

## ARTS & LETTERS

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### *THE ANNOTATED HUCKLEBERRY FINN.*

Edited by Michael Patrick Hearn.

Norton. 480 pp. \$39.95

Hearn's handsomely designed, album-sized edition of Mark Twain's great novel follows the examples of William S. Baring-Gould's magisterial *Annotated Sherlock Holmes* (1967) and similar treatments of *The Wizard of Oz* (1973), also by Hearn, and *Alice in Wonderland* (1993), by Martin Gardner. Such books have their primal ancestor in the Talmud's commentaries on commentaries. But *Huckleberry Finn* did not come into the world as a candidate for reverential treatment. It is a book born to trouble, a pariah novel denounced in its time as "trash and suitable only for the slums," denounced in our time as racist, but nonetheless not only vindicated but canonized (in several senses). Hearn lists 55 "notable" editions of the book, excluding countless routine reprints in virtually every known language. The subject of an enormous critical literature that has unearthed multiple levels of meaning and intention, Twain's masterpiece has become a sort of freshwater *Moby-Dick*.

Hearn's own 150-page introduction is a model of thoroughness and compaction: It recounts not only the vexed composition of *Huckleberry Finn* but its equally vexed production, publication, and reception, altogether a cautionary demonstration of the agonies of authorship and the vicissitudes of taste. The text of *Huckleberry Finn*—what this ambitious edition is all about to begin with—appears in an exceptionally attractive reprint along with the 174 original sepia illustrations by E. W. Kemble. Hearn's commentary is apt, informed, and engaged, but it sometimes outpaces what it is meant to illuminate instead of trotting alongside. At the outset, for example, Twain's ironic 34-word "Notice"—"Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot"—generates a gloss of more than a thousand words. Perhaps, though, the disproportion is right and proper considering the nature of the prefatory passage.

A major source of trouble for *Huckleberry Finn* has been its 200 or more iterations of the taboo word *nigger*. They have "kept the novel at the center of modern freedom-of-speech disputes," Hearn writes. "Can a book which uses racist language, however subtly, be a great work of literature? Should it have a place in the public school curriculum or library?" The argument over *Huckleberry Finn*'s suitability for impressionable, literal-minded readers with little or no recognition of historical context continues, with occasional ferocity. Hearn is attentive to three of the most crucial and controversial passages in the novel: Huck's initial reluctance to apologize to Jim ("I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards"), his decision not to turn Jim in as a fugitive slave ("All right, then, I'll go to hell"), and his blithe and bitter reply to Aunt Sally's question about whether anyone was hurt in a steamboat explosion: "No'm. Killed a nigger." "Well, it's lucky," she says, "because sometimes people do get hurt." Irony, we need to be reminded, may be the most sophisticated of all literary strategies.

Even readers moderately informed about *Huckleberry Finn* are likely to find themselves surprised by how many rich details they may have simply skimmed over: excursions into riverine social history, customs, superstitions, legends, domestic practices, and idioms. The drawback here, the difficulty inherent in such comprehensive treatment, is that the text itself—this brilliant and gripping story of adventure and moral education—may at times be overshadowed by the commentary it has provoked.

—JUSTIN KAPLAN

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### *THE GREAT AMERICAN PAPERBACK:*

#### *An Illustrated Tribute to the Legends of the Book.*

By Richard A. Lupoff. Collectors Press.  
320 pp. \$60

Mass-market paperback publishing in America got off to a rousing third or fourth start with the debut of Pocket Books in 1939. During the 19th century and then in the 1920s and 1930s, several companies had been

drawn to the paperback's promise of lower costs and higher profits, but they could never sustain their operations. Here, Lupoff, a historian of mass culture and the author of a book on Edgar Rice Burroughs, pays lavish, full-color tribute to the companies that finally made a go of it.

While the publishers' stories have been told more comprehensively elsewhere—Thomas Bonn's *Under Cover* (1982), Kenneth Davis's *Two-Bit Culture* (1984), and Piet Schreuders's *Paperbacks, U.S.A.* (1981)—Lupoff delivers a sure-footed overview of the history along with more than 400 reproductions of vintage covers. He has also identified most of the uncredited artists who painted the covers, a boon for paperback collectors who are interested principally in the campy, sometimes risqué, but often just silly artwork.

Why did Pocket and others succeed where their predecessors had failed? According to John Tebbel's magnificent four-volume *History of Book Publishing in the United States* (1972–81), Pocket combined the advantages of uniform size and price with enticing color covers, inexpensive paper, rotary printing (the technology first used to print newspapers on continuous rolls of paper), and—this is the key—a distribution system that treated books like magazines. Pocket allied with newspaper and periodical wholesale outfits, which placed the new paperbacks in drugstores, smoke shops, five-and-dimes, newsstands, train stations, and, of course, bookstores. No longer, the company promised, would readers be forced to “dawdle idly in reception rooms, fret on train or bus rides, sit vacantly at a restaurant table.”

The first Pocket Books were a shrewd mix: a few classics (Shakespeare, Samuel Butler, and Emily Brontë), a self-help book (*Wake Up and Live!*), an Agatha Christie mystery,

Thornton Wilder's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, a volume of Dorothy Parker's poetry, and, rounding out this selection of something for everyone, *Bambi*. Initially staffed by two people working out of a windowless office, Pocket started distributing in New York City and within a month branched out to most large cities. Within three months, the firm had sold half a million copies of its first 10 books. Shakespeare was the dog that didn't have his day—“a 574-page loss leader,” writes Tebbel—and *Wuthering Heights* was the top seller, owing not to the reading public's jones for Brontë but to the recent Laurence Olivier movie.

Within a few years, American paperback publishing houses were quickly and cheaply printing, widely distributing, and steadily selling titles both high and low, new and old. Lupoff sticks mostly with the low and the new. He calls *Reform School Girl*, whose cover features a tall, blonde woman in a scarlet teddy smoking a cigarette while leaning over to undo her garter straps, “an icon to paperback collectors,” whereas *Moby-Dick*, “masterpiece though it is and despite its many paperback editions, has had no great bearing on paperback publishing history.”

High and low, though, is a distinction the publishers themselves didn't draw. In 1950, Signet published Mickey Spillane's *My Gun Is Quick* and *Vengeance Is Mine!* as well as Vladimir Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark*. Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* was sold from spinner racks alongside Horace McCoy's *Kiss Tomorrow Good-Bye* (“Love as hot as a blow torch . . . crime as vicious as the jungle”).

These books were available for one-tenth the price of a hardcover book. Widely available, too: Bonn describes how readers in Columbus, Ohio, in 1941, could buy hard-



Lupoff calls this infamous cover “*inde-scribable, unbelievable, incomparable.*”

cover books from six places, while a Pocket Book could be theirs at any one of 224 outlets, for a quarter. It's easy to assume that the paperback revolution was all about campy artwork and cheesy come-ons, but to pay attention mostly to the covers, as astonishing as some of them are, is to ignore the social impact of an innovation that made writing available widely and cheaply.

Today's mass-market paperbacks are not as inexpensive, even adjusting for inflation; they require more than an hour's work at minimum wage, the early standard for pricing. Neither are they available as widely. Fewer classics and newer books of value are published in the format. With the advent of Vintage paperbacks in the early 1980s, most serious paperbacks, both fiction and nonfiction, began appearing in larger, pricier trade editions. Probably never again will a prospective reader, someone looking for a book, just something to pass the time, be lucky enough to stand within arm's reach of both a Nabokov and a Spillane.

—PAUL MALISZEWSKI

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**TEMPERAMENT:**  
*The Idea That Solved  
Music's Greatest Riddle.*

By Stuart Isacoff. Knopf. 259 pp. \$23

The lyre of the mythic Orpheus, enchanting even to trees and rocks, and the spirit-healing harp of the psalmist David have everything to do with the story of *Temperament*. Into modern times, musicians and instrument makers have been driven to break the code that gave that ancient music its magical powers. The tuning of notes and their spacing in the octave were thought to be the heart of the matter.

From the sixth century B.C. on, Pythagoras ruled the discussion with his general dictum that the right relationships were mathematical. The top note of the octave resonates exactly twice as fast as the bottom note (in "Over the Rainbow," the vibrational leap in the opening notes on the word "somewhere" is 1:2, as also in Duke Ellington's "Daydream"). Equally important to Pythagoras was the 2:3 ratio between the tones of the "perfect fifth" (the opening notes of "My Favorite Things") and the 3:4

ratio in the "perfect fourth" (the start of "Auld Lang Syne"). The exaltation of the "major third" (the mi-mi-mi-do! opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony) came later; with a 5:4 ratio of vibrations, it extended the rule of small integers over the definition of musical value.

Beauty lay not just in the ears but in the clarity of numbers. In the 17th century, Johannes Kepler argued that the courses of the several planets corresponded precisely with the harmonious proportions of musical thirds, fourths, and fifths. That is, music was the language both of man's singing inner life and of the celestial spheres in their orbits. "From earliest times," writes Isacoff, the editor of *Piano Today* magazine, "number, sound and virtue wrapped themselves like intertwining vines around the trunk of Western culture."

The problem with the number mysticism in music was spotted early on, even by Pythagoras. Intervals deemed "perfect" on their own were not neat nesting blocks that fitted perfectly together. Rather, like weeks fitting into months fitting into calendar years (or like mates in blessed matrimony), pleasing musical units had to be stretched here and whittled there to make a workable whole. The expressive voice and the tolerant ear had no trouble with the compromises, but the development of fixed-note instruments and especially keyboards forced hard choices and fierce arguments starting in the Renaissance. This is the terrain of Isacoff's chatty survey, an anecdotal, name-dropping slide show of the evolution that made pianos and orchestras possible.

Many paths led eventually to the system that dominates today, "equal temperament," which divides the octave into 12 uniform "half-tone" intervals. Another approach, "just intonation," preserved perfect fifths and major thirds more adamantly. "Mean-tone temperament" sacrificed the sanctity of the fifth in favor of the third. "Well temperament," which J. S. Bach loved, preserved clear differences of color and character among the scales built on each of 12 keys. Finding the right temperament sounds like an engineering challenge, but innumerable churchmen, sages, scientists, and musicians deemed it vastly more. Vincenzo Galilei,