

BOOKS AND BIBLIOPHILES

By David A. Watson, Ph.D.

Of all of my influences as a child, possibly the most enduring one was my grandfather, McClellan Watson. His was an uncompromising style that many considered, to put it kindly, eccentric. He was at once a geologist, train engineer, and certified vagabond. He liked food (any kind), conversation (with pretty much anybody under the sun), and dogs (small, medium, and large). I lack the space here to give the full flavor of his unique approach to life, so I'll just highlight one of the ways in which he impacted mine. Grandpa Mac was, among other things, a scholar and lover of the printed word, mainly books, but also newspapers, magazines, and alas, tabloids. He collected everything from scientific texts, to maps and atlases, encyclopedias, and novels. A good bit of what he accumulated ended up in the leaky basement of one of his residences, so that when age began to rob him of his once keen intellect, he invited me to take whatever I wanted. Much of what interested me I did rescue, jump-starting my own obsession with book collecting. I love everything about books, their look, their feel, even their odor. Let me, then, offer a few statistics and observations on the health of the publishing industry, and on its competitors.

It is estimated that world-wide there may be as many as eight million original book titles, with three to four million being available from the large booksellers here in the United States. The Library of Congress, our national book and copyright repository, contains some 26 million titles, with the global count probably in excess of 65 million. This number increased at a rate of between two and ten percent per year until the mid-1990's, when it decreased slightly. US book sales have recently been flat, but are still impressive, with a national total of greater than \$25 billion each of the past two years.

Books purchased for pleasure constitute the largest fraction, although sales are down slightly (roughly 2.5 %). Encouragingly, the sectors of the publishing industry showing the strongest gains have been public and higher education (both increased this past year by more than 7 %), and juvenile paperbacks (up a very strong 18 %). A new report from the National Center for Educational Statistics, however, reveals that only about half of us qualify as what are termed “regular readers” (defined as having done all of the following: read a newspaper at least once a week, read one or more magazines regularly, and read a book in the past six months). Women do better than men (54 to 46 %), and very strong correlations exist between both greater education and higher income level and regular reading. Lest we’re tempted to consider this a case of printed matter being unaffordable to many, consider the following. Ninety-eight percent of American households own at least one TV, with 41 % having three or more. Additionally, with regard to TV: half of us say we watch too much of it (ironically, essentially the same percentage as those who read regularly); nation-wide, six million videos are rented each day, while only three million items are checked out of public libraries; and per year, our children spend on average 900 hours in school, but over 1000 in front of the tube.

As I began looking through my new collection, it was obvious that not only had Grandpa managed to squirrel away this enormous stack of books, but based on notes I found in the margins, he had read and studied a great many of them as well. As a boy I had often observed him sitting (inside or outside) quietly reading and marking on some book, newspaper, or article photocopied from the local library. He got up early, read by the natural light of the sun, and had little use for television. In retrospect, I appreciate that he possessed a great and unquenchable desire to learn, simply for its own sake—and

if he could obtain the information at a bargain price (or for nothing) then so much the better. Even today any time I manage to grab up a good book for a small price a little smile crosses my face as I think that the old boy would likely approve. Now I get it, Gramps (but what exactly was that attraction to the National Enquirer?).