



Private Reading

EVEN reading, and private study (which is reading), are becoming institutionalized. President Conant and all the university and college presidents, are talking about adult education, and a good subject it is to talk about. As President Seymour of Yale said last week, when a student takes his B.A., the university faintly hopes that he is ready to get really educated. Not even a first-rate institution can guarantee more than an understructure for education, at age twenty-two or twenty-three. But if the pamphlets, circulars, tracts, magazine articles, and correspondence-course suggestions that come to an editorial desk can be trusted, the vast majority of adults interested, and most of those who cater to them, are thinking exclusively in terms of institutions. What can I do to be saved, for my intellectual interests stopped growing when I left college? Why, write to an institution and get a course, or go to an institution and get a course, or ask someone knowing in such matters to direct your reading.

These answers are good enough, if the prescriptions work. But they do not seem to cure mental inertia, or at least male mental inertia. If our women are the most curious intellectually in the world, and the most willing to be dosed with facts and ideas, our men are the least curious, even in economics and politics which would seem to be their business. Here is a test question. How many college graduates have done any reading, any study, any real thinking on the interrelations of business and government since the war? Yet here there have developed both necessities and dangers for which their formal education, unless very recent, has given them few or no frames of reference. And here also there has been a vast and important literature, which is as significantly new in the experience it analyzes and the ideas it deals with as the new physics. Who would attempt to explain the phenomena involved in radio transmission by the physics he studied in

college in 1920? Yet in problems of much more importance for society, the college graduate stands pat in what he learned in the past in his schooling, or deduces in the present from the narrow grounds of his own business.

The strength of the pre-Civil War America, when, among leaders, social, spiritual, and psychological problems outweighed, as they do today, the individual necessity of making money, was its private reading. Any student of the period when the Republic was formed, or of that intense idealistic movement in New England of the thirties to the fifties which did so much to crystallize American ideals when America at large was even more materialistic than today—any such student must be impressed by the amount of private reading—and by men. There is little doubt that the small town of Concord (exceptional of course) was more vitally conversant with the best that was being said and thought throughout the civilized world, than any university town today. And yet Concord contained no institution, and owed little to any institution except the Harvard library in Cambridge. Not only in Concord, but in the South, in the new West, in Philadelphia and New York, the private libraries of the leaders in the community are always surprising when one remembers the wide and immediate opportunities for profitable activity in a country that could readily be made profitable without books.

Private libraries now grow rare, though public libraries increase out of measure to the possibility of caring for them adequately. That is not significant. A home

library may be a dead thing. It is the books read that count. And here, while institutions may help, it is only a radically changed attitude toward private reading—especially by men—that is likely to further adult education. What *should* be said is not private reading, but private study. The inevitably superficial or incomplete transcripts of thinking that one gets in magazines, are easy to read, but impossible to study. It is said that the day of the essay is past. Nonsense, the essay, in its root meaning an assay, a suggestion, is in its boom period. Most men at least read only assays, suggestions, notes, proposals, guesses. They have taken no time for the books that lie behind—for real reading and real thinking. Adult education of the college graduate in this country will begin only when he feels the need of more education, of more reading. Then lists, such as the recent Harvard readings in American history and literature, will help him, then lectures may be of use, and even courses; although experience has shown that the man who has been given the broad frames of reference in college, and taught there (a hard thing) how to read and to study, needs not so much more teaching, as lists of books and an incentive to make him find his own way among them, and discover the answer to his own intellectual needs. An hour's private reading a day is worth three hours of anyone else's time, no matter how skillfully applied to soothe the ear and provide an illusion of self-thinking. Of course authors of books sometimes merely soothe and delude. But it is easier to change your book than a lecturer or an institution.

H. S. C.

To a Mocking Bird

BY ARTHUR GUITERMAN

SWEET bird, the only plagiarist I love,
Because, too brave to let your spirit sink,
You do not imitate the mourning dove,
That sorry crooner, but the bobolink,—
Why can't you teach all birds of your profession
To steal, for steal they must, with like discretion?

No doubt the little fowls of golden throats
From whom you borrow, chirp, "At least he's shown,
This charlatan, by echoing our notes,
That he prefers our music to his own."
While you can make the plausible apology
That you are just compiling an anthology.

And so you whistle like the hidden quail
Or like the thrush above the woodland spring,
Or carol like the whitethroat on the rail,
When you'd excel them all if you would sing
A lay completely of your own creation!
But no, you'd rather be an imitation.

Letters to the Editor: *Mr. Calkins Asks, "What Is a Book?"*

100 Best Books

SIR:—I have just received from the American Library Association a copy of the list of 100 books chosen by prominent Americans, books every American should read, compiled by Dr. Nathan G. Goodman, arranged in the order of their popularity, beginning with Shakespeare and ending with Sheldon Cheney! Such a list is always a challenge. One could find fault with the selections, or the omissions, or the order of arrangement. But the question that such a list always imposes to my mind is, What is a book?

Is Shakespeare a book? Then why is not Hugo or Thackeray? Why do not the compilers decide at the outset whether a book means a single integrated work or a single physical volume, instead of straddling both definitions? Apparently a book may mean a single work no matter how many volumes, or an author's complete works whether in one volume or many. Therefore some writers are represented by a liberal portion of their whole output, and others by one book out of thirty or forty. Such a list seems meaningless and inconsistent.

For instance, this list before me begins with

Shakespeare—"Plays"

Immediately beneath it is

Mark Twain—"Huckleberry Finn,"
or "Tom Sawyer"

If "Shakespeare—"Plays," why not "Mark Twain—"Works"?" It may be argued that you can get Shakespeare in one volume, but you can also get him in 36 volumes, and a decent reading edition should be at least nine volumes. And what with the popularity of omnibuses, Mark Twain may yet be had in one volume. Composing the list as above, it means that the least of Shakespeare is worth more than anything of Twain, or any other writer on the list that follows. So adopting one definition of a book as being a single integrated work, the first 36 books of the hundred are plays by William Shakespeare. But his plays are no more of equal merit than the works of Twain. Isn't the spirit of such a list as this aimed at some acquaintance with what is supposedly the best in literature? Wouldn't it be more consistent if the compiler took the time and trouble to decide what he meant by a book, and then decided whether he was listing desirable writers, or selecting the preferred work of each of a hundred writers?

Burton's "Arabian Nights," though a single work, is in twelve volumes, while in editions sufficiently agreeable to the eye to make comfortable reading and holding, Montaigne is in four volumes, Boswell's "Johnson" in ten, and Shakespeare at least nine, taking as typical the editions in my own library bought solely for the purpose of reading, usually in bed, when a five pound book is a weariness to the flesh. On such a basis, the hundred books become 204 volumes, and in any case considerably more than a hundred.

There is another matter that bothers



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me which I might as well bring up while I am in a fault-finding mood. What does a publisher mean by a "printing"? Every so often we are told with all the air of imparting precious information, that a certain book has gone to a second, or even a third printing before publication. As no reader knows what a printing is, nor even any publisher, what is the significance of the tidings? Why, simply that the publisher guessed wrong the first time, or has gained courage, and is printing more, but how many more, and how many he printed the first time, is anyone's guess. A printing might be with equal correctness, 500, or 5000 copies, depending on the character of the book. So what is the sense of using the expression at all?

The word "edition" has a similar vagueness, though the word is useful in merely alluding to a definite separate production, "the total number of copies issued at once," the dictionary says. It has no other value. The publishing trade seems to cling to secrecy, just as once the magazines refused to reveal their circulation figures to advertisers. We broke them of that. Now why cannot the publishers standardize the word "printing" to indicate a definite known amount, for whatever it may be worth?

EARNEST ELMO CALKINS.

New York City.

George Sterling

SIR:—I have in preparation a life of George Sterling, and I would deeply appreciate any assistance your readers might furnish in the way of letters, anecdotes and counsel.

This is a first book about Sterling, and when we consider his worth, it is astonishing how he has become forgotten in print, if not in mind. I want to make this

book a tribute that will determine Sterling's final worth.

I will take the greatest care of any material placed in my hands and will acknowledge source and assistance.

JACKSON BARBER.

1353 Geary St.,
San Francisco, Cal.

Gorky in the U. S.

SIR:—The Gorky Institute of Literature, Moscow, which is gathering biographical data on the late Maxim Gorky, has requested me to appeal to American readers for documents, letters, or other material relating to Gorky's visit to the United States in 1906. I shall be grateful if this suggestion is passed on in your columns. Any material sent to me will be forwarded to the Institute.

C. OUMANSKY, Counselor
Embassy of U.S.S.R.
Washington, D. C.

"And Sudden Death"

SIR:—Though it hurt me in my heart's deep core when Harry Morgan was killed [in "To Have and Have Not"] I am still all for the killers. Just think what a boon if a good big gorilla had carried off the comic strip children in "The Prodigal Parents." For my part another might have taken the marcelled wife and the pseudo-Babbitt Cornplow too. In fact I would have paid for an Uniatz drink for them—and if you are too literate and superior to know what that is, and never read a Carter Dickson mystery, I will explain that Mr. Uniatz took any bottle at hand and putting the mouth to his own never removed either until the bottle was empty.

DOROTHEA MOORE.

Los Angeles, Cal.