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LIFE AND LITERATURE

Best Sellers, 1935

BY MARY M. COLUM

IT IS FAIR to assume that the best sellers in any country, in any year, are a passably accurate gauge of the intellectual, emotional, moral, and imaginative interests of the average reader. But to assume, as some critics do, that they are also a gauge of the interests of the bulk of the nation is a misconception. For, except in odd communities, the bulk of the people neither buys nor reads books.

To start with, the average reader is by no means the average person: he is the exceptional member of the population, one of a minority. If we take a look at the titles of the best sellers for 1935 — T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Thomas Wolfe's *Of Time and the River*, Vincent Sheean's *Personal History*, Anne Lindbergh's *North to the Orient*, Franz Werfel's *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, Alexis Carrel's *Man the Unknown*, Clarence Day's *Life with Father*, James Hilton's *Good-bye, Mr. Chips*, we cannot help the belief that the mentality of the average reader is a high-class one and that his taste is liberal and large-minded. With such an index, there is no reason why any author should not be proud to be a best seller and to enjoy the favor of the average reader. In fact, one may fairly conclude that it would be difficult in our time for any outstanding book, no matter how unusual, to miss appreciation by a fairly large number of readers. That is, it would be difficult unless the book were poetry, for not a single volume of poetry, to my knowledge, has ever appeared on a best-seller list since such lists began to be compiled (a possible exception occurs to me — Edwin Arlington Robinson's *Tristram*).

However, it is clear that only a small minority of that minority that reads books at all reads poetry. Why this should be so is hard to understand. Is it owing to some defect in early training? Is it due to the fact that poetry for the most part is taught in schools and colleges by people who have no great appreciation of it? Some critics hold that it is because modern poetry has no relation to modern life. But a great deal of poetry in every age had very little to do with the life of the age. No literature, even prose literature, is necessarily about contemporary life or need have much relation to contemporary life. Can it be that poetry as a means of expression is not suited to this particular age? Or is it because poetry, being a distillation of literature, cannot be read constantly and in large quantities and that it needs for its setting a tranquillity which we can seldom have in modern life?

It is not that it needs mental training to an unusual degree, for it requires a more unusual mental training to read a book like the widely read *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* than to read most of the volumes of poetry published.

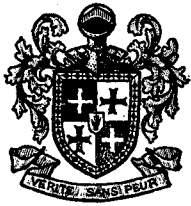
But if the best sellers are a gauge of the intellectual interests of the average reader only, how are we to find out what are the literary interests of the nation as a whole? One had best, to do this, ignore the book sales and devote oneself to a study of the magazines. For, when the average person reads anything at all besides the newspapers, he reads the five- and ten-cent magazines, and one must devote oneself not only to the higher five- and ten-cent magazines but to the cheaper ones that are on display on newsstands and in drug-stores. The very names of these are unknown to the average reader of books — *The Silver Screen*, *The Blue Book*, *The Love Fiction Monthly*, *The Dime Western Magazine*, *Horror Stories*, *Phantoms*, etc. The extent to which these and similar titles represent the reading of the bulk of the population is not at all realized, yet I can vouch from a perusal of them that they are not, in small doses, unentertaining; the objection to them is a mental and moral one, in as much as they seem to be the products, at the same time, of an elementary and an abnormal mentality such as one might find in certain dementia-praecox cases: the addict to them not only is given a false view of life, but must become incapacitated for any serious reading, any sound estimate of life, and even for any important experiences.

MEDITATIONS OF A SCIENTIST

BUT LET US return to the books read by the elite in 1935. Of these the bulk of the nonfiction was more exciting and entertaining than the bulk of the fiction. Of the nonfiction I think the two most extraordinary books were *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and *Man the Unknown*. The first, which has already been treated in this department, was an epic — that is, in this unlikely age when we thought that the old saga emotions and happenings were dead and done with, we had them appearing as a side event in the last war. And not only did we have them appearing, but taking part in them was the very man who could recognize them and translate them all into heroic expression, a man who was not only a leader in battle but a master of the written word.

Man the Unknown is an extraordinary book in spite of its puerilities, in spite of the combination of the most mature ideas

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