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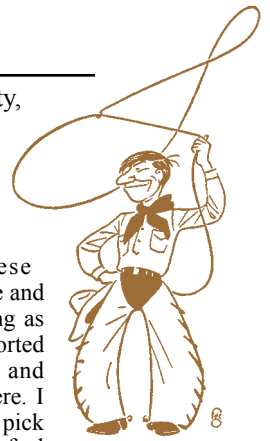
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Lost in Austin — Books for a Rainy Day

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Every so often someone mentions the **Google** book project — you know, the one where they (**Google**) want to digitize every book in the world. Is this the modern equivalent of **Alexander the Great** or **Napoleon** and their ilk wanting to conquer the world? If **Google** should succeed (and how would we know?), what would the empire be like? Would **Google** rule supreme in the world of books? Lawsuits underway suggest otherwise, and it doesn't take deep thinking to realize how scary and repugnant it would be if this oversized corporate ego were to get its way. **Google** does some neat things, but encouraging a life of the mind is not one of them, not even indirectly, and to finish this project or even begin to approach a large percentage of the millions of titles that exist leaves one wondering what has actually been accomplished. At least a mountain climber can look down on the rest of the world and feel a physical and emotional satisfaction, but **Google** and the world's book titles? The Supreme Court to the contrary, a corporation doesn't have a heart because it isn't human. And let us not, in this essay, even speculate about the essence of those who purport to run those corporations.

What are we to make of such a project? As someone who haunts second-hand book shops and nearly always manages to find a gem, sometimes one that I didn't know existed, shouldn't I revel in the knowledge that that long-sought-after book that I have longed for, lusted after, for many a year is there online just waiting for me to complete that **Google** book search and finally be satisfied? No, I find no solace or satisfaction in being able to track a copy written solely in zeroes and ones. And besides, as I have just noted, some of my most satisfying purchases were of the most serendipitous serendipity one can imagine, finding a book that pleases me and that I had not known existed. As is often the case, I will spot a book nestled among hundreds or thousands (oh, joy) of others. The dust jacket or binding is probably not colorful or flashy, rather it reflects an ineffable character, charm, and appeal, like love at first sight. The book says, "I am not like the others, I am special. Choose me."

So I carefully remove the book from its resting place and mechanically blow across the top edge of the book to remove any dust that might have settled since the bookseller set it in place. I prefer to see the dust fly because it suggests that no one else has handled the book in a good while. And no wonder, I may be the only person to appreciate the book for what it is, and I wonder how it got to the bookseller in the first place. Was it unrequited love? Was the owner a fickle book owner who buys, reads, and discards? Moving? Broke and in need of money? Dead and no heirs to appreciate what was theirs for the taking?

There is the serendipitous high that also

comes from finding the one title that I hoped to find like the time in 2007 when I attended the **Frankfurter Buchmesse**. In front of the **Fair's** main entrance, several second-hand and antiquarian booksellers had set up tables. As I wandered from table to table, wishing that I had an extra suitcase, I was looking for a post-war novel called *Missa Sine Nomine*. I would have been happy to have found anything by **Ernst Wiechert**, the author, but that was the one I really wanted to own. It need not be a first edition or even hard bound, I just wanted my own copy.

As I examined an assortment of *Insel Verlag* volumes that are reminiscent of the **Peter Pauper Press** books of the 1950s (except *Insel* titles tend toward the literary and artistic), I was losing hope and deciding to break down and break one of my cardinal rules by asking a bookseller if he had a copy.

But as I moved to the next table, there was a copy of *Missa Sine Nomine: Roman bei Desch* (published by **Desch**), its mauve dust jacket calling to me silently but clearly. My heart skipped a beat as I respectfully picked my book up (for it was mine the minute I saw it), looked at the title page, and then the verso: "**Verlag Kurt Desch**, printed in Vienna 1973, first published in 1950." My copy was like new except for a few rough edges on the dust jacket, and it cost me a mere four Euros, a bargain in any currency.

Wiechert's novel is 412 pages long. My copy came with the publisher's postcard still in it inviting the dear reader to indicate which six genres were of interest and to then mail the card to Munich. I have kept the card with the book as an association and for the **Ronald Searle** drawing on the card of a man in a bookshop opening a book and observing the words fall from the pages onto the floor.

This treasure had a place of pride in my carryon luggage as I traveled back to Austin, but I didn't begin reading it and haven't yet started on it. I read it several years ago in a hurry because it was an ILL book. My own copy is reserved for my retirement when I can take my time reading it on those rainy Oregon spring and fall days with nothing else to do and nowhere to go but where **Wiechert's** words lead me.

For the record, I don't own a **Kindle** or any other electronic book reader other than my computer and I don't intend to buy one, not because I can't imagine the usefulness or practicality of such a machine but I don't intend to travel much after I retire, and when I go I will try to go by train, car, or boat and not on what **Tarzan** called the "Iron Bird," when I can help it. Trains, ships, and books were meant for each other — batteries not included, batteries not needed.

The books that I intend to read at my leisure are already living with me. I won't preclude

buying others, even on a fixed income, but these friends will endure and comfort me as long as I live. I am comforted as I look around and see them sitting there. I grow tranquil as I pick one off the shelf, feel its heft, fan its pages, read a paragraph or too. I may not have enough time to read them all but rather that than not have enough to last me until the end.

Finally, I am not sure of the benefits of digitizing all those books that were not born digital, whether you want to read them with a machine or print them out for reading later. Out of sight, out of mind. Never mind that of the millions of titles that have been published and self-published, most are not very good. I say that with confidence even though I can't read more than a fraction of a percent of what is published annually. And if you are like I am, you learned over the years to put down a book that you begin in good faith but end with disappointment. I don't have that experience often because of how I select books to read — reviews, recommendations, known authors — but each year when I read books nominated for *ForeWord Magazine's* Book of the Year Award, I realize that not all books are equal. As a writer, I appreciate how difficult it is to write and how few authors write really well or have much to say, but I am still shocked when I work my way through a book of the year nominee and find myself not bored but embarrassed. I have learned that it is particularly difficult to write a good or even interesting (interesting can't always make up for bad writing) autobiography or memoir. Yes, I know that everyone on earth has a book inside oneself but at least 80% of us should leave those books alone. Sometimes that writing could be improved by judicious, insightful editing but mostly the lives being described are everyday lives with clichés for experiences. That is a fact of life and not meant to be disrespectful of those who need to write about themselves, a form of therapy much cheaper than paying a shrink but anything but confidential. Do we really want to know about someone who has spent his entire adult life and most of his adolescence dealing drugs? What are we to learn after the author goes straight and finds salvation? Better to read **St. Augustine's** or **Rousseau's** confessions knowing in advance that each amounted to something after all after sowing a few wild oats. Reformed sinners are a dime a dozen and should confine their confessions to those willing (and able) to listen. Keep a diary instead, and resist the impulse to self-publish it.

Digitize, schmigitize. Just because you can do something doesn't mean you should. 🐻