

# Book Reviews



**Benton, Megan L.** *Beauty and the Book. Fine Editions and Cultural Distinction in America.* New Haven & London: Yale Univ. Pr. (Henry McBride Series in Modernism and Modernity), 2000. 323p. \$30, alk. paper (ISBN 0-300-08213-4). LC 99-38198.

Rare book librarians in college and university libraries who have inherited fine printing or book arts collections and have struggled to make them relevant to curricular and research agendas will welcome *Beauty and the Book*. It is one of the very few attempts from within the academy to take seriously the rise and significance of fine printing in early twentieth-century America. Although Benton's focus is narrow (the 1920s), it is informed by a generous set of archival sources. What it may lack in breadth, it more than gains in depth. It is well worth reading.

According to the author, fine printing emerged as a national publishing phenomenon after World War I. It was during this period, she contends, that Americans began to covet the finely made book on an unprecedented scale. It was this craze for fine printing in the 1920s that made it an enduring niche market within the much larger world of publishing. Benton begins with a quick review of the jeremiads *du jour* by postwar critics lamenting the decline of American culture as crass, commercial, and thoughtless, and ends in the depths of the Depression, where the plunging fortunes of fine printers contrast markedly with the unlikely success of George Macy's Limited Edition Club. In between appears a cast of characters who will be familiar to many, including Bruce Rogers, John Henry Nash, the Grabhorns, Carl Rollins, Frederic Warde, Bennett Cerf, and Elmer Adler, to name the principals. These printers and publishers, along with their products, came to occupy, if only briefly, an unprec-

edented position in American cultural life. In a society of cheaply made goods, questionable taste, and ephemeral values, they stood for quality, distinction, and endurance. Fine printing entered the marketplace as the last bulwark against the total demise of "civilized" society. It conferred status on a newly moneyed elite, eager to identify with emblems of taste and discernment. Its success in the marketplace turned on its repudiation of the values of the marketplace. But, in Hegelian fashion, success brought with it the pressures of its eventual demise.

*Beauty and the Book* rests on a set of ironies, which often seem more clever than substantive. The principal one is what I will call the "good Christian" challenge: how to be *in* the world without being *of* the world. For producers of fine books, the marketplace was a necessary evil. It demanded that they reconcile the idealism of their ideology of the book beautiful with the financial exigencies intrinsic to a competitive market environment. Capitalism is nothing if not tough love, as the book's heroes soon discover to their chagrin. The success of the finely made book spawned an intense competition, as more and more publishers caught on to the lure of the premium cultural artifact. On the eve of the Depression, the market for fine printing was virtually saturated. Because printers and publishers tended to reissue titles from the established canon of Western literature (lasting books made to last), the marketplace for them quickly became glutted with variations on similar themes. Publishers found themselves caught in a predictable vise. According to Benton, the Depression was akin to a mercy killing.

However, another, more interesting irony concerns the cultural status of the printers and designers themselves. These

saviors of Western Civilization were by and large high-spirited artisans whose world and work focused on colors, textures, and production processes rather than words, texts, and the higher criticism. But because the object of their cult was The Book, these hard-drinking, colorful characters were numbered among the cultural elect. They made the best for the best. The fact that only few of them had more than a high school education mattered little. In a democratic society, everyman is always a potential saint.

Whether or not you are persuaded by Benton's arguments, you have to admire the wealth of information she has assembled on the business and production practices of her core group. In fact, I suspect that the enduring value of the book lies in the pages and pages of documentation it presents to provide a detailed view of the world of fine printing in the 1920s. An appendix lists some 300 titles that constituted her sample group. *Beauty and the Book* thus gives the first detailed and systematic look at the business of fine printing; and for that alone, it earns a spot on your shelf.

Because the book tilts decidedly toward production rather than consumption, it provides at best a partial view of the phenomenon it wants to explain. In focusing exclusively on relations between American printers/publishers and their clients, *Beauty and the Book* ignores the other streams that fed the market for finely made books. By the 1920s, Britain, France, and Germany had vital and important traditions of fine printing and artists' books, and America was a growing market for them. If the issue is "cultural distinction in America," what better source than Europe to look for tokens and emblems of "having arrived." Benton's book leaves plenty of room for further work on collectors and collections in the early twentieth century.

That being said, *Beauty and the Book* is a smart monograph that helps bridge the gap between the self-conscious attempts of high modernists to wed text and artifact, marvelously captured in Jerome

McGann's *Black Riders* (Princeton 1993) and Jan Radway's study of the emergence of American middlebrow culture, *A Feeling for Books* (North Carolina 1997, reviewed in *C&RL* vol. 59, no. 3). Benton is a scholar who appreciates the fact that not all books are made or bought to be read; books are artifacts as well as texts.—*Michael Ryan, University of Pennsylvania.*

**Borgman, Christine L.** *From Gutenberg to the Global Information Infrastructure: Access to Information in the Networked World.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Pr., 2000. 324p. \$42, alk. paper (ISBN 0-262-02473-x). LC 99-39906.

Few observers would disagree that the dissemination of information, and the role of libraries in it, are at a major crossroads, with few road signs pointing to the next destination. Print has reigned supreme for centuries, and before that, similar principles prevailed. In the 1950s and thereafter, microforms came briefly to steal part of the show, although more as a preservation and space-saving expedient than as a substitute for print. Despite exuberant predictions, microforms never played their predicted role; they were too inconvenient to use, were poorly indexed in public catalogs and on the reel, and never contributed much to saving shelf space because libraries seldom discarded the materials they 'replaced.' In these instances, whatever the changes, they were relatively modest and never threatened the status of libraries as indispensable intermediaries between information and its seekers.

This is no longer the case. Cyberspace is, or at least is seen to be, as much nemesis of traditional libraries as benefactor. The reasons for this are all too obvious: convenience and efficiency are the two most often advanced. Christine Borgman's study employs a wide canvass in presenting a *status questionis*. On the whole, Borgman steers a middle course between the Scylla of nostalgia and the Charybdis of futurism. She is especially careful to treat issues on a quid pro quo basis, scrupulously and systematically discussing both advantages and disadvantages.