The New York Times Book Review

125 YEARS OF LITERARY HISTORY

Edited by Tina Jordan with Noor Qasim

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SIXTEEN PAGES
WITH BOOK REVIEW SUPPLEMENT.

NEW-YORK, SATURDAY, OCT. 10, 1896.

A BOOK REVIEW SUPPLEMENT.

We begin to-day the publication of a Supplement which contains reviews of the new books, the announcements of the publishers, an epitome of the leading articles in the domestic and foreign magazines, information and comment relating to art, and other interesting matter which may appropriately be associated with the literary and art news of the day. This Book Review Supplement will appear hereafter every Saturday morning. We commend it to the attention of our readers, who will observe that its form will enable them easily to preserve the successive numbers.

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The Birth of the Book Review

As we celebrate the 125th anniversary of The New York Times Book Review, take a trip with us back to the earliest years of the newspaper to look at how its literary coverage began—and how it grew before being spun off into the Book Review we know today.

It all started in the very first issue of The New York Daily Times on September 18, 1851. Peer carefully at the old, yellowing pages, densely speckled with six columns of tiny, often smudged type, and there—in an article on Page 2 headlined "Snap-Shots at Books, Talk and Town"—the paper laid out its ambitious plans for covering books and the publishing industry.

"The book-men are just now bidding upon the summer's surfeit of literature, and sometime, it may be worth our while to take our readers into the rooms of this traffic," the newspaper announced. "We shall sometimes too . . . take note of the books of the day—unravel their narrative into a newspaper column and give the public, whom we have taken in hand to serve, a running synopsis of their story. And if we give, now and then, a critical shot at their manner, method or morals, we shall do it with all the modesty, and perhaps the occasional misses, which belong to our swift shooting."

No time was wasted. The next day the paper introduced a column about authors and artists called "Limnings of Literary People," and on September 22 the first book reviews appeared. They included such gems as *The United States Post-Office Guide* and an apparently execrable novel called *Kenneth: A Romance of the Highlands,* the review of which began, "Mr. Reynolds is a bad specimen of a very bad school of writers."

Book reviews, which were published at least once a week, were crisp and to the point. D. J. Browne's *American Muck Book,* for example, got a one-line rave as "doubtless a most valuable aid to the farmer, who admits science to the help of agriculture." Two 1851 novels that we now regard as important were not reviewed: Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick,* which came out a few weeks after The Times began publishing, and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *House of the Seven Gables,* which had been published in the spring.

The second half of the 19th century was filled with riches: "There were literary giants, and pygmies, too, upon the earth," wrote Francis Brown, who edited the Book Review from 1949 until 1971. "It was the period of Trollope and Dickens and Thackeray, of Whitman, Longfellow, Tennyson and Baudelaire, of Darwin and Huxley, of the Russians Turgenev, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy." With a few notable exceptions, the paper covered every important book published during those decades.

Villette, by Charlotte Brontë, was hailed as "a first-class work." An unnamed critic struggled with *Leaves of Grass,* first calling Walt Whitman "a literary fraud" and then confessing, "Still, this man has brave stuff in him. . . . Since the greater portion of this review was written we confess to having been attracted again and again to *Leaves of Grass.*" Of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species,* the paper's

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unnamed critic wrote, "Shall we frankly declare that, after the most deliberate consideration of Mr. Darwin's arguments, we remain unconvinced?"

The blockbuster novels of the day were often first published in serial form, usually in magazines like *Harper's* and *Scribner's,* and The Times covered new chapters with fanfare. "The first sheets of *Bleak House*—Dickens's new novel—have been received in advance of their publication in London, for *Harper's Magazine,*" the paper reported on March 16, 1852. "They have the clear ring of the true metal." Although an editor once railed that "a serial story has ever been our special detestation. We have a horror of anything published in parts," The Times nonetheless published some serials of its own, including Thomas Hardy's *The Hand of Ethelberta.*

The Times's book coverage extended well beyond reviews and serials. Holiday gift guides, publishing news, literary scandals, poems, summer reading and recommendations for children could all be found in the pages of the paper. In 1871, an editorial remonstrated against the moral depravity of "flash literature"; in 1875, a male author penned an essay about the difficulties of dressing his female characters (the opening line: "What shall I put on her head?"). Dime novels—the pulpy Westerns that were blamed for social ills, like comic books in the mid-20th century and violent video games today—figured in countless news stories.

Charles Dickens, Mark Twain and Walt Whitman were among the subjects of early author profiles, some reprinted from other newspapers and magazines, others written for The Times. When a correspondent visited Émile Zola in Paris in 1885, he found it "not a luxurious apartment. . . . Straight-backed chairs were arranged against the walls in gaunt precision. . . . A spiritless attempt at a bric-à-brac collection was nailed to the walls, and a few vases, suggestive of a New York boarding house, adorned the mantelpiece." When a writer called on Alexandre Dumas *fils,* he described the house—at "No. 98 Avenue de Villiers"—as "glaringly white, three-storied, with a capacious *porte cochère,* which could hold half a dozen carriages and still not be uncomfortably crowded."

Authors like Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray and Oscar Wilde were front-page news when they came to America on speaking tours; sometimes the paper began covering their visits the moment they disembarked from the ship.

Literary stories great and small were considered newsworthy. A letter of support Louisa May Alcott sent to the American Woman Suffrage Association was reprinted in full, as was Twain's remedy for a cold: "Plain gin was recommended, then gin and molasses, then gin and onions. I took all three." When Wilde fell victim to card cheats in New York, readers learned about it in a piece headlined "Oscar Fleeced at Banco."

Authors' marriages, illnesses, arrests, writing habits, children, money problems and vacations were fodder for stories. So were their deaths: When beloved authors were dying, The Times issued deathbed updates—in Whitman's case, for months—that we would now find intrusive.

Given the breadth—and depth—of literary coverage appearing throughout the paper in those early decades, it was perhaps no surprise that someone decided to corral all those stories and reviews into a dedicated book section. That someone was Adolph S. Ochs, who established the Book Review as a standalone supplement shortly after he became publisher of the paper in 1896. And thus was born The New York Times Book Review, a publication that over the course of its 125-year history has been known variously as "the Saturday Review of Books and Art," "the Sunday Book Review," "the NYTBR" or, mostly internally, simply "TBR" (not to be mistaken for the current acronym for "to be read," though you can understand the confusion).

"In this publication was carried out an idea of the publisher of The Times that a newspaper book

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A YOUTH WHO HAS BEEN RUINED BY DIME NOVEL READING.

NO HOPE FOR WALT WHITMAN.

THE AGED POET MAY LIVE THREE OR FOUR DAYS LONGER.

PHILADELPHIA, Dec. 21.—All hope of Walt Whitman's recovery has been given up by his physicians, who say, however, that he may last as long as three or four days. He takes little or no nourishment, and was very weak to-night, but still maintains his cheerful disposition. He has been told his exact condition by the doctors, but he remarked to his nurse, "We may beat them all yet."

Dr. Alexander McAllister of Camden was called in by Dr. Longacre, and is now attending him regularly. The two physicians made an examination of their patient to-day, and found that his right lung is entirely collapsed and his left one two-thirds gone. His heart is the strongest organ. Only the doctors and the nurse are allowed to see the poet. Not even his brother, who called at the house to-day, was allowed to see him. His presence at the house was announced to "Walt," who sent down his love.

Dr. McAllister said to-night that he didn't think death would be sudden, but that he would sink away gradually. Dr. Buck, a friend of the poet, now in Canada, who is the possessor of all his manuscripts and knows all of his affairs, has been telegraphed for, and is expected to arrive at the bedside to-morrow or next day.

WALT WHITMAN STILL SINKING.

DOUBTFUL IF THE POET WILL BE LIVING THIS MORNING.

PHILADELPHIA, Dec. 26.—Dr. Buck, Walt Whitman's biographer, who is constantly with the poet, said this morning that he was so weak that it was doubtful if he would live until morning.

He dozed during the early part of the morning; and at 10 o'clock showed signs of sinking. His heart, which has been his healthiest organ during his illness and has been acting regularly, failed him to-day and became very unsteady. His pulse, which has been as low as 65, ran up to 95, and his respiration increased, his breathing becoming short gasps. He was lower at 5 o'clock to-day than at any time during the week. At 10 o'clock this evening his pulse fell to 88, and he appeared much easier, although he was very weak.

No nourishment was taken by the poet to-day, the only thing that passed his lips being an occasional sup of water. He appeared perfectly rational and clear-minded, but showed no disposition to talk, not even to his closest friends, and answered all questions put to him in monosyllables. The attending physician receives numerous letters and telegraph dispatches daily, asking after the sick poet's condition, but he has become so weak that they have discontinued showing them to him, as he apparently takes little interest in them.

DIME NOVELS CORRUPTED HIM.

AT HOME WITH EMILE ZOLA

HE TALKS FREELY OF HIS LIFE, HIS BOOKS, AND HIS WAYS.

HOW HE CAME TO WRITE THE MORE FAMOUS WORKS—HIS TOWN QUARTERS AND HIS LOVE OF COUNTRY LIFE.

News stories from early Times books coverage.

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A woman reads at the New York Public Library, 1952.

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review should be a literary newspaper, treating newly published books as news and containing besides other news of literary happenings," Elmer Davis wrote in *History of The New York Times, 1851-1921.*

"Books as news" remained the Book Review's watchword for years. "Literary criticism, an excellent thing in its way, but, properly speaking, a means rather than an end, has never been the chief object of its existence," the Book Review reiterated in 1913. "An open forum for the discussion of books from all sane and honest points of view is always accessible in The New York Times Book Review."

As time passed, the Book Review evolved, shedding its "books as news" dictum and embracing literary criticism, essays, theories and ideas. It became a lens through which to view not only literature but also the world at large, with scholars and thinkers weighing in on all the people and issues and subjects covered in books: philosophy, art, science, economics, history and more.

J. Donald Adams, who was appointed editor of the Book Review in 1925, later recalled: "When I took over, The Times thought that all you had to do was to tell people what was in the books. I wanted to make the Book Review something more than that." Under him, reviews became more opinionated and the coverage broader and deeper. "Dissent in itself can be exciting, can bring light into gray corners," Francis Brown wrote in a short history of the Book Review in 1968. "As our culture becomes more and more unified, diversity is a quality to be cherished and cultivated, and how dull it would be, how stultifying, to find ourselves in agreement on politics, aesthetics or what you will—and most of all on books, which by their very being testify to the diversity of man."

The Book Review didn't just explain to its readers; it began engaging them, stimulating them and occasionally angering them. It provoked—and encouraged—lively debate and the exchange of ideas, all while helping people figure out what book to pick up next.

In many ways, the Book Review's history is that of American letters. In this book, we'll highlight that history, drawing on our vast and varied archive to examine the ways the Book Review has shaped literary taste, informed arguments and driven the world of ideas in the United States and beyond. We've pored over more than 6,000 issues to bring you the best, worst, funniest, strangest and most influential coverage from our pages.

James Baldwin wrote for us, as did Langston Hughes. Toni Morrison was a regular contributor. Eudora Welty was briefly on staff and reviewed the likes of E. B. White, Virginia Woolf and S. J. Perelman. Here we have reviews by Margaret Atwood, Thomas Pynchon, Tennessee Williams and Nora Ephron. Presidents—Theodore Roosevelt, Bill Clinton, Herbert Hoover—wrote reviews, and so did musicians, poets, playwrights, scholars, Nobel winners, tycoons and Hollywood stars. Where appropriate, some reprinted reviews have been edited for clarity—and, quite frankly, to shorten them, since they often ran to many thousands of words.

We'll bring you the Book Review's most fascinating interviews, with everyone from Willa Cather to Gabriel García Márquez, as well as essays by Paule Marshall, Haruki Murakami and Walter Mosley, to name a few. We'll showcase a handful of our best letters. And along the way we'll show you how American reading tastes and book-buying patterns shifted, how literary criticism evolved and the ways in which history—particularly both world wars—shaped what was written and published. Yet even though the literary landscape has changed dramatically over the past 125 years—driven, in no small part, by the influence of the Book Review—some things remain the same: As an editor's note from 1897 points out, "Life is worth living because there are books."

TINA JORDAN
DEPUTY EDITOR,
THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

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A Review of the Review

PARUL SEHGAL

Halfway through *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert—relaxed, triumphant and a mere pinch of pages away from his downfall—stops to extol the wonders of America. He has dragged his 12-year-old quarry on a road trip across the country, a perversion of a honeymoon. He slips into French to marvel at all they have seen. "*Nous connûmes*," he purrs, borrowing "a Flaubertian intonation"—*we came to know*—and enumerates each guesthouse and motel, each unsmiling landlady.

Nous connûmes—we came to know. It has felt like the mood of the moment, with the reappraisal of monuments, real and metaphorical, in our midst—writers included. There have been fresh considerations of William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, David Foster Wallace and others, as their private papers and private lives have come to light. *Nous connûmes* Nabokov himself; this past year brought forth a swarm of studies and, in March, an anthology dedicated to *Lolita* alone. The morality of the novel, and of its creator, are litigated with hot urgency, as if Nabokov, dead some 40 years, lingers in the dock somewhere.

Not a surprising moment, then, to be asked to explore the archives of The New York Times Book Review on the occasion of its 125th anniversary, a moment for celebration but also for some more challenging introspection, a moment to examine the publication's legacy in full. My brief, you could say, was to review the Book Review, to consider the coverage of "women, people of color, L.G.B.T.Q. writers" and changing mores in criticism. But what revelatory news could I possibly bring? The word "archive" derives from the ancient Greek *arkheion*, sometimes translated as "house of the ruler." Who wanders there with any illusions?

What could those reviews contain? Some misjudgments, to be sure—masterpieces misunderstood in their time. A few preternaturally sensitive assessments. Fluorescent condescension and stereotype. Above all, the pleasant and dubious satisfactions of feeling superior to the past.

And yet. In recent years, The Times has faced scrutiny of the racial and gender imbalance in its reviews. One survey, which looked at nearly 750 books assessed by The Times in 2011, across all genres, found that nearly 90 percent of the authors assessed were white. But what about the reviews themselves: the language, the criteria? When "women, people of color, L.G.B.T.Q. writers" *were* reviewed, how was their work positioned? What patterns can we trace, what consequences? And what do we do with this knowledge—how can it be made useful? When we come to know, what do we really see?

To wander through 125 years of book reviews is to endure assault by adjective. All the *fatuous* books, the *frequently brilliant*, the *disappointing*, the *essential*. The adjectives one only ever encounters in a review (*indelible, risible*), the archaic descriptors (*sumptuous*). So many *masterpieces*, so many *duds*—now enjoying quiet anonymity.

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What did I find? Those misjudged masterpieces—on Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*: "It is a book one can very well get along without reading." The sensitive assessments—consistently by the critic and former editor of the Book Review, John Leonard, an early and forceful champion of writers like Toni Morrison, John Edgar Wideman and Grace Paley. Fluorescent condescension and stereotype—on N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, which went on to win the 1969 Pulitzer Prize for fiction: "American Indians do not write novels and poetry as a rule or teach English in top-ranking universities either. But we cannot be patronizing." Oh, no?

The inaugural issue of the Book Review was published in 1896. It featured 10 reviews, all unsigned, along with lists of new books and literary happenings. An essay in the form of an imaginary conversation poked fun at novelists' stock phrases. On Laurence Sterne: "that 'shorn lamb' of his has been pulled hither and thither enough to be the toughest jerk mutton in the world."

Since 1924, the Book Review has run bylines. Contributors are not, for the most part, professional critics (a vanishing breed) but what Ford Madox Ford called "artist-practitioners"—the moonlighting novelist or specialist. Curiously, many seem to speak in one voice throughout the years, with that signature, seignorial remove.

That tone isn't merely a function of the rhythms of the short review; it flows from the house style. Reviewers almost never use "I," long discouraged by the paper, but the magisterial "we." What flaws did "we" discover in this slight but promising novel? Why do "we" go to fiction? (This last example from my—our?—own work.)

"We" can be a coercive little word. A forced embrace, a leash. It's Humbert's pronoun—*"nous"*—his way of speaking for Lolita. It presumes consensus; it presumes that "we" are the same. Margo Jefferson, a former book critic at The Times, has spoken about the peculiarity of the convention. "'We' meant that our readers were our students and our followers," she said. "It implied we were omniscient narrators, leading them toward the best, the wisest, the most educated conclusions."

How unselfconsciously, how *affectionately*, that notion of consensus was once assumed—and inscribed. How specifically the reader of the Book Review was imagined and catered to. In a summer reading column in 1915, the Book Review recommended titles for the "intellectual enjoyment that appeals to 'the tired business man' on holiday."

As I reached midcentury in the archives, I kept bumping into one particular reviewer with a plump, paternalistic style and the Dickensian name of Marshall Sprague.

Sprague! I'd innocently turn a corner and find you back at it, comparing a woman writer to a trout—*as praise*.

His own best-known book—a study of the frontier (what else?)—was titled *A Gallery of Dudes*, a fair description of these pages at the time.

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(A moment to appreciate the obituary of Francis Whiting Halsey, the Book Review's first editor, whose death in 1919 was presented as a sort of apotheosis of literary masculinity: "Overwork on a 10-volume history of the European War contributed to his last illness.") It was a clubby world put into a panic by the success of "the lit'ry lady," as a 1907 article termed her. Early issues of the Book Review were lively with alarm. Why Are Women Using Male Pseudonyms? How Dare Women Write From the Point of View of Male Characters? Why Are Women's Books Selling So Well? *"Is Woman Crowding Out Man From the Field of Fiction?"*

The suave "we" would not yet accommodate women, or others, and the reviewer acted as sentry, patrolling the pronoun's borders. For years the novelist Anthony Burgess, chief fiction reviewer of *The Observer* in London, was said to decide which women would be permitted to leave the "ghetto" of female writing. The longtime Times staff critic Orville Prescott enjoyed prerogatives of his own. (The paper's staff critics, of which I am now one, operate independently of the weekly Book Review.) In 1948, Prescott dismissed Gore Vidal's novel *The City and the Pillar* as "pornography"—an odd claim given the lack of sex in the book. I suspect that what Prescott really found so objectionable was the absence of shame in a love story between two men. Meanwhile, in the Book Review, C.V. Terry took a different view, but no less ugly: "A novel as sterile as its protagonist." Vidal and his publishers claimed that the Book Review refused to run paid advertisements and had him blacklisted for years.

Truman Capote's Southern Gothic *Other Voices, Other Rooms* was published that same month, and featured that famous author photograph: young Capote, lovely and sulky, splayed across the back jacket, making the kind of eye contact that can still make you flush, some 70 years on. Carlos Baker's review was an extended shudder. "The story," he wrote, "did not need to be told, except to get it out of the author's system."

Note that language. It reappears in the reviews of the interlopers—the nonwhite writers, women writers and especially L.G.B.T.Q. writers. Their books are not written, they are not crafted—they are expelled, they are excreted, almost involuntarily. James Purdy's work—his "homosexual fiction" (this from a Wilfrid Sheed review)—represented "the sick outpouring of a confused, adolescent, distraught mind" (that from Prescott). Katherine Anne Porter's work received a clinical and distressing diagnosis: "The pellucid trickle has lately clouded." The charge can be twisted into a form of perverse praise, as if writing were a sort of bodily instinct. In a review of *Dust Tracks on a Road*, John Chamberlain wrote that the "saucy, defiant" Zora Neale Hurston was "born with a tongue in her head, and she has never failed to use it."

Where Black writers are concerned, another pattern can be detected. Reviewers might impute cultural importance to the work, but aesthetic significance only rarely. And if aesthetic significance was conferred, it often hinged on one particular quality: authenticity. The convention was so pronounced that a writer named Elizabeth Brown addressed it in her 1932 review of Countee Cullen's stinging satire *One Way to Heaven*. "Most of us have not yet reached the stage where we can appreciate any story about colored people at its face value without always straining to find in it some sort of presentation of 'Negro life,'" Brown wrote. "It is, therefore, from one who frankly knows little about the subject, an impertinence to say that Mr. Cullen paints a convincing picture of life in Harlem; but one can at least say that the picture is sometimes amusing, sometimes very moving, and at all times interesting."

That presumption—that the work of the Black writer was always coded autobiography, and *only* coded autobiography—was so entrenched, it feels startling to see the Black novelist praised purely for

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technique and inventiveness, to see an artistic lineage located, as in Wright Morris's review of Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man," which named Ellison as a descendant of Virgil and Dante.

Authenticity was valued up to the point it contravened the (white) critic's notions of Black life. In his review of James Weldon Johnson's novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Charles Willis Thompson, an op-ed writer for The Times and frequent reviewer, objected to Johnson's depiction of a lynching as an ordinary affair, attended by familiar figures and recognizable types. The author "knows more about such cases than I do," Willis concedes—Johnson worked as an anti-lynching advocate for the N.A.A.C.P.—but smoothly sails on. "I have never seen a lynching, but I have talked to many who have and they all tell me that the lynchers are the toughs and riff-raff of the community." Furthermore: "I have seen lynchers after the event, and they verify this description."

I can hear the muttered objections. Times were different. How crude, how predictably "woke" to apply present-day standards to the past. But I'm not referring to just the real relics, many of which provoke more amused incredulity than offense. (My particular favorite is an agitated essay from 1900 in which a "Mrs. Sherwood" inveighs against the fashion for heroines who smoke and befoul their fragrant feminine breath: "the sweet south wind over a bank of violets.")

To dismiss these reviews as mere fossils requires a series of awkward and dishonest contortions. Reviewers like Sheed and Prescott might have handled the work of gay writers with tongs, but the public didn't. *The City and the Pillar* and *Other Voices, Other Rooms* both made the Times best-seller list. And if these judgments were simply a matter of their times, would it make sense for Zora Neale Hurston to sound quite so exasperated in 1950? "It is assumed that all non-Anglo-Saxons are uncomplicated stereotypes," she wrote in an essay titled "What White Publishers Won't Print." "They are lay figures mounted in the museum where all may take them in at a glance. They are made of bent wires without insides at all. So how could anybody write a book about the nonexistent?"

To my mind, the most persuasive evidence against treating such reviews as irrelevant artifacts is the letters to the editor. If the critic assumes (or imposes) consensus with that peremptory "we," in the letters, we see the reader recoil. *"We" who?*

In 1974, the writer Rebecca West excoriated *Conundrum*, Jan Morris's landmark memoir about her gender transition. Throughout, West refers to Morris as "Mr. Morris"—"one feels sure she is not a woman." West scorned the fact that Morris had transitioned as an older woman: "a woman who has had the equivalent of a hysterectomy, one who cannot offer the same facilities for love-making as a woman who was born a woman. And having changed sex so late in life, she is unlikely to attract the men that, earlier, would have made good husbands or lovers." To top it off, she objected to the "spirit of passionate advocacy," with which Morris wrote, as if "he [sic] had had to make the change from man to woman against a host of opposition." *Surely not.*

The responses were scathing. How could West pronounce upon the validity of Morris's sense of herself as a woman? How could she reject emotions she had not felt? "If this were an account of the first Everest ascent, should a reviewer doubt its honesty simply because no one had ever climbed the mountain before?" one reader asked. "Or, more to the point, because the reviewer had never wanted to himself?" Another reader, recuperating at home from a hysterectomy, wrote in furious solidarity with Morris: "I expect to have just as good a relationship now as formerly, and in fact, am waiting impatiently for my doctor's OK to go ahead."

But reviewers like West weren't firing off these broadsides from their desks unsolicited. These reviews were commissioned; they passed through

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multiple layers of editing. West's views on gender were far from a mystery. Christopher Hitchens would memorably describe her feminism as "above all concerned with the respect for, and the preservation of, true masculinity." A strange assignment, to say the least.

Perhaps not. In recent years, the paper has been grappling with its history of reporting on L.G.B.T.Q. issues, especially during the height of the AIDS epidemic. According to the paper's former executive editor Max Frankel, the longtime publisher Arthur Ochs Sulzberger instructed The Times to avoid the subject of gay life as much as possible. The stylebook did not allow the word "gay" to be used until 1987; the preference was for the clinical "homosexual."

How can one cover—let alone judge—what one refuses to see? What one is institutionally mandated to ignore?

There's a Jasper Johns sculpture called *The Critic Sees*. It features a pair of round-rimmed glasses. Where one expects two eyes are two open mouths instead, in mid-pronouncement.

It was 1981, and Toni Morrison was lonely. Not for readers or praise—she'd written four acclaimed books by then; her readership was wide and admiring. "My complaint about letters now would be the state of criticism," she said in an interview. "I have yet to read criticism that understands my work or is prepared to understand it. I don't care if the critic likes or dislikes it. I would just like to feel less isolated."

The relaxed, reflexive contempt of reviews of the past cannot be disentangled from their failures as pieces of criticism. They might stand in harsh judgment of the writer, but as examples of writing they're *soft*. They rarely quote the book, or offer more than perfunctory summary. We hear little of style, of argument or technique. I'm reminded of Richard Brinsley Sheridan's 18th-century play *The Critic*, which features two malicious critics, named Dangle and Sneer. That's what these pieces do. They hover and mock, or patronize, the reviewer keeping his hands in his pockets all the while. He builds no case—he feels no need; the identity of the writer, the source of that obsessive fascination, appears to be all the evidence required for his scorn.

The opposite of "dangle and sneer" isn't "genuflect and revere." It's the work of vigorous reading, of research, curiosity, the capacity for surprise—*criticism*, in short. In a 2006 interview, Maxine Hong Kingston pined for "better criticism"—not kinder reviews: "I don't mean they praise my work more, I mean that they understand what the work is about and there is more willingness now to read a book by a minority person and to criticize it as literature and not just see it as anthropology."

In time, one begins to see calls for this kind of coverage in the Book Review itself. The section becomes self-reflective, critiquing a literary culture it had a powerful hand in creating. We see Bharati Mukherjee's 1988 front-page essay on immigrant fiction, in which she questioned the racial underpinnings of the fashion for literary minimalism. Meg Wolitzer's 2012 essay "The Second Shelf" asked why women's literary fiction is taken less seriously than men's, why women are derided for the narrowness of their subjects but punished if they take risks. If "a woman writes a doorstop filled with free associations about life and love and childbirth and war, and jokes and recipes and maybe even a novel-within-a-novel," Wolitzer wrote, "she risks being labeled undisciplined and self-indulgent."

A ghostly feeling settled over me as I read this essay. I'd seen the reviews Wolitzer was referring to—not just of her contemporaries but of generations past, that long, ignoble lineage. The contributor who, in 1905, sniffed that the woman writer would always paint on a small canvas, ask the small questions; his descendant in 2001 who berated a novelist for squandering ambitious experimental techniques on the deeply undeserving subject of a

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young girl's coming-of-age story. Another prickly feeling followed—that I've been reading writers who'd produced the very book Wolitzer imagined, as if they'd absorbed her piece. I think of Lucy Ellmann, who also contributed to the Book Review around that time. In 2019, she published *Ducks, Newburyport*, a thousand-page doorstop—all in one sentence, no less—about "life and love and childbirth and war, and jokes and recipes" (and a mountain lion). The novel won awards, raves; no one that I recall accused it of indulgence. The review or essay written in protest doesn't merely seed the work of the future; it can clear a path for its reception, creating the vocabulary and terms by which it will be received.

My copy of *Lolita* is all foxed pages and spindly spine, battered and beloved. It's my mother's old copy and still bears traces of her cigarette ash. Looking at the passage again now, I understand for the first time, shamefacedly, its irony. Humbert boasts of all he has seen, but what does it amount to but a few squalid motel rooms, variations in bathroom tile? "Nous connûmes" *nothing*. It's the very story of the novel—all that Humbert refuses to see about the girl he calls Lolita, about himself.

To look at the past is to look, for the most part, at what *can be seen*, what can be assessed. The number of women reviewed in an issue, the cruel jokes. I'm haunted by what cannot be quantified, what cannot be known—the long legacies of the language in the reviews, and how they creep into the present. How "reckonings" pass for restitution. I'm haunted by the notion of jettisoned novels and aborted careers—of novelists but also would-be reviewers. See, I know something of how language can be used to thwart and intimidate, about worlds so closed they awaken the great, self-preserving question: Why bother?

But bother I did; bother I do. In part because criticism, when I came to it, felt like freedom. The critics I first loved spoke with a note of defiant truthfulness; they were impatient with cliché, puffery and scolds, contemptuous of anxious gatekeeping. I'm not referring to academic critics but regular reviewers, whose only credentials were nerve, wariness and style. V. S. Pritchett, Anatole Broyard, Randall Jarrell, Elizabeth Hardwick, Margo Jefferson. They were so often transplants, immigrants, dropouts. Their notion of "we" was expansive and frequently full of playful provocation.

There are old, imperishable debates about whether criticism is itself an art form (depends who's doing it, I say). What cannot be in doubt is that criticism is itself a form of mythmaking, itself a story. And like any other story, it ought to withstand scrutiny, both of itself and what it purports to protect—for the desires of criticism and literature lie tangled together. "Stanley Elkin says you need great literature to have great criticism," Morrison once said. "I think it works the other way around. If there were better criticism, there would be better books."

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The steps of the New York Public Library on May 3, 1979.

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1896

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CHAPTER ONE

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The New York Times

SATURDAY REVIEW OF BOOKS AND ART.

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The New York Times

SATURDAY REVIEW OF BOOKS AND ART.

NEW YORK, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 7, 1901. 24 PAGES.

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Illustrated by Cesare

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On October 10, 1896, "the Book Review became the newspaper of the rapidly expanding book world," *The Literary Digest* proclaimed in a 1919 piece celebrating Francis W. Halsey, the Book Review's first editor. "A paraphrase of The Times motto, 'All the news that's fit to print,' would have described the Book Review, 'All the books that are fit to be read.'"

It was the age of Rudyard Kipling, Ezra Pound, Edith Wharton, William Butler Yeats. In his history of the Book Review, Francis Brown noted, "It was a period of ferment, of individuality . . . and while the Book Review did not interpret the period as a whole in the sense of answering the why and the how, it did answer the what by reflecting and recording temper and mood."

The Book Review—which started at eight pages—exploded in size during its first 25 years. Often it was 32 pages; for special issues—such as holiday issues—it was as many as 56. Its basic format did not change until 1911, when there were two important developments. First, publication moved from Saturday to Sunday with the hopes that it "will be read with more thoughtful attention . . . when the subscriber is free from the cares and demands of weekday vocations." And second, the lead review began appearing regularly on the front page.

In 1920, the Book Review merged with The New York Times Magazine, an experiment that ended abruptly two years later.

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The First Issue

The eight-page inaugural issue of The New York Times Saturday Book Review Supplement, dated October 10, 1896, featured news stories on the cover—including "Oscar Wilde's Forlorn State," about the author's suffering in jail, and one that should sound familiar: It was about how book sales at department stores were threatening independent bookstores.

There were 10 reviews. The one of *One Day's Courtship and the Heralds of Fame* began, "Mr. Robert Barr is a reasonably ingenious, versatile, fairly well informed writer, and frequently an irritating one." Of Emile Richebourg's *La Jolie Dentellière*, the critic offered what was clearly an insult: "This novel belongs to the class—a very large class—of French novels that seem to be written with a view to the stage as their ultimate destination." (The equivalent, perhaps, to a reviewer today noting derisively that a book reads like a movie treatment.)

There was also a piece that derided the use of cliché in fiction, lists of publishers' forthcoming titles, news of magazine articles, a page on art-world doings and a rather strange little piece reprinted from *The London Standard*—perhaps used to fill extra space—that had absolutely nothing to do with books or literature. "Science Has Neglected Eggs" was about keeping eggs fresh. "The egg problem seems one that might advantageously be taken up by those interested in developing poultry and eggs as a domestic industry."

In "Notoriety by Negation"—reprinted from a British journal called *The Saturday Review*—an unnamed critic took a few vicious swipes at the popular novelist Marie Corelli. The Times noted the critic's "savagely contemptuous" tone, adding that the motto of *The Saturday Review* "seems to be 'Anything to give pain.'"

All of the Book Review's early issues were, as Elmer Davis explained in *History of The New York Times, 1851–1921*, printed "in the form of loose sheets, folded into the rest of the paper. Those who didn't care to carry the Book Review about with them—they rarely failed to 'look over' it—let it blow away in the wind, so one morning the management of The Times was attracted, and rather aggrieved, by a cartoon in *Life* entitled 'The Littery Supplement,' and depicting a citizen desperately trying to struggle out of an elevated station through a heap of discarded sheets of The Times Saturday Book Review."

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"Can Any of Your Readers Furnish Me With a List of Books?"

The Book Review began running letters soon after its first issue in 1896, but these usually arrived in a trickle, with one or two tacked at the bottom of a page where space permitted.

By 1898, though, correspondence had exploded, and the letters section, called "Comment and Query" (the "query" portion was soon spun off into its own page), sometimes filled two pages. It was the internet message board of its day, lively and topical and bristling with opinions. Debates about books and reviews could—and often did—rage for months.

When there wasn't any simmering controversy, the editor posed questions to generate discussion. For example, on December 31, 1898, in a note affixed to the top of the letters page, he invited readers to submit their lists of the best short stories ever written, saying he would be "glad to hear from them."

The letters page also served as a recommendation engine: From the very beginning, people wrote in seeking literary inspiration from fellow readers, who were only too happy to oblige.

To The Editor:

Can any of your readers furnish me with a list of books suitable for working girls, that would be good from a moral and not too poor from a literary point of view, and yet exciting enough to interest them? I confess I don't think they would appreciate Jane Austen, and yet I don't care to try Marie Corelli or Rider Haggard. If any of your readers could make any suggestions on the subject, they would greatly oblige.

A READER OF THE NEW YORK TIMES
New York, April 16, 1898

1896 — The first issue of the Book Review is published on October 10, 1896.

1897 — The Book Review anoints the 50 best books of 1896. The No. 1 novel is J. M. Barrie's *Sentimental Tommy.*

1897 — *Publishers Weekly* reports that 5,703 new books and new editions were published in 1896.

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I would like to make a few suggestions in response to the inquiry regarding books for working girls.

I presume the inquirer had in mind books of fiction in which the action is quick and interesting and free from much "philosophizing," or short stories, and given that the taste of the working girls in question has not been too much spoiled by a diet of *Family Story Paper,* I see no reason why there should not be a large and choice variety for them to select from. There are *Betty Alden,* by Jane G. Austin, and *The Green Door,* by Mary E. Wilkins; also Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans,* and Conan Doyle's *Refugees.*

Nearly all the titles given are of books read by myself before the age of 14, and I judge from the pleasure and food for reflection they afforded that they might be suitable to the intellect of the average working girl.

S.S.G.

East Orange, N.J., May 4, 1898

I think that "A Reader of The New York Times," whose letter appeared in the issue of April 23, will find *Ramona, In the Golden Days, All Sorts and Conditions of Men, A Singular Life* and *Rudder Grange* "exciting enough to interest working girls."

The "working girls" to whom I read aloud *Rudder Grange* confessed that it was "the first book they ever listened to without going to sleep." Their interest was unabated and they never failed to be present while the story lasted. Probably Stockton's other writings would have equally attracted them, but the readings were brought to an unexpected close. Surely it is something to bring amusement and brightness into dull lives.

There are, of course, working girls and working girls, and some of them may see nothing in *Rudder Grange,* as some of us can find nothing satisfactory in Rider Haggard or Marie Corelli.

A FRIEND OF THE WORKERS

New York, May 1, 1898

In making a selection for working girls, it is wise to bear in mind that a considerable percentage of them read with pleasure and appreciation novels every bit as good from a literary standpoint as do the girls in higher walks of life. I have in mind a cashier in a retail Avenue A butcher's shop who reads no novels at all but English literature and history, a packer at Macy's who reads only good poetry, a saleslady at Wanamaker's who reads "purpose novels," a cigarette girl who reads constantly such authors as Thackeray, William Morris, Walter Besant.

EDWIN WHITE GAILLARD

Librarian, Webster Free Library

New York, May 12, 1898

1898

The Book Review runs a front-page piece on the importance of the bicycle, "which has become a force in latter-day letters."

1899

The Book Review recommends Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* in its summer reading issue, calling it "clever" and "particularly poignant."

1900

In a front-page editorial, the Book Review rails against "heroines who smoke" in novels.

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Early Book Review Headlines That Didn't Mince Words

FICTION, GOOD
AND OTHERWISE

~

PRURIENT AND
WORSE YET--DULL

~

Bad Prose as Well as Bad Verse.

~

FEVERISH FICTION.

~

A Painstaking but Dull Book.*

~

SUNDRY NOVELS

Some Worth Reading and Others
Not Worth the Printing

~

WELL-WRITTEN STORY:
UNPLEASANT CHARACTERS.

~

DULL CONFESSIONS BRIGHTLY REVIEWED.

~

WORTHLESS EDITION OF
A POOR ANTHOLOGY.

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George Bernard Shaw, *Plays: Pleasant and Unpleasant*

In the beginning, only some reviews were signed—the ones by well-known critics and scholars. In 1905, the editor noted that the annual holiday issue was "remarkable for the large number of valuable contributions . . . from writers of eminence in their respective fields." This practice, however, was the exception, not the norm; unnamed pundits regularly took potshots at authors, poets and dramatists, some of whom began writing directly to the paper's publisher, Adolph Ochs, asking that he intercede on their behalf. Ochs's replies were courteous but firm. "I should be pleased to have notice taken of your book," he wrote to one Mr. Miller in 1901. "Of course in such matters, as you will readily understand, I do not interfere; in fact cannot do so without totally demoralizing our organization. Our high standing as to the literary character of The Times is due to the utmost freedom given for the honest expression of the opinion of the writers."

This review of George Bernard Shaw's plays, though, later caused quite a stir, probably because it crossed the line from "honest expression" to mean-spiritedness.

MR. SHAW IS ALWAYS SMART AND GLIB, AND he is not more demoniac or less human in any one of these plays, as a whole, than in another. They are all readable, if one likes to read Shaw's stuff, and for the sake of good measure he has written a long introduction to each volume, in which he sets forth again in his fluent, showy way, his barren philosophy and his unbounded self-esteem. He has not a touch of the poetical in his composition, and the critic and satirist who is not a bit of a poet cannot reasonably hope to win wide renown as a dramatist.

Of course, this criticism, and any other that may conceivably be made against these pieces, has been "discounted," as the phrase goes, by the author in his preface, wherein he proclaims his own artistic and literary kinship with the great. But this clever, voluble jack-of-all-trades . . .

1901
The French poet Sully Prudhomme wins the first Nobel Prize in Literature.

1901
Booker T. Washington publishes *Up From Slavery*, which the Book Review says is "a simple and unaffected biography."

1905
Mark Twain's 70th birthday celebration at Delmonico's is front-page news. The menus are inscribed with one of his famous lines: "Be good and you will be lonesome."

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cannot be judged by his own comic standards when he puts his wares in the open market.

Mr. Shaw's new book is one which a multitude of readers would find intolerably dry. The moral of *Widowers' Houses* they would fail to comprehend. There are two or three passages in *The Philanderer* that seem capital burlesque. Probably a plumber's assistant would laugh at them if they were read aloud to him. *Mrs. Warren's Profession* has an unspeakable subject and the details of the story are unlikely. This play is too harsh and repellent, too bitter in its view of life, too dry and inconsequential to be acted.

A smart bit of historical perversion is called *The Man of Destiny,* and its subject is a supposed incident in the life of Napoleon. This shows, as some scenes in *The Devil's Disciple* (acted here last winter, but as yet unpublished) show, that Shaw has the instinct of stagecraft and the knack of devising situations, and that if he had a poet's gift he might become a real dramatist.

A striking portrait of the author serves as frontispiece in Vol. 1. His face is long and narrow, the brow high, the eyes shifty, the nose large, broad and blunt at the tip, the hair and beard scant Not a handsome man, surely and one who, except for the oddity of his dress and his views, and the unusual opportunities he has enjoyed to publicly exhibit both, would never have attracted much notice. And, to conclude, it should be borne in mind that there are ten thousand men and women in America and England writing smart, partly original, wholly unactable plays.

Shaw on February 3, 1889.

"Mr. Shaw's new book is one which a multitude of readers would find intolerably dry."

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Henry James, *The Two Magics*

Sometimes the anonymous Book Review critics got it wrong; sometimes they got it very, very right. This assessment of the book that included "The Turn of the Screw" said of the horror novella, "The very breath of hell seems to pervade some of its chapters."

COMING IMMEDIATELY ON THE HEELS, AS ONE may say, of his painfully elaborate treatment of an almost worthless subject in a story called "In the Cage," this newer volume by Mr. James is doubly gratifying. We should not care, certainly, to recommend it offhand as agreeable reading for habitually light-hearted or light-minded persons, though, to be sure the second of the two stories which make up its contents, "Covering End," is a perfect example of pure comedy.

But it is to the longer tale that we desire to direct attention. "The Turn of the Screw" is such a deliberate, powerful, and horribly successful study of the magic of evil, and of the subtle influence over human hearts and minds of the sin with which this world is accursed, as our language has not produced since Stevenson wrote his "Jekyll and Hyde" tale.

Mr. James's story is perhaps as allegorical as Stevenson's, but the allegory is not so clear. We have called it "horribly successful," and the phrase seems to still stand to express the awful, almost overpowering sense of evil that human nature is subject to derived from it by the sensitive reader. We have no doubt that with such a reader Mr. James will invariably produce the effect he aims at. But the work is not horrible in any grotesque or realistic sense. The most affecting argument against sin we have lately encountered in literature, it is nevertheless free from the slightest hint of grossness. Yet while the manner of his story is always graceful, the very breath of hell seems to pervade some of its chapters.

Just what the story is would be unfair to divulge here, but a boy of 10 and a girl of 8 figure in it prominently, and they are so lovely in their outward semblance of childlike innocence. Yet these children are accursed, and are shown to have daily, almost hourly, communication with lost souls, the souls that formerly inhabited the bodies of a vicious governess and her paramour who, in the flesh, began the degradation of their victims. The awful "imagination of evil" this fair boy and girl must possess, the terrible precocity which enables them to deceive their pastors and masters as to their knowledge of their ghostly mentors, are set with perfect clearness against the narrative to produce the thrilling effect.

A Christmas house party, with ghost stories told around the fireplace, develops "The Turn of the Screw" in a tale of a ghost seen first by an innocent child, and this leads to the production of this ghost story read from the faded manuscript of a gentlewoman who had had experiences with the possessed children. The style of the manuscript, in spite of the insistence upon the woman's penmanship, is obviously the style of Mr. Henry James. But one appreciates not the less the touch in the statement that it was read "with a fine clearness that was like a rendering to the ear of the beauty of the author's hand."

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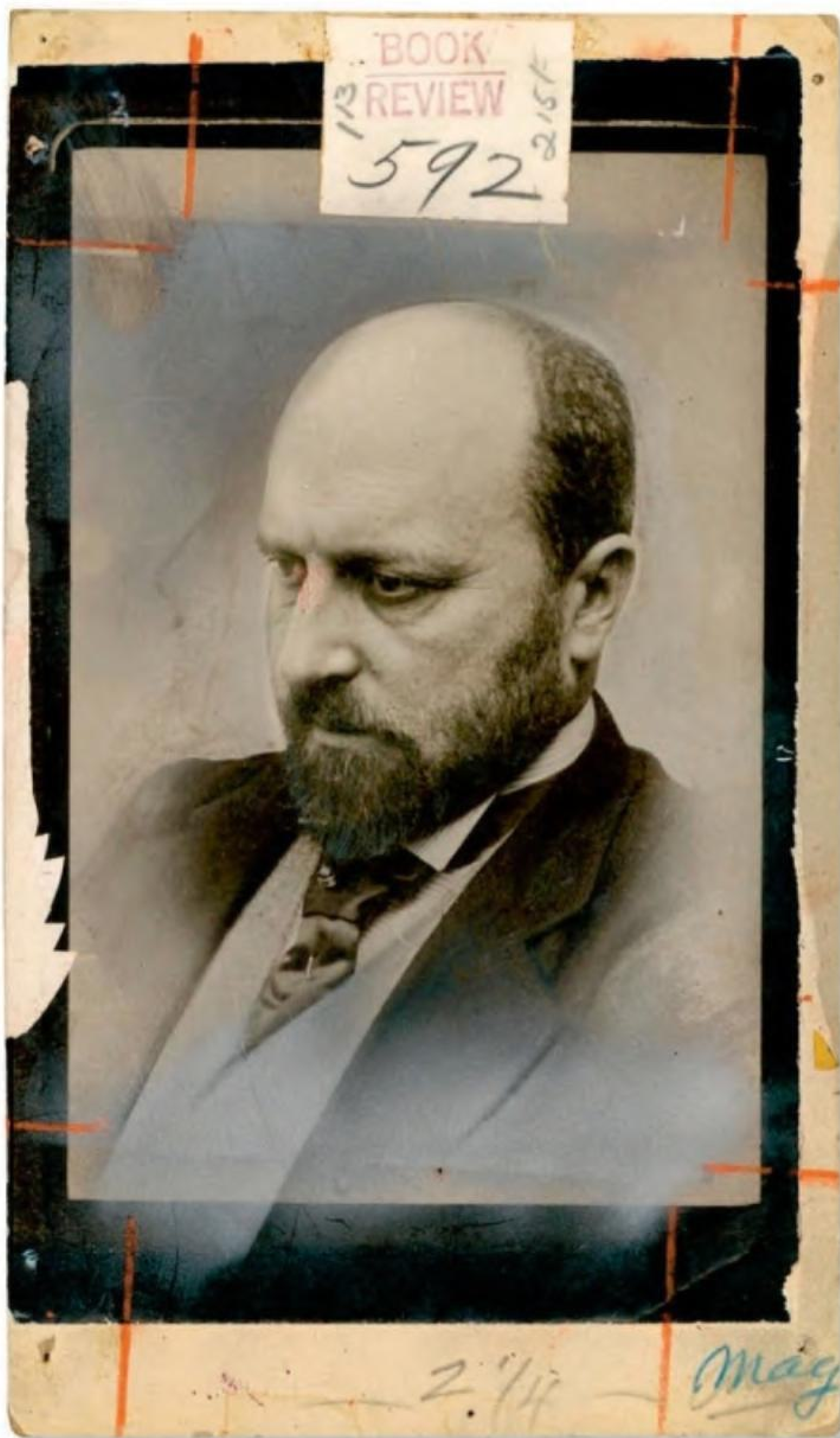

A portrait of James published in The Times in 1916.

"'The Turn of the Screw' is such a deliberate, powerful, and horribly successful study of the magic of evil."

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MAY 20, 1899 | LETTER

"Your Worship of Kipling"

In his reply to a somewhat cranky missive, the editor of the Book Review laid out its basic philosophy.

"YOUR WORSHIP OF KIPLING."

To The New York Times Saturday Review:

Is there never to be any let up in your worship of Kipling? I can put up with a considerable of that sort of thing; but you have brought it close to a state of nausea—and if, as I conjecture, Kipling is not hopelessly conceited, he must be nigh sickening of it himself.

TIMES READER.

New York, May 15, 1899.

To The New York Times Saturday Review:

Is there never to be any let up in your worship of Kipling? I can put up with a considerable amount of that sort of thing, but you have brought it close to a state of nausea—and if, as I conjecture, Kipling is not hopelessly conceited, he must be nigh sickening of it himself.

TIMES READER

May 15, 1899

The editor responds:

Although the above note is anonymous, this need not diminish the force of the appeal contained in it. The editor has, in fact, concluded to violate the ancient rule not to notice anonymous correspondence and accordingly gives "Times Reader" a hearing. "Times Reader" will be glad to know that the present number of The Saturday Review has been prepared with a special desire to please him (or her). So far as our most eagleish eye has determined, this present number of The Saturday Review does not contain a single article about Kipling, save of course the present, and for this "Times Reader" will not blame the editor. But it will be impossible to give "Times Reader" any guarantee of future immunity from Kipling. The Saturday Review must give the news of books. Its topics must be timely. Otherwise it would not remain long alive. The editor seriously hopes that "Times Reader" desires to see The Saturday Review continue its existence for many years. "Times Reader" is a candid friend, the kind of friend the editor likes to hear from. But these friends should always extend their candor one point further. They should send their names with their friendly admonitions.

Later

The above had been scheduled for a Kiplingless paper, and had been written in perfect good faith, when, late yesterday afternoon, there came to the editor news he had long had an inkling of but could not print until now—news of Mr. Kipling's new edition of his works. This seemed to us a most important piece of news and could not possibly be "held over." Will "Times Reader" please pardon us—or at least credit us with good intentions? And will he not understand that an editor, who aims to print the news, is far from being a free agent?

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How a Christmas Classic Came to Be

The Book Review often reprinted Clement C. Moore's famous poem during the holiday season. In 1899, it published this brief history, which drew a fascinating reply from a reader.

THE MERRY CHRISTMAS SEASON ALWAYS awakens fresh reference to the name of another who quite by accident made the whole Christian world his debtor. Clement C. Moore, a man of profound learning, earned worldwide and enduring fame as the author of "A Visit From St. Nicholas," more familiarly called "The Night Before Christmas." No poem written by an American has had so wide a circulation or been translated into so many languages. The human spirit beats in it, the true Christmas spirit pervades it, and it will be dear to the hearts of children as long as children continue to hang their stockings on Christmas Eve—and may that beautiful custom never die out!

Moore, who gave this old Dutch legend its poetic form, was born (July 15, 1779), reared

CHRISTMAS CLASSIC IN AUTHOR'S HAND

"A Visit to St. Nicholas," Written by Clement C. Moore 100 Years Ago and Known to Every Child

Page of "The Night Before Christmas" in the Handwriting of its Author.

A LITTLE book bound in red morocco holds the kernel of the children's celebration the world over of Christmas. To look at it no one would dream its hidden words are even now vibrating in the hearts of countless children, yet the charm its bright covers ing the original manuscript when it was presented to the society by T. W. Moore, a relative, some fifty years ago, is a letter in which the writer tells how the verses came to be written and how it happened that they were eventually published.

1907 — Theodore Dreiser republishes *Sister Carrie*, which the Book Review pans: "It is a book one can very well get along without reading."

1910 — Mark Twain dies. The paper reports that, on his deathbed, he called for his copy of Carlyle's *French Revolution*.

1910 — The Book Review wonders if "the beautiful and ultra-virtuous American heroine of fiction" can possibly be "true to life."

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and spent practically all his days in this city. His father had a stately mansion, a house that stood on a hill where the east side of Ninth Avenue, between Twenty-second and Twenty-third Streets, now is. It commanded a magnificently extensive view of the river and beyond, and the land was terraced to the water's edge.

Moore devoted his life to the education of young men for the ministry. He became Professor of Greek and Oriental Literature in the Episcopal Theological Seminary. As a relaxation from his serious work, Dr. Moore amused himself by writing stories and verses for the entertainment of his children, and "The Night Before Christmas" was written to aid their jollification while celebrating the holiday season of 1822.

A young lady from Troy, while on a visit to the home of Dr. Moore, saw the verses, and was so pleased with them that she begged the privilege of making a copy of them to show her friends at home. The following year, without consulting Dr. Moore, she sent the poem to the editor of the *Troy Sentinel*, in which it was printed on Dec. 23, 1823. The pleasure with which it was received, and the popularity which it immediately secured, mollified the good doctor's displeasure over its publication.

On July 10, 1863, Dr. Moore died at his summer home in Newport, R.I., at the ripe old age of 84 years. His place in the affections of his fellow men is secure as long as there is a pair of childish lips to murmur that happy closing line in his poetic version of the jolly old Dutch legend of "The Visit of St. Nicholas":

Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night.

A week later, the Book Review printed a reply from a reader:

It is not so long ago that Clement C. Moore's old residence in New York's Chelsea was torn down. I remember it well. The whole block bounded by Twenty-second and Twenty-third Streets and Ninth and Tenth Avenues was, as late as 1855, a hill, with high stone walls supporting it on the street and avenue sides. I used to take my sled up in front of the old mansion and slide downhill, out at the northwest corner of Twenty-second and Ninth. That was the mansion in which "The Visit of St. Nicholas" was written. And those were the days before horse cars, when omnibuses ran in summer and big stage-sleighs in winter, for the snow stayed on the ground weeks at a time. I saw that old hill dug down and carted away, and that winter, 1856 I think it was, the rain collected and froze in the excavations and I skated there. But I will say no more, or I shall ramble too long and too far.
GEORGE W. VAN SICLEN
The night before Christmas, 1899

1911
The Book Review switches to Sunday on January 29.

1911
In an op-ed, the Book Review wonders if there is a connection between the divorce rate and the public's appetite for saucy novels.

1912
Edgar Rice Burroughs publishes *Tarzan of the Apes*.

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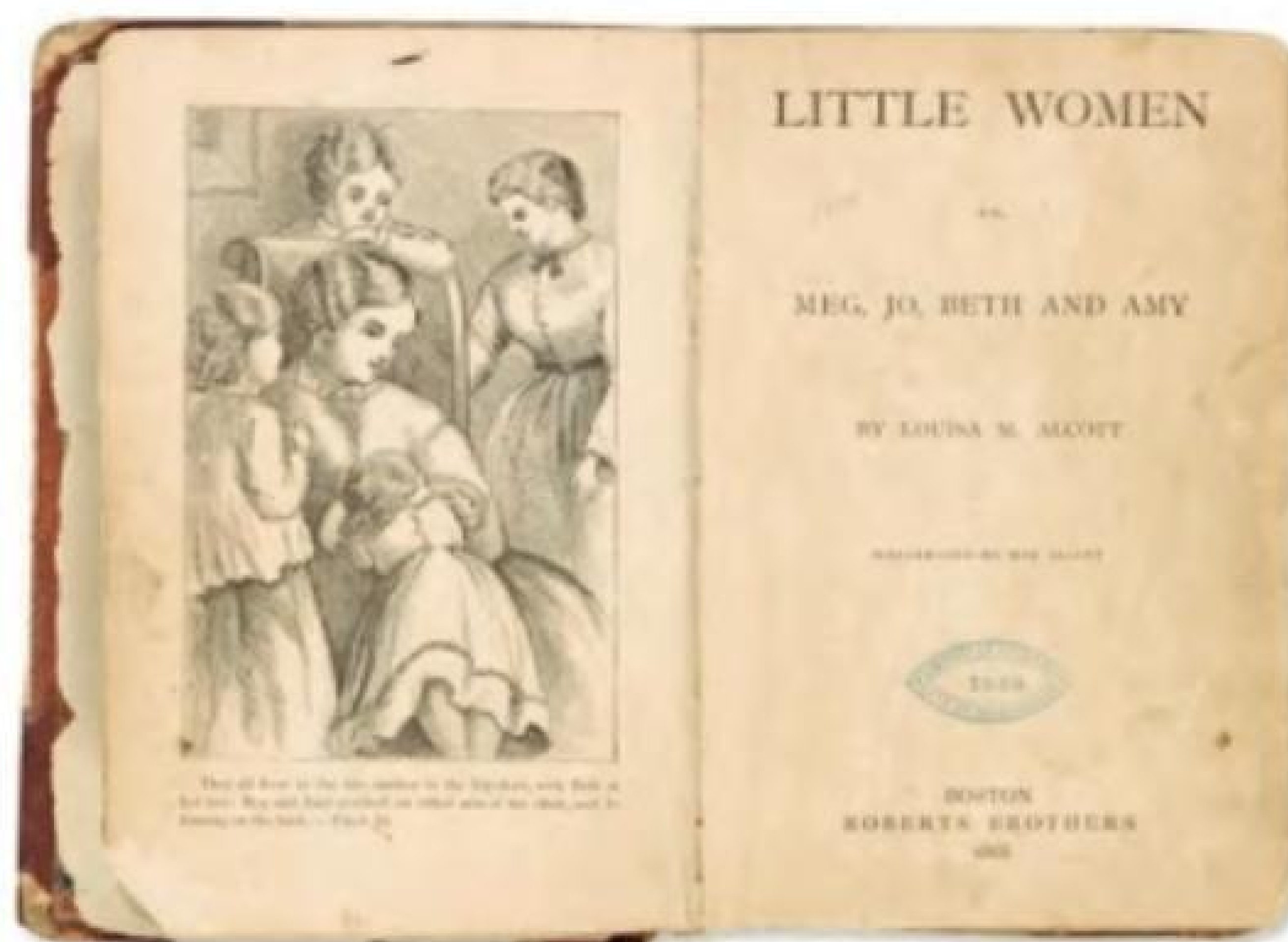
Why Miss Alcott Still Lives



When *Little Women* was first published in 1868, the paper's reviewer wrote, "While occupied with something far graver and less agreeable, we pushed *Little Women* quietly within the reach of two younger critics, and soon had them silent for a time." The book met with the children's approval: "You ought to read it, though!" they said.

NOTHING CHANGES THE CHILD. BORN INTO AN age of iron, an age of steam, or an age of electricity, he is precisely the same, with the same primal reversion to ancestral tastes. He will read stories of war and hunting, and will long to use a wicked gun; he must pass through the barbaric period.

So must his sister, but for her the stories of the human giant and fairy are substituted. The human giant, the girl of 5 or 6 who performs all the household work of her father's small establishment; the domestic fairy, who bestows good gifts upon her entire family by charming an aged millionaire, or a dying miser, or an alienated grandparent, or a long exiled third cousin, are always favorite with girls.

It is because Miss Alcott ministered to the phase of childish feeling that her books have so long held sway among American girls, and it is small wonder that the appearance of two as plays and of one with 15 clever pictures sets them among the chief favorites of the holiday season.

Yet, looking merely at their incidents and at the characters of their small personages, one is puzzled to see why they should be longer lived than a hundred ephemerals which have opened their wings to flutter about the Christmas candles and closed them to fall into forgotten slumbers. Their success is one of the strongest illustrations afforded by juvenile literature than, in art as in life, it is above all character that counts. Miss Alcott, as all the world knows, grew to her noble womanhood in a home which surpassed in quaintness anything which she would or could describe. She and her sisters had every opportunity to perform giant labors, and all manner of uses for fairy wands, and she, the strongest and the cleverest, found need for all her strength and cleverness, and when she wrote of the March family she merely described life as she knew it.

As Scotland to Burns and Sir Walter, as courts to Metternich, such was a New England home with plenty of nothing but love and courage to her. She had no need to rectify and enlarge, to cull anecdotes from the records of children. She had only to unveil the mirror of her heart.

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A Form of Busybodyism

In its early days, the Book Review quite enjoyed issuing knuckle-rapping editorials like this one, which was written after the paper published a news story about censorship in an Illinois library.

THE NEW YORK TIMES THE OTHER DAY CONtained an account, partly ridiculous and partly disgusting, of the tribulations which a library at Evanston has got into by undertaking to regulate the reading morals of that community. It appeared that the chief censor was the librarian, and her principle of exclusion was simple. Any book that contained any sentence to which any respectable person objected was thereupon "taboo." At least that is the only way in which we can account for the fact that pretty much all the recent novels that amount to anything or have anything to say were on the blacklist of this singular institution.

Of course there are in every community, and in an American community in larger numbers than in any other except a British, plenty of people endowed with a heaven-born itch for minding other people's business. The less they know about the business the more eager they are to mind it. But to interfere with the reading of other people and to insist that they shall read nothing but what you think good for them is a form of busybodyism in the pursuit of which much annoyance may be inflicted. It is to this that the busybodies of Evanston appear to have devoted themselves with great success, aided, or yielded to, by the authorities of the local library. If the Prurient Prudes find something in a current book which it would not be good for such a child to know, the offending volume must therefore "go." It matters not that it may be a work of genius by a writer of distinction and bear the imprint of a respectable publishing house. If somebody with a cultivated sense for indecency finds it indecent it is doomed. On such principles the volumes on the shelves of the Evanston library will soon be reduced to the goody goody class, which no sane soul can find interest in reading.

What sort of protection to the public morals is it to proscribe any book that any old woman of either sex and of any age may find "immoral" and then to publish the fact of that proscription? One would rather live under the Russian censorship than under that. The Russian censor is at least a male.

1912 — Harper's finds Zane Grey's third novel, *Riders of the Purple Sage*, to be "too bludgy," and publishes it only after the author pleads with them. It is a huge hit.

1912 — After the *Titanic* sinks, the paper publishes a poem about the tragedy by Thomas Hardy. Hundreds of readers then send in their own apparently bad poems, causing the paper to scold them for their "audacity."

1913 — The Book Review issues a stern editorial against immoral books: "A bad book is much more dangerous than a bad play or a bad picture."

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