8), there has been a recent heightening of interest in book history that "is related to the rise of elec-

tronic media, whose growing strength is casting print culture in sharp relief."

The Coming of the Book is an excellent guide to the evolution of publishing during roughly the first 350 years of printing. The authors have delved very deeply into libraries and archives to obtain the extensive data they use to support their assertions throughout the book. **Lucien Febvre**, who died not long before this book was first published (in French) in 1958, was a prominent French social historian and a leader of the *Annales* school (named after the journal *Annales: Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, of which he was a co-founder) that has done much pioneering work in book history. His considerably younger colleague **Henri-Jean Martin** was a librarian at the Bibliothèque Nationale (the French national library) when the book was written and was also a member of the *Annales* school. Several of the book's sections on specialized topics were written by other French scholars.

The book covers a great many subjects, only a few of which can be mentioned here. For example, Febvre and Martin do a wonderful job of explaining how printing spread rapidly during the fifteenth century from Germany to all of Europe. They also describe how large-scale international printing and publishing conglomerates emerged rather early — in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries — in Europe as shrewd and well-financed entrepreneurs acquired presses in several countries and/or arranged for many existing printers to be their subcontractors on publishing projects, as well as developing rather extensive distribution and retail networks.

The authors describe the work of the early humanist printer/publishers — people like **Jean Amerbach** of Paris, **Anton Koberger** of Nuremberg, **Joost Bade** of Lyons and Paris, and **Aldus Manutius** of Venice — during much of the sixteenth century. These men, who were scholars in their own right, assembled coteries of distinguished scholar/authors and published their works in editions of the highest quality. This golden era of book publishing, which occurred when book publishing was still strongly

affected by the fine calligraphy and elaborate illumination that had characterized the best books produced by the medieval scribes, also saw the works of many distinguished artists -- including Albrecht Dürer, Hans Holbein, and Lucas Cranach — used to create book illustrations.

Febvre and Martin focus on how printing and publishing operated as a business, including how it was affected by both favorable and unfavorable economic trends. For example, after the good publishing years of the humanist printer/publishers, a period of overproduction and industry-wide crisis hit. The authors note that "the first concern of publishers was survival, especially in France. . . . The world of the book emerged impoverished and diminished from economic turmoil. Publisher-booksellers were no longer concerned to patronise the world of letters, but only to publish books with a guaranteed sale. . . . Publishing was in total subjection to authority. Originality was shunned, and new works . . . were not favoured." Correspondingly, the quality of book design (including illustrations) and production diminished. So things continued until the latter part of the seventeenth century.

One particularly interesting section of the book presents an account of the pivotal role of printing in both the Reformation, as the works of Martin Luther and John Calvin rapidly attracted readers throughout Europe and helped Protestantism to win numerous converts, and the Counter-Reformation, as both the hierarchy of the Catholic church and French kings and their ministers sought to exclude heretical books from their realms and reinforce religious orthodoxy with their own publications. The authors describe how all their efforts at censorship ultimately failed, as many printers and booksellers — especially the larger and better connected ones — adopted a variety of ingenious subterfuges that helped them to avoid getting snared during the authorities' erratic and often half-hearted enforcement campaigns. They also provide readers with interesting accounts of the extensive and costly book piracy that, over time, created pressures from the publishing community for enactment of

national copyright laws in Europe.

Febvre and Martin explain in considerable detail how printers established and ran their businesses — how they learned their trade, how they attempted to identify underserved markets, how they obtained capital, what presses and type fonts they had, what paper they used and where they got it, what they charged customers for printing jobs, what they paid their workers, and much more. They also describe the bookselling business in detail — how books were packed and shipped, how booksellers who traded with one another settled accounts, where urban bookshops were located, who the principal groups of their customers were, etc. Somehow the authors were able to unearth a wealth of relevant documents — for example, printers' and booksellers' financial records, journals, and correspondence, as well as pertinent legal documents — providing them with data that greatly enhanced their descriptions of printing and publishing at specific times and places.

Another thread in this book's elaborate web of description involves the role of book fairs in the international book trade. Febvre and Martin explain how these fairs — first in Lyons, then in Frankfurt, and later in Leipzig — served as important meeting places for publishers from all over Europe and played a crucial role in promoting cultural exchange. Their well-researched descriptions, especially of the Lyons and Frankfurt Fairs, are quite effective in helping the reader understand what these gatherings were really like — who came, how they traveled there, where and how they did business, and more.

The Coming of the Book clearly describes how publishing gradually shifted from its initial heavy concentration on religious and scholarly works published primarily in Latin to an increasing emphasis on secular books, including popular literature, published in vernacular (national) languages. It also traces the expansion of literacy that printing helped to bring about and describes the gradual evolution of publishing from a small-scale business producing books for an educated elite into an industry producing for a true mass market.

This translated book provides readers with a continental European perspective on the evolution of printing and publishing that the language barrier, colonial heritage, and Anglophilia ordinarily make it somewhat difficult for North

American readers to obtain. England, where printing was introduced relatively late (by William Caxton in 1476, some 40 years after Gutenberg started working with type) is referred to only occasionally, primarily as an export market for books printed on the Continent. (The book's solid index may provide a crude gauge of the book's geographical focus: There are, for example, 122 page references for Paris, 77 for Lyons, 62 for Venice, 57 for Basel, 42 for Strasbourg, 34 for Antwerp, 30 for Nuremberg, 27 for Rome, and 13 for London.) Readers may catch a whiff of Gallic chauvinism in a few places in the text, but it is not pronounced.

This reviewer cannot judge the fidelity of the English edition to the French original, but the quality of the English prose is high. It should be kept in mind, though, that *The Coming of the Book* is a rather dense, heavily annotated work of scholarship. The book's wealth of detail can be daunting, especially to readers not familiar with the names of the many printers and publishers referred to. (For this reason, some readers may find it useful to read a more approachable overview of printing and publishing history, such as Warren Chappell's readable, handsome, and informative *A Short History of the Printed Word* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1980), before reading Febvre and Martin's book.) The book's 9-point type, which presumably was used to keep its production costs down, and dearth of illustrations (created by eliminating 24 black-and-white plates included in the original French edition, leaving only 2 black-and-white maps) make it less than inviting visually. Nonetheless, its high intellectual specific gravity, innovative approach to its subject, and the thorough research it is based on ensuring that *The Coming of the Book* will amply repay careful reading.

Note: Readers interested in further information on the history of the book may wish to look over the above-mentioned *Chronicle of Higher Education* article (and accompanying reading list) and an article by Ian Willison and Tim Rix entitled "Remembrance of Things Past: Worldwide Activity on Book and Book Trade History" (and accompanying reading list) in Volume 4, Issue 2 (1993) of *LOGOS* (pp. 99-104).

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(Washington, DC). The views expressed in this article are those of the author and should not be interpreted as reflecting those of the IMF.

Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*: An Appreciation, And a Glimpse of the Author

by Ellen Duranceau (MIT)

A review of:

A Suitable Boy by Vikram Seth. Harper Collins, 1993, 006-017012-3, 1349p.

In an era of instant email communication, sound bites, and splintered MTV images, Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* reminds us how rewarding a real commitment to a long, well-written novel can be. And Seth knows this is a long book. Making fun of his own longwindedness on page 1,254, Seth has the character Amit Chatterji, a poet and novelist, respond to a question from the audience at a reading of his work. He is asked why his forthcoming novel is to be so long, and replies:

"'Oh, I don't know how it grew to be so long,' said Amit. 'I'm very undisciplined. But I hate long books: the better, the worse. If they're bad, they merely make me pant with the effort of holding them up for a few minutes. But if they're good, I turn into a social moron for days, refusing to go out of my room, scowling and growling at interruptions, ignoring weddings and funerals, and making enemies out of friends. I still bear the scars of *Middlemarch*.'"

A Suitable Boy is one of those good long novels that will turn you into a social moron — one of those long, seductive excursions into the lives of others that, in the hands of a talented author, takes us for a time out of our own life and into the pleasures, pains, and strivings of fictional beings we come to know and love, people whose fates become so important to us that we are lost in their concerns and we miss our stops on the subway and retreat under the bedclothes right after dinner, to learn what choices they will make and whether they will succeed or fail in the choosing. If you are a reader, like me, who yearns for someone to bring the breadth, depth, and richness of the greatest nineteenth-century literature — books like

Middlemarch, *War and Peace*, and *Anna Karenina* — into our age, then **A Suitable Boy** is for you.

The story is made up of intricately entwined strands of plot that are interwoven into a single tapestry of life in Northern India in the early 1950's, just after India's independence from England. Set against the political turmoil of these years, the primary narrative thread concerns the engagingly sincere, intelligent, and conflicted college student Lata Mehra and her mother's attempt to get her married to a "suitable boy." Lata must choose between three very different suitors: the poet Amit, the ambitious shoemaker Haresh, and her forbidden Muslim lover, Kabir. This choice-of-suitor plot, pleasantly familiar to readers of nineteenth-century novels, is made fresh and convincing here both because of the affection we feel for Lata, and because of Seth's compelling depiction of the opposing demands placed on her by family, religion, friendship, and romantic love as she sorts out what — or whom — she really wants.

Several other plot lines work their way around and into Lata's coming of age story, all of which concern the lives of four families: Lata's family, the Mehra's; the Kapoors; the Chatterjis; and the Khans. We follow the sincere and well-meaning Maan Kapoor's struggle towards redemption from dissolution and sexual obsession; we participate in the lives of Lata's sister Savita and her asthmatic husband Pran Kapoor as he struggles to develop an academic literary career in a conservative English department; we follow with horror the struggle of Maan's tutor Rasheed to overcome his limiting circumstances; we delight in the humor and irony in Seth's depiction of the would-be Englishman, Lata's arrogant and egotistical brother, Arun Mehra, and his selfish, snobby, and acquisitive wife Meenakshi.

By sketching out these plot lines here, I cannot begin to capture this book's soul for you, but I can at least tell you what the author himself had to say about his book, for I had the good fortune to be present at a reading and signing at Waterstone's bookstore in Boston on October 2nd, and heard Vikram Seth speak. Having finished **A Suitable Boy** the previous evening after more than three obsessive weeks as a "social moron," I waited with much anticipation to see what Seth would have to say about how he came to create such a book. He

arrived looking like somebody's brother, in casual beige slacks, black sneakers, and a colorful orange and striped shirt, smiling, his face open and accepting, unassuming, entirely without pretense. He is a slight man, with a smile that will melt your heart and a writer's rumpled hair, which, as he ran his fingers through it, gave him the slightly preoccupied but friendly air of having left his pen in mid-sentence — willingly — to join us for a chat.

Seth read some of the lighter passages of the book, since he felt they would work better on their own, and his selections were filled with the satisfying twist of small ironies and with wry, good-natured amusement at the all-too-human foibles of a self-important poet, and a devoted but overdramatic mother, Mrs. Mehra. It is part of Seth's genius that while we laugh at Mrs. Mehra, we sympathize with her, too; Mrs. Mehra is amusing but never completely ridiculous. In the passage he read, as throughout the book, Seth makes us laugh and smile over the comedy and absurdity inherent in family relationships, while managing at the same time to inspire respect for these relationships.

It took Seth a decade to write this book: 6 or 7 years in research and writing, a year and a half in revision, and a year to promote, which he told us he expects will be followed by "a year of recovery." During revision, he cut the novel from over 2,000 pages, removing passages that seemed to be regurgitated research, poor writing, or were not required to move the story along or provide structure for the novel. When he had completed this arduous process, he offered the book to publishers as it was, refusing to cut more. He had hoped to publish the book in three volumes once he realized that it would be longer than the 250 pages he'd originally envisioned, but the architecture of the book precluded this: there just weren't any good breaks in the story.

Seth denies that his character, the poet Amit Chatterji, is a stand-in for himself, a thought that will inevitably strike every reader. He says there are elements of himself in Amit — who bears the first name that appears on Seth's birth certificate — but that he is also a part of many of the other characters, old and young, male and female. Besides, Seth said with his easy and natural smile, Amit is "more feckless" than he himself is, and probably "won't ever finish HIS long novel."

I asked Seth to comment on his book's implication that passionate or purely romantic love is dangerous and therefore undesirable, while love built on friendship is solid, lasting, and therefore more valuable. Seth said that we should not assume that he personally believes anything that emerges out of his characters' actions; he followed his characters and let them develop, even if their choices forced him to explore paths that he himself was not comfortable with. But Seth did concede, after this disclaimer, that he feels both the extremes — pure romantic love, which, like an addiction, leaves a lover obsessed and unable to function without the love object, and a purely arranged marriage, which deprives the participants of life itself — are wrong.

One woman in the audience, although "not trying to suggest she wished he'd written a 'politically correct' novel" asked whether he had in fact written not the great Indian novel, as has been proclaimed, but rather the great Indian Middle Class novel, given the relative lack of attention to upper and lower classes in the book. With his characteristic and refreshing refusal to mystify, inflate, and surround his work with the stultifying trappings we have come to expect from some literary critics, Seth said he didn't care whether he'd written the Great Indian Novel or the Great Indian Middle Class Novel. This was not his concern; his concern, was to "Do his best; [and] damn the rest." At this — and perhaps at the relief of having a stilted political correctness courageously held at bay — the audience broke into spontaneous applause.

This lack of pretension, so evident in all Seth's words, carries into every detail of the book. For example, there are no endnotes, no footnotes, no glossary to define Indian terms or to provide background for social and political events. This lack is completely intentional, according to Seth. He felt that his book must be an Indian novel, but not *only* an Indian novel. He did not want Indians to read his book and be jolted out of the narrative by having their own culture defined for them; but he also wanted the book to be able to "travel," since he felt it must transcend its setting. And while it may take the untutored reader a while to catch the full meaning of some Indian terms, **A Suitable Boy** does manage to travel, for although the political and cultural life of India in the '50s drives the plot, the drama of the characters' lives is

only partially a product of Indian society. The trauma of love not sanctioned by the family; the struggle for self-definition; the desperate desire to leave a small village and turn against the conservative mindset of one's family to seek a better life in the city; the petty cruelties of those in power; the potential in each of us for heroism and for evil — these themes are not unique to India or even to a particular time in history, and they make the book more than an Indian book and more than an historical novel.

Seth, who was originally an economist until "gripped" by Pushkin's Eugene Onegin, a novel in verse, has written books of poetry, a travel book, and, most recently, a novel set in California and written in verse, **The Golden Gate** (1986). Asked why he shifted his setting from this last novel, which did not involve any references to India, Seth denied that he was trying to "find his roots." With characteristic sincerity, Seth said that he simply likes to try different genres so that he and his readers do not become bored, and because he tends to choose his projects based on whatever conversation, meeting, or bit of imagined dialog inspires him to write. His imagined conversation about the need for "a suitable boy" for Lata which takes place in the opening of the novel was the germ for the entirety of **A Suitable Boy**.

After exhausting himself with this decade-long project, Seth lightly jokes that he may try Haiku next. This is one reader that hopes he sticks to novels.

New York: You Have to be Here

by Barry Fast

A review of:

Up in the Old Hotel. Pantheon Books, 1992. \$27.50 (soon to be in paperback).

"When a man takes to meddling with Egyptian mummies fresh out of the tomb, damn near anything's apt to happen"

Joseph Mitchell left his boyhood home in Fairmont, North Carolina and at the age of 21 arrived in New York City with The Depression. He spent the next sixty-odd years of his life (he recently died) celebrating the city and the people who inhabited it in a series of profiles for *The New Yorker* magazine. **Up in the Old Hotel** is his collected essays and

three short works of fiction.

New York has always been, and continues to be, a city on many levels. Mitchell is not interested in the media moguls, the fat cat Wall Street money men, the fashionable trend setters and the politicians (except the crooked ones or the Tammany Hall ward workers). He loves the losers, the down and outs, the fringe inhabitants that give the city, to this day, its depth and character. Gypsies, cops, bartenders, flophouse managers, street preachers, Hudson River shad fishermen and Great South Bay clammers, bearded ladies and Mohawk Indians, kind old blondes and brassy hookers — all are profiled by Mitchell.

His writing is straightforward and economical, and his ear for language is perfect. Where another writer would describe, Mitchell quotes. And it is from these long quotes that every nuance of personality emerges. When gypsies talk about themselves, the reader can hear the conversation. There is no romanticizing here; the gypsies gyp, and their scams are recounted in detail. Yet somehow Mitchell manages to enable us to see them fully formed. While we hear the details of a plot to steal an old woman's every last cent, a plot that works all too well, there is no harsh judgment, no condemnation. One could argue that there should be, but that is not Mitchell's intention. He just wants us to see gypsies as they are. As the King of the Gypsies says at one point, we steal gas out of someone's car while politicians steal a whole oil well. Hardly justification, but true enough.

Mitchell's favorite bar is McSorley's, which is still going strong to this day, although it is the oldest saloon in New York. Kelly, the assistant bartender and after hours sweeper likes to show newcomers around the place. The walls are decorated with a series of paintings by John Sloan, done between 1912 and 1930. But Kelly is not interested in this high brow art; he says to a visitor "Hey Mac, if you want to see some real art go look at the naked lady in the back room." The nude is stretched out on a couch and is playing with a parrot. The painting is a copy, probably by a budding young artist at Cooper Union just down the block, of Gustave Courbet's "La Femme au Peroquet." Kelly always translates for strangers. "It's French," he says learnedly, "It means Duh Goil and Duh Polly."

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