

THEY'RE WONDERING WHAT YOU'LL READ

by Fred C. Kelly

A CLOSE friend of mine, a famous actor, used to entertain little groups of acquaintances by an amusing monologue based on the career of an old man from his home town. The character he used in his monologue had never actually existed but he had known a man enough like him to give the general idea. We always referred to it simply as *The Story*. I had heard my friend tell it so often I had learned it by heart and sometimes I used to tell it myself. Many of my own friends wrongly thought I had originated the story.

One day I came upon an advertising circular containing a stupid version of this same tale. The writer had tried to improve it by making it vulgar, and by introducing citified slang which threw it entirely out of key. I wrote on the margin of this advertising circular a brief paragraph: "Look at this. Some numbskull has tried to plagiarize your yarn", and sent it to my actor friend, the originator of the little monologue.

When I saw him, two or three weeks later, he said: "If people are going to steal that story, I'm tempted to put the true version into book form and publish it myself. If you'll help me in its preparation, we'll divide the profits."

"Don't be silly," I admonished him. "It is a thoroughly amusing little story when told as a monologue, but would never do as a book. Its merit lies in the homely absurdity of its humour; because it is on the border line of vulgarity, most people who might

read it would see *only* the vulgarity and miss the humour. You might perhaps sell five hundred copies, but those who read it at all would simply think of you as a man who tried to write a vulgar book. Forget it."

He went away and I thought no more of his proposal to put the monologue into book form until I learned that the book was not only on the market but was a best seller. In due course its sales reached nearly a million copies, instead of the five hundred I had predicted, and the author made about \$100,000 profit, half of which, if I had accepted his suggestion to collaborate with him, would have been mine. The book to which I am referring was, of course, Chic Sale's *The Specialist*. There was, indeed, "gold in them thar hills".

Ever since then I have had a sympathetic feeling for publishers who make a faulty prediction and turn down a book capable of a big sale. Such wrong estimates of a book's golden possibilities do often happen.

Trader Horn was turned down by at least four ordinarily shrewd publishers, and perhaps by even more than that; at any rate, the manuscript was badly tattered and dog-eared from many readings before it reached the office of the firm which finally published it.

To mention one more example: Several years ago, a novel, or mystery story, ran serially in *Munsey's Magazine*. It was the first serial written by a new author, a woman. By way of encouraging her, Bob Davis, edi-

tor of the magazine, with his customary courtesy and willingness to oblige, offered to find for her a publisher who would bring the story out in book form. He sent it to four or five good publishers in New York with whom he had friendly relations, but one by one they all rejected the manuscript. He then mailed the manuscript back to the author, along with a letter in which he regretfully told her of his inability to find a publisher. "I still think it's good," he wrote, "but have not been able to find a publisher who shares my opinion, and I am therefore passing the buck to you."

The author was in her library when the postman brought the manuscript back to her. She decided to send it to the first publisher she thought of. Knowing little of the field, she walked across the room to a book shelf to pull out a book at random to see who had published it. This chance selection was a red book. (Its color made it a little more visible than others nearby on the same shelf.) The woman found on the title page the name of a publishing firm in Indianapolis, and she promptly mailed the manuscript to them.

Two days later the editorial director of that firm was on the train en route to see this author at her home in Pittsburgh. He was so favourably impressed by the sales possibilities of her story that he took along with him blank contracts for the next three books she might write. The book in question was *The Circular Staircase*, by Mary Roberts Rinehart.

From all this it may appear that since one publisher turns down the book which makes a fortune for another publisher, the business of selecting books must be governed by chance rather than by scientific knowledge. But publishers say their failure to predict accurately which books will succeed is not because the feat cannot be performed, but

rather because they have not learned how. Book sales and people's tastes in reading *are* to some extent predictable—though perhaps less so than in almost any other line of business.

A few facts about the reading tastes of the majority of people are fairly well established. To mention one example of no special importance, almost any public librarian knows that the peak of interest in *astrology* comes in spring months, but the majority of those who read about *astronomy* do so in the autumn. Most reading is done, *not* in December and January when the days are shortest and the long evenings might be expected to induce sitting at home with a book; it is done in February and March—probably because the weather in many localities is then much more disagreeable than when the evenings are longest, and also because the social season is on the wane.

One thing which may definitely be predicted about a book is that it will not be successful, nor a good seller, unless it is *as good a piece of work as the author is capable of doing*. It is fatal for the author to try to write *down* to his readers. So far as I can learn from conversations with publishers, there seems to be no record of a successful book in which the author deliberately wrote trash, while capable of doing better, because he thought such a book would sell. Sincerity is a prime requirement.

But these are general forecasts of reading behaviour and cannot always be applied to specific books. What a publisher wishes to know when considering a manuscript is: How many people would be interested in this, and how can I induce them to buy it, without spending more money than I can afford to let them know there *is* such a book?

Right or wrong, when a publisher decides to bring out a book, he has in mind some

reason why he thinks it should reach a reasonably large group. Frederick Allen wrote a book called *Only Yesterday*, a history of the nineteen-twenties. The publisher evidently figured on the number of people in the country who were a part of this history, who had seen the events related in the book actually happen, and who had shared the feelings described in connection therewith. These people could thus have the fun of reading about *themselves*. His forecast that there were enough such people to insure a good sale proved to be correct; the book's sales soon reached 90,000.

Occasionally, plans for a book are so carefully laid and so logical that it is almost certain to reach the expected sale. An example of this is James Truslow Adams's *The Epic of America*. The publishers were seeking just such a book. The job was done by a man who had already gained a reputation not only as a colourful writer but as an author of other successful books, covering several phases of American history. Moreover, the book came out at a time when comparative frankness in history was possible; it was, in a mild way, a "debunking" book. Almost immediately it began to have a good sale and was soon on the list of best-selling non-fiction. Yet the sale was hardly more than the publishers had expected. They had known what they were about all along.

When the American publishers of *All Quiet on the Western Front* brought out that book, they made all preparations for a sale of at least 100,000 copies. It had already been a big success in at least two or three languages, and this success rested on sound psychology. It was the first book to give, with fascinating detail, the life and viewpoint of the average soldier at the front. Moreover, it came out long enough after the War for the former soldier, his family, and his friends

to be convalescent from their first disgust with war and willing to read about it again. The book actually sold nearly three times as many copies as the publishers expected. When the next book by the same author appeared, however, the total sale was a little less than expected. But it was more than 70,000—a decided success.

If an author has done two or three successful books it is comparatively easy to make a fairly correct guess as to the number of copies of his next book that can be marketed. Even in a case where a man has written no previous book, but is well known in a totally different field, it may be almost equally easy to estimate how many people would be interested in a book bearing his name.

Several years ago, when Sousa's Band was filling an engagement in Indianapolis, the personal representative of John Phillip Sousa telephoned to the publishing firm of Bobbs-Merrill and told the editor, Hewitt Howland, that Mr. Sousa would appreciate the courtesy if the editor would call at Sousa's hotel.

Sousa explained to Howland that he had written a little novel called *The Fifth String*, and as it was not a long story he would like to read the manuscript aloud to him then and there. Howland agreed and reclined comfortably on a couch in the hotel room with a couple of good cigars, listening while the great band leader read the little novel that represented his first exploration in the field of literature.

It may not have been a great story but it was not bad, and Howland estimated that there should be fifty thousand people in the United States who might be curious to see what so famous a musician could accomplish as an author. His firm published the novel and, sure enough, they did sell about fifty thousand copies.

In a general way, books may be divided into three classes: (1) Those that should interest a relatively small number of highly intelligent people. (2) Those that should interest a large number of readers lacking high intelligence. (3) Those of such broad appeal as to interest everybody.

A book of the first type may be brought out because of the prestige it lends the house that publishes it, even though its publication is unlikely to be profitable. The number who can appreciate its merits may be distressingly small. (Which recalls that I once heard Stephen Leacock say: "If I could afford to, I'd like to write a book so good that *nobody* would read it.")

Sometimes, unfortunately, a best-selling book belongs in the second class—intended for people of only moderate intelligence. Many novels, comparatively trash, have sold in greater numbers, and brought more money to their authors for serial rights, than novels of infinitely more merit written by such elders of American literature as Booth Tarkington.

Producing books that interest the mass of the people but are never found in homes of genuine culture isn't quite what an ambitious publisher would like to do. The ideal is to publish books of such high merit and universal appeal that *anybody* who chances to pick up the book wants to read it. The quality which makes this book sought by hundreds of thousands of readers is its power to arouse real enthusiasm. People not only like it; they like it so well that they button-hole their friends to tell them about it. Except, perhaps, for the modern "speakeasy", there is nothing to which word-of-mouth advertising is so important as to a book.

Now, how is a publisher to know in advance if a book is the kind that will stir a reader's enthusiasm to the point of making

him a shouter for it? The answer is simpler than one might think: employ an editor whose reading tastes conform to the reading tastes of the crowd. Of course the one great difficulty about this is that one must first locate and catch such an editor; but occasionally it can be done. It is no secret that Mr. Lorimer's success as editor of the *Saturday Evening Post* is due in a great measure to the fact that he buys what interests *him*. Since he has wide range of enthusiasm and great curiosity, whatever interests Lorimer is almost sure to interest a vast number of others. If a book editor is blessed with a point of view representative of a great mass of people, he does not need any further test of a book's probable success than that he himself can't lay it down.

One afternoon some years ago, Mr. Frederick A. Stokes closed down his desk a little earlier than usual and told his associates that he wished to hasten home because he could hardly wait to get back to the reading of a manuscript which he had been compelled to lay aside when he rushed to his train that morning. "If the rest of the story is as good as the part I have read," said he, "we are going to publish it and I'm willing to bet it will be a success." A success it was, too—*The Garden of Allah*, by Robert Hichens.

Many publishers have a whole board of editors and assistants whose composite tastes are supposed to be representative of the taste of the public at large; but if one editor can be found with the kind of genius which makes his mind a test-tube for the crowd mind, his opinion is more important than that of all the others.

To help him test his feeling about a book, an editor may systematically ask himself a list of questions. Such a list, in use in the office of one of the most successful New York houses, may read somewhat as follows:

1. How important or how interesting is the purpose of the book?
2. How well does the book achieve this purpose?
3. How large an audience may be expected for a book with such a purpose, so achieved?
4. Does the editor personally enjoy it?
5. Is it news, by virtue of message, novelty, author, or special situation?
6. Is it likely to receive conspicuous, important, or favourable reviews?
7. Does it say something worth while not said by any other book in its field?
8. Is it reasonably free from danger of justified censorship or suppression?
9. Is it *sincere*? Does the manuscript seem to express 100 percent what the author feels? [Probably this question regarding sincerity is the most important of all.]
10. How much money are we willing to bet on the answers to these questions?

Sometimes confirmation of a publisher's belief in a book's sales possibilities is slow; but the publisher must feel all the more satisfaction when such confirmation finally comes. Not so long ago Mr. John Macrae, head of an old firm, and one of the grand old men of the publishing business, was in London arranging for American publication of a number of books of European origin. Just as Mr. Macrae was about to start homeward, an agent placed in his hands a rough, unbound copy of one more book which he heartily recommended. The publisher read this on his way home and liked it well enough to buy from the British publisher a few hundred sheets, that is, printed pages of the book not yet bound. Mr. Macrae liked the book so well that he felt almost duty bound to offer it to the public; and in this way, because of the comparatively small expense, it could be tried out at a minimum of risk.

The book sold barely 500 copies in the first eight months following its American publication. Of this number nearly 150 copies

were sold in one book store. It later came out that a salesman in that store liked the book so much that he kept recommending it to customers, and the copies he sold probably accounted for the book getting a start. Everybody who bought it began to talk about it. They said it contained what is commonly known as human interest, and episodes showing a certain quality of human sympathy. It took the readers behind the scenes and gave them bits of vicarious adventure.

Though eight months getting under way, sales of the book began to go by leaps and bounds. When the publishers saw the book finally showing signs of vitality they were shrewd enough promptly to make liberal advertising appropriations and did all they could to bring the work to the public attention. They spent \$75,000 in exploiting it. It became a best-seller and continued to be a best-seller constantly for more than two years—*The Story of San Michele*.

Mention of John Macrae recalls that he nearly always wears in his necktie a little ornamental pin, and back of this pin is a story. It was given to Mr. Macrae by his former chief, then head of the publishing company. Years ago, this publisher found on his desk the manuscript of a novel. It seemed meritorious enough, but at that time he was not much interested in fiction, concentrating his efforts on more serious books. He therefore called up his friend and fellow publisher, Henry Holt, and said to him: "We have a fiction manuscript here that perhaps you would like to publish. As you know, we don't handle much fiction, but it might be suitable for you. At any rate, I'll send it over to you." Henry Holt published the book. Several months later he came to the office of the man who had sent the manuscript over to him and said: "I came to thank you for

your thoughtfulness in delivering that piece of fiction to us and as a testimonial of our appreciation I want to give you this little scarf-pin."

"Oh, yes," replied the other publisher, "I remember the manuscript but I don't seem to recall the title. I hope you have had good luck with it. What was the name of it?"

"It is called," replied Mr. Holt, "*The Prisoner of Zenda*." Whereupon the other fellow almost fell off his chair, for *The Prisoner of Zenda* had broken all records for sales, and James K. Hackett, a leading popular actor, was appearing in a play based on the story, with great success. The publication had brought the Holt firm a fortune.

Considerably longer ago than the period when *The Prisoner of Zenda* was an outstanding best seller, another publishing firm nearly let a fortune slip through its fingers because of uncertainty about a certain phase of public psychology.

A carefully prepared novel manuscript had come to Harper & Brothers. There were no typewriters in those days, and this had been faultlessly penned in neat, legible script. The author was widely known as a general of the United States Army. The manuscript had plenty of story quality; there was no question about its being interesting; but there was a grave question of the propriety of publishing it, because it seemed to violate good taste. Christ appeared as a character, and this, it was feared, would be resented by a great mass of Christian people. The editors hesitated for several weeks before they finally determined to go ahead and publish the novel. To their utter amazement, the great rank and file of conservative, Christian folk who, it had been feared, might criticize the book, praised it most highly. The book was *Ben Hur*, by General Lew Wallace, of Crawfordsville, Indiana, and it is hardly necessary

to say kept its place on the best-selling list for several years.

Many a ten-strike has been made by a publisher on a book that fell into his lap by the merest chance. Mrs. Douglas Robinson, sister of Theodore Roosevelt, then just becoming a popular figure, dropped in one afternoon, many years ago, to see her friend Major Putnam, and laid on his desk a little book she had picked up in England. "Here is a book," she said, "I believe you might wish to publish. I thought I would bring it to you."

Major Putnam did publish it and it swept the country like wildfire—a little book, with a thin, little story, by one Beatrice Harraden. It was called *Ships that Pass in the Night*.

Every now and then a publisher is even more correct in his judgement of a book than he himself can foresee. If he has solved the problem of determining wisely whether to publish a book or let it alone, he nevertheless runs into surprises as to how successful a well-chosen book may become. Influences which make sales of a book multiply are so varied that even after estimating them wisely there is still room for the unexpected. One of the strange facts about the great sales of *Trader Horn*, for example, was that it began to feed on its own popularity. Its initial success depended upon the interest aroused in an odd old character. Once the book had a good sale, this old chap was even more of a character. He was transformed from a poor, obscure pedlar into a celebrated co-author, rich and famous. We all like Cinderella stories, and for a man to rise from poverty to fame and riches, late in life, aroused so much interest that everybody wished to make contact with the old fellow. The only way to make contact was by reading his book.

The same publishing firm stumbled into pay-dirt when it decided to publish a little

book called *The Art of Thinking*, by a now well known French abbé. The editorial board was convinced that while this book could hardly have a large sale, they might count on selling between seven and eight thousand copies, which should bring enough profit to justify their investment. Sales never stopped until they had attained a figure of more than a quarter of a million.

As if that were not enough good fortune for one publishing firm, they were prompted to consider publication of a book made up entirely of material that had previously been published in fourteen small sections which sold for five cents each. While they naturally did not advertise this, yet they made no secret of the fact that *The Story of Philosophy*, by Will Durant, had been previously published and was still available for seventy cents, if one wished to have it in its cheaper form, instead of paying five dollars to get it in a single volume. The book went along quietly, and finally, when 8,000 copies had been sold, the author did the unheard of thing of asking the publishers to stop further advertising.

"I never counted on a sale of more than 10,000," he said, "and since you have come

near to that, I have no complaint. But I don't want you to throw away any more money on advertising."

The publishers, however, were willing to risk a little more. They believed that with proper effort they could sell another 10,000 copies. Then came the surprise. Those next 10,000 copies must have fallen into hands of people who were especially enthusiastic and did nothing but boost the book. Sales began to mount and kept right on until they were measured not by tens of thousands but by hundreds of thousands. And the author, in spite of his initial protests, reaped a fortune.

Regardless of all these surprises as to which books people will read at a given time, the fact remains that when we walk into a store and buy a book, we are contributing our part to a definite pattern. The publisher had reasons for believing that you and I and a few thousand others would buy whatever we do buy. If publishers were wrong too often in their efforts to predict which books will interest us, then publishers would all lose money and finally be forced out of business. Good publishers have come to know pretty much what they are doing.

THE PRIX FEMINA AMERICAIN

by Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant

ON FEBRUARY SECOND Willa Cather received, for *Shadows on the Rock*, the first award of the French *Prix Femina* to be made in the United States. This honouring of one of our finest American talents is in a large sense fitting, although the book in question—dealing with French Quebec in the seventeenth century—is less well adapted to the avowed purpose of the prize than *O Pioneers*, *A Lost Lady*, or almost any of the author's works.

In theory—"preferably", as the Constitution of the American Committee has it—the prize-winning volume should be one which, in addition to literary distinction, will increase in France the understanding of American life and culture. But *Shadows on the Rock* was a leading book of the year 1931-2—of that May-to-May year ordained for purpose of selection—and as against the two other books recommended by the American Committee, 1919 by Dos Passos, with its modernist pattern and disintegrated picture of Peace Conference Paris, and *State Fair* by Phil Strong, whose humour has a strongly provincial, not to say porcine flavour, the choice of the French women was for the recognized, or "classic", literary figure. At home, in Paris, it is the unknown talent, the "coming" man or woman who is honoured with this prize. On this side of the Atlantic the situation may prove a bit different, because with few exceptions the most distinguished American authors are scarcely even names to the French. Our Gallic friends have been

much less interested in our literature than we in theirs. Even if an American author is translated into French—and most of Willa Cather's books have been translated these many years—the chances are that he or she has been scarcely read or understood outside a small circle.

It is obvious that the annual award of this French prize to an American book will inevitably have the effect of widening the Frenchman's knowledge of our present trends and accomplishments. The costs and risks of translation and publication in France are borne by Hachette, a leading Paris publisher. The American author will receive the usual translation royalties; and of course additional advantages will come indirectly from the increased sale of other works and the wider comprehension of his talent.

II

No doubt the award of the *Prix Femina* to a woman will confirm many American readers in the assumption, suggested by its title, that this is a prize for a woman's achievement. Such is not the case; both in France and in the two foreign countries where the award is now made, it is offered for distinction and originality in literary work, regardless of the writer's sex. The *Femina* in the title comes from the fact that the judges are women.

The prize in France is no new thing, as it is with us; it dates back nearly thirty years, to 1904, when a group of literary