Lost in Austin -- My School Books

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Lost in Austin — My School Books

by Thomas W. Leonhardt (St. Edward's University, Austin, Texas; Phone: 512-448-8470; Fax: 512-448-8737) <thomasl@stedwards.edu>

For many years, I have owned a small book called My School Books by Hendrik Willem van Loon, a Dutchman born in 1882. He migrated to the United States in 1903 and became a best-selling author and illustrator of children's books, the most famous of which is The Story of Mankind for which he was awarded the very first Newbery Award in 1922.

My School Books is only 24 pages long, from frontispiece to the final page and was printed by the T.W. and C.B. Sheridan Company for the E.I. DuPont de Nemours & Co., Inc., “Fabrikoid” (“Fabrikoid” is DuPont’s Registered Trademark designating its pyroxylin coated and impregnated fabrics) Division for distribution as a memento at the DuPont “Wonder World of Chemistry” Exhibit at the New York World’s Fair, 1933. The book is bound in PX Cloth — a pyroxylin impregnated cloth which is distinguished for its cleanliness, its durability and its functional beauty."

My copy, in very good condition (no wonder, being bound in pyroxylin), once belonged to Edward deWitt Taylor (1871-1962), a San Francisco printer of fine books. He would have had more than a passing interest in the design, typography, and binding of the book. As for the subject matter, if Taylor bothered to read the book, as I have just recently done after owning the book for more than thirty years, he must have been as disappointed as I was.

van Loon tells of three illustrated volumes, in Dutch, that he inherited from his grandmother and how dull his school books were by comparison. I had been expecting a bibliography of sorts, a list of his favorite childhood books at the very least.

If I were writing about my school books, it would be an even shorter book unless I included those books that accompanied me throughout my school days spent in eleven different schools as we moved from place to place, wherever the Department of the Army saw fit to send my father. And when I say accompanied me, I don’t mean that I possessed many books, even in high school when I began reading at a higher level and an increased pace.

What I mean is that books other than textbooks were my companions whom I visited in the post libraries wherever we went.
Bet You Missed It

Press Clippings — In the News — Carefully Selected by Your Crack Staff of News Sleuths

Column Editor: Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

Editor’s Note: Hey, are you all reading this? If you know of an article that should be called to Against the Grain’s attention ... send an email to <kstrauch@comcast.net>. We’re listening! — KS

THE DEFENSE RESTS
by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

“Rumpole” author John Mortimer defends his five favorite fictional depictions of the bar. Are you ready?

Anthony Trollope, Orley Farm; Charles Dickens, Bleak House; William Shakespeare, Measure for Measure; Charles Dickens, Great Expectations; P.D. James, A Certain Justice.


THE EMBLEM OF A TIMELESS VOLUME
by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

An art reviewer’s paean to glorious bookplates with laurel leaves wrapping a scroll reading “From the Library of.” Here were produced by the Antioch Bookplate Co. (now Antioch Publishing) in Yellow Springs, Ohio. Co-founder Ernest Morgan was in a work-study program at Antioch College when he caught the bookplate bug.

Plates were designed by Rockwell Kent and Robert Whitmore, and what designs they were. A tree with roots wrapped around an open book; an owl sitting on a book stack; “ex libris” with the man on the library ladder.

And the great homilies: like “I enjoy sharing my books as I do my friends asking only that you treat them well and see them safely home.”

Karen Gardner now owns the plate business via Bookplate Ink. Karen is working her niche well with sales up 40% over last year. Authors are now signing plates and sending them off to bookstores for self-adhesive insertion.


AT LEAST THERE’S NO MORE CARD CATALOGUE
by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

Bing Pan, a College of Charleston business professor discovers that college kids just open the first entry on Google. And since the number of hits determines the position, the article stays on top. He is not pleased with this, research-wise.


BACKTALK IS ALWAYS MORE INTERESTING
by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

Wikipedia now has 1.9 million online encyclopedia articles and is the 17th busiest US Website. If you go under the tab “Discussion,” you’ll find what the author refers to as addictive stuff. Editors get into some “prolix vehemence.”

Did Meucci or Bell invent the telephone? 242,000 words are devoted to this academic brawl. Should the concept of “limit” be explained as “average” in calculus. That one got a lot of heated debate. An author who ventured that most people consider kittens to be cute got attacked as “Eurocentric.”

And you’ll pick up some rare trivia. Raw potatoes are indeed poisonous due to solanine, but you’d have to eat a sackful.

Yes, the academic brawl. Should the concept of “limit” be explained as “average” in calculus. That one got a lot of heated debate. An author who ventured that most people consider kittens to be cute got attacked as “Eurocentric.”

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Marshall McLuhan thought his ideas on media were inspired by the Virgin Mary. And he believed that a global conspiracy of Freemasons was seeking to wreck his career. And this last comes authoritatively from his biographer.


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van Loon speculates that he was five or six when he started school. I was 5 ½ when I began kindergarten in 1948 at the Benjamin Franklin School in Junction City, Kansas. Miss Bradbury was our teacher. In those days, we weren’t supposed to learn to read in kindergarten, we were supposed to learn to play with others, obey rules, lie quietly on our mats, swallow our football-shaped cod liver oil pills without tasting them, and finishing our graham cracker and half pint of milk. We learned children’s songs and played the usual games of the time but I recall nothing academic at all from that school year.

I can’t remember the name of my first grade teacher in that same school but I remember our reader, a Dick and Jane book. Make fun if you will, but we learned to read, despite a profligate kindergarten devoted to play. The bright colors and bold illustrations were glorious to me and the prose — so clear and direct and unambiguous — gave me just the confidence that I needed to learn to read and then move on to bigger, longer, and more complex books. I won’t say better because I don’t want to belittle in any way the book that gave me my reading start.

We moved every couple of years so there were regular and frequent opportunities to get rid of things when it was time to pull up stakes so I didn’t really accumulate a lot of books growing up. Those that I remember carrying from place to place were gifts from my Grandmother Leonhardt and Aunt Audrey and included books given to my younger sister but claimed by me including Black Beauty. I never did finish that book, finding it utterly unfathomable to me, and included books given to my younger sister and included books given to my younger sister but claimed by me including Black Beauty. I never did finish that book, finding it utterly boring, but, using a red, indelible pencil, I dutifully made X marks by each chapter heading in the table of contents to mark my laborious way.

I had much better luck with The Lone Indian, a book that impressed me so much that I added my own illustrations in the flyleaf and inside the back cover. I also had a copy of Mark Twain’s Tom Sawyer and The Story of a Bad Boy by Thomas Bailey Aldrich, an author looked on with scorn by Mr. Twain, something I don’t understand because I enjoyed both books. Aldrich was a New Englander, as I recall, and Twain became one when his royalties allowed him to move into a fine house in Hartford. Perhaps it was some social jealousy that led Samuel Langhorne Clemens to look down on the literary efforts of a born New Englander. On the other hand, there is no doubt that Mark Twain is the superior writer who would be superior to anyone writing today if he should resurrect himself and resume his career. He is certainly a better writer than Hendrik Willem van Loon, too, but I wonder if we would have awarded him a Newbery for The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. And if we had, I wonder if he would have accepted it. We’ll never know. 🕵️‍♂️