

The Saturday Review



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Culture in Soft Covers

LACKING a millionaire partner who is allergic to reading balance-sheets, no man with any financial acumen would attempt in these days to launch a book-publishing house with contemporary novels priced at three to five dollars, non-fiction ranging from three-fifty to ten dollars, and an occasional lean volume of poetry at two-fifty. The older, long-established firms can ride through the storm of paperbacks now flooding the country by leaning on the continuing sales of valuable lists of "back-log" books; then there are children's books and textbook departments whose roseate future is based on the astonishing fertility of the American people over the last decade.

Nevertheless, the trade-book department is the heart, if not the center, of a sound publishing house. It must find new writers in the various fields of creative literature, for in a large measure the reputation, the prestige of the firm depends on them. It is often a thankless and a disappointing task for even the most astute editor. He may turn down an author's first book only to have it hit the best-seller lists in the hands of another publisher; the first may have a measure of success and a good press, and the second book may fail, and then there is a question of whether after an investment of a considerable sum of money the third book should be accepted. Discovering new writers is a gamble, though a publisher may parlay his bet by offering the reprint rights of a manuscript to a paperback publisher. But if he does so he is feeding the wolf that is howling at the door of his house.

A publisher inevitably assumes financial risks unknown to the pro-

ducer of plays, who rarely uses his own money; he has had to be a stout-hearted gambler to endure the dangers which seemed to threaten him during the last thirty years. First it was the movies, then the radio, and worse still, television, for you cannot read a book with one eye and view a flickering screen with the other. He has now overcome his fear of them, only to tremble at the overwhelming proliferation of the paperbacks, selling from twenty-five cents to a dollar and a quarter. Two hundred sixty million copies of them were sold last year under 1,061 titles. During the last two years an extraordinary number of them were republications of fine books which had long been out of print because the original publishers knew that it would not profit them to bring them out at the price they would have to charge. It has turned out to be a goldmine for the paperback houses, for the sales of a great many of them exceeded the most optimistic predictions. Mentor Books' sale two years ago of more than a million copies each of translations of old Homer's "The Odyssey" and "The Iliad" woke the publishers to the fact that there was an enormous and hitherto untouched audience of innumerable Americans who would read, or at least buy, books of the highest caliber on almost every subject, from art, music, science, philosophy, history, criticism, to world politics, belles-lettres, collections of poetry, and other way stations on the route to the hitherto remote fairylands of culture.

Nevertheless, alarming as this may seem to the trade-book publisher, there are two major flaws in this fantastic outpouring of inexpensive books.

It is estimated that in 1946 sixty million paperbacks were distributed and from 10 to 15 per cent were returned to the publishers. Last year more than three times as many paperbacks were printed by a larger number of companies and distributed to over a hundred thousand retailers where they have, as everyone knows, cluttered the newsstands and drugstores across the land. A very large percentage of them were only too obviously devoted to novels of suspense, murder, vice, mayhem, sex, and science fiction. But it is remarkable, for example, that Doubleday Anchor Books' reprint of Edmund Wilson's 500-page study in the writing and acting of history, "To the Finland Station," and hundreds of other books of the same caliber could be able to survive in this lush jungle. Knox Burger, an editor of Dell Publishing Co., in a recent symposium of publishers debating the problem of this industry said, "The turnback of paperbooks has risen to proportions that are disturbing . . . There are probably too many titles put out and too many companies in the business. Some time in the future there will be a shaking-down process and some people will get hurt." Actually no one knows the percentage of copies of paperbooks returned in 1953. It may be as dangerously high as 20 per cent.

THERE is another aspect of this invasion not often mentioned. At the present rate of consumption of reprints of trade publishers' books, the soft-cover publishers will have consumed in the next two years most of the books available to them. What will they do when they come to the end of the rich vein they have been exploring? They can, of course, wait for a year and reprint more of the same titles for distribution. But eventually that, too, will come to an end. It has not yet been proved that the soft-cover publishers can successfully bring out first editions, with the exception of the more lurid books often written for them by hitherto unknown writers. And, unfortunately, it is not proved that the public, which has recently purchased in large numbers paperbooks once assumed to be beyond their capacity to enjoy or comprehend, will continue to do so. How many of the two million copies of Homer, for example, were read from cover to cover? But this tremendous and unsuspected audience for cultural books may have emerged from the seven million living graduates of colleges and universities who were subjected to four years of higher education; or, who knows, from a host of truckdrivers, factory hands, and office workers who will take to literature and philosophy as a steady diet?—H. S.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

INTERNATIONAL HAND SHAKE

MANY OF YOUR READERS WERE, I am sure, greatly impressed by Stanley Young's excellent guest editorial, "America's Bookless Santa Claus," which dealt with the urgent need for spreading democratic ideas to other peoples and other continents via a wider distribution of worthwhile books and periodicals in low-cost editions [SR Feb. 13]. . . .

There is, however, an equally urgent need to provide greater opportunities for the people of the Western nations to mingle and fraternize with each other; to learn at first hand and by personal contact the ways of life of other nationalities; to understand their ideals and their modes of living; and finally, to acquire an understanding of the traditions and background which motivate our own thoughts and actions. Only upon such a foundation can cultural, political, and economic cooperation between nations become a permanent reality. . . .

The way to achieve this goal could be through the creation of an international organization set up exclusively to provide opportunities for people visiting other countries to meet with persons of similar interests, professions, and hobbies. Simply by welcoming overseas visitors and, perhaps, by inviting them into their homes, the members of such an organization could do much to build international friendships, stimulate the voluntary exchange of ideas and experiences, and broaden the basis for mutual understanding and respect.

Such an organization would certainly win enthusiastic support from the approximately twenty million people traveling every year between the nations of Europe and the North and South American continents who are anxious to meet individual citizens of the nations they visit whose interests are similar to their own.

The Danes, in their characteristically friendly and practical manner, have shown the way with their "Meet the Danes" program. Confronted by the problem of caring for a hundred thousand vacationing G.I.s after the last war, the originators of this program asked Danish citizens interested in meeting the visiting Americans to register at a central agency in Copenhagen. The idea appealed to the Danes and their visitors alike and has grown far beyond the original plan for making American soldiers feel at home. . . .

From America might well come the initiative for establishing an international association of individuals dedicated to the sole purpose of providing its members with an opportunity of meeting like-minded individuals when visiting other countries. During and since the days of the Marshall Plan, thousands of Europeans from all walks of life have visited the United States under technical assistance programs and have experienced at first hand the hospitable and



THROUGH HISTORY WITH J. WESLEY SMITH

"Oh, your price for the land is most generous. But frankly, we were looking for a somewhat better class of customer."

open-minded attitude of Americans. These and other thousands of U. S. and European scholarship students, exchange lecturers, trainees, and government officials in all countries of the Atlantic Community could readily provide the nucleus for several such associations here and abroad.

In these days when friendly and intelligent cooperation between nations is of the utmost importance, what better or more timely project could there be for any public-spirited individual, group, or foundation dedicated to the furtherance of international understanding and peace?

BIRGER NORDHOLM.

New York, N.Y.

PROSPECT BEFORE US

THE EDITORIAL "BOOK DUMPING" [SR March 6] is the most encouraging bit of book business news that I have seen in years.

I have been hoping against hope that somehow the problems of the Trade Book Industry would escape from *Publishers' Weekly* conventions into the public domain. Unless there is some violent awakening the industry as we know it is doomed. I have felt very lonely because no one seems to understand that it is the industry, not just the bookstores, that is in danger. When the bookstore goes, trade-book publishing goes too. . . .

JOHN A. REED.

Newton Centre, Mass.

PETITION WANTED

THE EDITORIAL ON BOOK DUMPING was happily received by me and, I am sure,

by many reviewers across the country. Newspapers have even a worse time of it, for we have to keep in mind the news angle as well as the literary. When you start circulating petitions, let me sign!

WALT McCASLIN.

Dayton, O.

PLAN IN FILES

CONGRATULATIONS on the masterful analysis on book dumping. Books are definitely a retail business. Realization of this one fact will move book selling forward many years. The American Book Publishers Council has a potent plan for accomplishing this in their file which I sent them several years ago. This may be a good time to review it in the interests of the industry as a whole.

JOSEPH BROSLAW.

New York, N.Y.

ALAS, NOT FRIENDS

THE SATURDAY REVIEW has always treated my brothers and me with the utmost courtesy, and we owe you deep gratitude. But may I be allowed to correct one misunderstanding that crept into your paragraph about my meeting with Miss Marilyn Monroe. I am quoted as saying that Mr. Stravinsky is one of my greatest friends.

I am one of his greatest admirers. I know him to be one of the only men of genius now working. But alas, I cannot claim to be one of his greatest friends, since I have only had the privilege of meeting him twice.

EDITH SITWELL.

New York, N.Y.