Booklover: Don't Judge a Movie by Its Book

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When Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1958 he was “immensely thankful, touched, proud, astonished, abashed.” The award came on the heels of the publication of Doctor Zhivago by the Italian publisher Giangiacomo Feltrinelli. Since the publication had been denied in his homeland the thought was such a prestigious award would bring insult to the government, and he was forced to leave Russia or to decline acceptance. He penned to Khruschev: “Leaving the Motherland will equal death for me. I am tied to Russia by birth, by life and work.” He also sent a telegram to the Swedish Academy: “Considering the meaning this award has been given in the society to which I belong, I must refuse it. Please do not take offense at my voluntary rejection.” (Lyrical even in his declination.) To which the Nobel Committee replied: “This refusal, of course, in no way alters the validity of the award. There remains only for the Academy, however, to announce with regret that the presentation of the Prize cannot take place.”

Now to a short story. It is of constant curiosity to me how I come to find certain Nobel literature. With Pasternak I would be hard-pressed to find an individual who does not have some knowledge of Doctor Zhivago. But in my little gem of a used book entitled Great Stories by Nobel Prize Winners is Il Tratto de Apollo, a short story by him. I read the 23-page story and then reread it after researching Pasternak’s life for this column. I am glad, because as I absorbed his words I believe I could feel his artistic conflict, his transition from music to writing, the impact of a short academic time in the realm of philosophy, and this new poetic lyric wording leaping from his pen as he wrote a short tale based on his visit to Italy. I will share two passages. Decide for yourself.

“The leaning tower of Pisa had pushed its way through a chain of medieval fortifications. The number of people who could see it from the bridge were increasing every minute. The red glow of the sky, like a pursuivant, crawled along the square. The streets were blocked with tiptitled shadows, some of which were still fighting in the narrow alleyways. The tower of Pisa continued its march, moving everything down, until at last one insane, gigantic shadow covered the sun. The day broke into pieces. And meanwhile the lackey, briefly and confusedly informing Heine of his recent visit, succeeded several minutes before the final setting of the sun in presenting the impatient guest with a car [sic-card] bearing a coagulating yellow stain.”

“A seat by the window. A moment later—a completely deserted platform formed a massive

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When I started writing books nearly fifty years ago, I had an idea about the end result of what I was doing. That first book was a short monograph, _Temperature Control_, which _Wiley_ published in 1968. I thought it would remain on library shelves for many years. Why not? After all, a decade earlier I’d had a student job in the MIT library, and weren’t the basement stacks full of old books, among other materials? Just to further entice me, the reception area at _Wiley’s_ offices on Third Avenue in Manhattan was wood-paneled and lined with shelf after shelf of books whose ranks I yearned to join. (To this point, no surprise, my dream is reality. According to WorldCat, for instance, half a dozen research libraries within a short drive from my Upstate New York home have a copy.)

My thinking was reinforced twenty years later, when I edited the first of my twenty or so engineering handbooks. That was in 1986, when _Wiley_ published the first edition of the _Mechanical Engineers’ Handbook_ with my name on the spine. I had the idea that the handbook would have a long shelf life, and in some future edition, would live on long after I was gone. Again, why not? The main competitor (although it focuses on fundamentals, while mine focuses more on new practices) was the ubiquitous _Marks’_ handbook, which was still going strong three decades after the death of Lionel Simeon Marks. ( _Marks_ was born in Birmingham, England in 1871 and died of a heart attack in Providence, RI in 1955. According to Wikipedia (Sorry!), he held a mechanical engineering professorship at _Harvard_ for over four decades, starting in his early twenties, and also taught at _MIT_ in the early 1900s.) The _Marks’ Standard Handbook for Mechanical Engineers_ was first published (without the word _Standard_ in the title) by _McGraw-Hill_ in 1916 and is now in its 11th edition. There have been three editors subsequent to _Marks_ himself, but his name remains in the handbook’s title. The first of the three successor editors was Theodore Baumeister, III, who worked at _DuPont_. His name was as prominent as _Marks’_ had been. Eugene Avallone’s name was added to Baumeister’s, and Ali M. Sadegh’s was added later (both mechanical engineering professors at _The City College of the City University of New York_, where future editors presumably can be recruited).

Actually, _Marks_ started as a competitor to an older _Wiley_ handbook — _Kent’s Mechanical Engineers’ Handbook_, which was first published in 1895. _William Kent_ (1851-1918) was the founder. Handbook dimensions were pocket-sized. _Kent’s_ original title was _Mechanical Engineer’s Pocket-Book_: A reference-book of rules, tables, data, and formulae, for the use of engineers, mechanics, and students. At the outset, new editions came much more rapidly than they do now. The eighth edition was published in 1910, only fifteen years after the first. _Kent’s_ son, Robert Thurston Kent, born in 1880, took over at some point in the early 1900s and new editions came more slowly. Trim dimensions had grown bigger. Eventually, others edited the handbook, but as was the case with _Marks_, _Kent’s_ name remained in the title. The 12th edition was published in 1950, more than a decade after _Kent_ had split into two volumes. In the 11th edition, published in 1936, the first volume was called _Design, Shop Practice_ and the second volume _Power_. In the next edition, the first volume title was changed to the more professional and academic sounding _Design and Production_. It was edited by _Colin Carmichael_, who also edited a book on electric motors. The _Power_ volume was edited by _J. Kenneth Salisbury_, an expert on steam turbines. Like early editions of _Marks_, _Kent_ was bound in faux leather. Someone gave me a copy of one of the volumes as a going-away gift when I left a drafting job at the Portsmouth Navy Yard and went back to _MIT_ for my sophomore year. (I got the job by acing an easy civil service exam.)

That 12th edition was _Kent’s_ last. The base of _Wiley’s_ engineering handbook program was tiny (four or five titles in all), particularly compared with _McGraw-Hill’s_ and, nothing was done with the program until the late 1970s, when a former _McGraw-Hill_ executive was hired to revive it. When I signed on to edit a mechanical engineers’ handbook, I thought that _Wiley_ would keep _Kent’s_ name in the title, but they had no intention of doing so. I wanted to make a fresh start as well, and it seemed a no-brainer to jettison much of _Kent’s_ pages like, for instance, tables with numerical values that engineers could easily call up on the Texas Instrument pocket calculators that were so popular at the time. In the end, contributors used almost nothing from the old book in my new one. Besides, by then it was three decades since the last publication of _Kent_. So _Wiley’s_ decision made a lot of sense.

Yet _Kent’s_ name has by no means disappeared. You can still find copies of some editions of his handbook (he published several other books) on _Amazon_, _Ebay_, _Abebooks_, and _Ailbris_, among other places, mostly for a few dollars, although in some cases at collectors’ prices. I’m not sure, however, even given considerable time, that you would be able to put together a collectable set of your own of all the _Kent_ editions. Of course, numerous state and academic libraries have various editions in their physical-copy collections. The book has been digitized, and you can peruse the contents of some pre-1923 editions. So _Kent_, in one edition or another, appears destined for perpetual life, albeit in a vegetative state impervious to the ministrations of editors.

In my view research libraries are keeping their physical and digital copies of _Kent_ as historical artifacts. The situation with _Marks_ appears to be far more preferable — although I don’t know _McGraw-Hill’s_ plans for it. In any case, _Marks_ appears to be a living organism with body parts (chapters) that editors and contributors can fix as they see fit. They can keep the handbook roughly the same size or they can expand it into a multi-volume work. Whatever the decision, _Marks_ has its place on the shelves of research libraries.

Until recently, I’d thought the same about my own _Mechanical Engineers’ Handbook_, which is published in four volumes, to take into account the growing breadth of the discipline. The fourth edition is in production, with publication due at the end of this year. I hope to be around for several more editions. I also hope that _Wiley_ will see fit to keep the _Handbook_ alive and will keep my name in the title or at least on the cover or title pages of future editions that other editors will deal with. But now that research libraries are increasingly buying published materials in digital format, is it safe to assume that future editions of my handbook will reside in those libraries in one form or another? Handbook publishers – commercial houses, pretty much — rightly in business terms and in the interests of shareholders, will focus on whatever deals they can make that maximize the bottom line. Of course, publishers and libraries do have a, should I say, contentious partnership. For example, publishers are making complete archives of scholarly journals available to libraries as a benefit to patron researchers. Perhaps handbooks in multiple editions will be treated the same way. I can only hope that the promise of pride I felt when I first entered the book-lined reception area at _Wiley_ so long ago, and my hope for longevity of my books, will not be lost.

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**Booklover from page 77**

Stone, massive rumbling sounds and massive exhortation from the guard: _Prompt!_ — and the guard runs alongside in pursuit of his own exhortations. The columns of the station slip smoothly away. Lights scurry along, intermingling like knitting needles. Gleams of light from the reflectors catch the carriage windows, caught by the draught, proceed through, by-and-across the opposite windows, lie along the line, trailing, slide on the rails, rise and disappear behind the cart-sheds. Dwarf streets, misshapen and hybrid corners — the jaws of the viaduct swallow them with a hollow roar. The bustling of approaching gardens close to the blind. The restful space of the curling carpet of vines. _Fields._