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Occasional Rambles in the World of the Book — Books as Entertainment

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The Classical Greeks were great consumers of tales and fables — even more so the Romans, who seemed to relish eroticism in literature as greatly as in their figurative drawings, paintings, etc. Some of the manuscripts, more from the Roman than the Greek, containing a sampling of these fictions, survived the “cleansing” of “profane writings,” first by the Christians. The remaining Classical literature subsequently was further cleansed by the Moslems in their *jihads*, which eliminated Christianity from all of North Africa and most of the Middle East. But some writings survived, often left in strange out-of-the-way places.

The more readily recovered Latin literary manuscripts were either copied in a relatively accurate way or provided the stimulus to recast them in various ways to generate the fables and tales so commonly found in the collections of the then European nobility or well-to-do of the Medieval period. With the great Greek revival of the late 15C and early 16C occasioned by the efforts to close the Great Schism of the Eastern and Western churches initiated at the Council of Constance the Greek entertainment writings began to appear in the West. The enormous subsequent avalanche of Orthodox scholars and Greek manuscripts resulting from the Moslem *jihad* leading to the capture of Constantinople and the final demise of the Roman Empire in the East led to the recovery of what is virtually all the Classical canon presently known. Fortunately and at nearly the same time, **Gutenberg** had bestowed upon Europe his revolutionary invention of “artificial writing,” which was to make this avalanche of manuscript material widely available. This newly acquired cultural treasure brought into print in multiple copies and widely distributed throughout Europe, proved to yield some of the premium fuel driving the enormous Western knowledge-generating engine of the printed book in the 15th and following centuries.

And with the printed book the means to provide a wider literate audience with the fictions that had previously entertained the nobility and wealthy was suddenly within the grasp of the growingly literate bourgeoisie. **Gutenberg**, himself, was the first to launch a printed popular fiction. **Albert Kapr**, the leading recent **Gutenberg** scholar, has **Gutenberg** while still in Strasburg printing the *Sybyllenweissagung*. A popular account of supposed Sibylline prophecies, some dealing with purported return of the **Emperor Frederick**. This piece cannot legitimately be styled an entertainment for it reflected a deeply held set of cultural beliefs but it was a

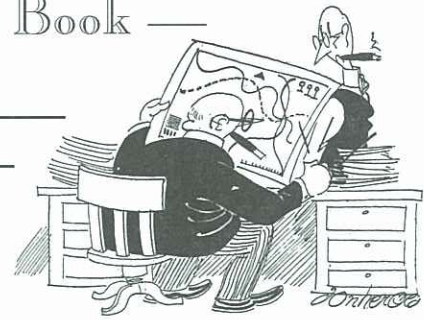
far more popular piece of literary fare than the several reprintings of the standard *Donatus* Latin grammars/dictionaries, which were **Gutenberg's** economic life-blood at the time.

Among the “graduates” trained in **Gutenberg's** printing offices, several quickly took up the printing and distribution of all manner of fictions when they departed to set up their own printing offices — not simply Classical fables and tales but popular folktales, fabricated in the various languages of Europe in addition to Latin. These ventures nearly always proved highly successful and rewarded the owners of these presses well.


And so publishing, bookselling and much library collecting has continued to this day. Indeed, this entertainment industry acquired a new trajectory of growth, in the early 18C with the advent of the “English Novel.” This example was quickly followed across Europe. This trend was quickened with the inauguration of the study of “English Literature,” usually situated in the curriculum of rhetoric in the four Scottish universities. This arrival in the prestigious realm of “higher education” was occasioned by the desire to give graduates of these Scots universities the polish of English gentleman and offer them an enhanced opportunity to qualify for the many prestigious places in the rapidly growing British Empire. From Scotland, departments of first “English Literature” and then “Literature” spread to England and quickly thereafter to the United States colleges and those of the numerous British overseas colonies — Canada, Australia, etc.

In succession followed the founding of private “lending Libraries,” the “Golden Age of reading” (mostly of the widespread reading of fictions before and after the turn of the 20C), and in the late 20C the formation of international conglomerates largely managed along classic “business school” lines, tinctured with a cultural smugness ostentatiously derived from the remarkable cultural achievement of the astonishing knowledge-generation engine having the book at its heart and from the esthetic conceit of “the art of literature” fostered by the University curriculum. The latter covertly but quite candidly acknowledge their almost total dependence upon the publishing of successful fictions by their continuing closer approximations to the “star system,” pre- and post-publications publicity and “tie-in” promotions, and other marketing strategies of the leading entertainment media of film and television.


Yet for all these foibles what these pub-



lishers, booksellers, and librarians are serving are the all-too-human reader interests and wishes which are manifestly inherent in and deeply rooted in human nature. The Greeks, the Romans, Europeans in the Middle Ages and post-**Gutenberg** eras have all eagerly sought out such fabrications — as have those in the three great cultures, Indian, Oriental, and Moslem. While far



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from the most noble and estimable intellectual and ethical pursuits and the best of the book fictions remain “a good read.” A virtue equivalent to a pleasant Spring evening or a languid turn in the pool. So, rather than taking cultural umbrage or some other “high-minded” critical posture with respect to fictions we are well-advised to see it as a gentle and pleasing way to spend a few quiet hours. 