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The World's Best Books: Taste, Culture, and the Modern Library

Gordon B. Neavill

Wayne State University, neavill@wayne.edu

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reading, Cambridge University Press has produced a book worthy of its author's important achievement.

Satterfield, Jay. *The World's Best Books: Taste, Culture, and the Modern Library*. (Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book.) Amherst and Boston: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 2002. ix, 240 pp. Illus. Cloth, \$29.95. (ISBN 1-55849-353-0)

Reviewed by GORDON B. NEAVILL

The Modern Library of the World's Best Books was founded in 1917 and is still published today. The series was the most tangible representation of the literary canon in the American cultural marketplace for nearly half a century. The books were inexpensive and widely distributed; before the advent of quality paperbacks in the 1950s many significant works were in print in the United States in no other format. Their appeal was such that New York department stores like Macy's and Gimbels occasionally used Modern Library books as loss leaders to attract customers into their stores.

Albert Boni conceived the Modern Library as a vehicle for promoting the currents of European modernism in the United States. Authors like Gabriele D'Annunzio, Gustave Flaubert, Anatole France, Henrik Ibsen, Friedrich Nietzsche, Arthur Schnitzler, August Strindberg, Leo Tolstoy, H. G. Wells, and Oscar Wilde dominated the early lists. The publishing firm Boni and Liveright was created to publish the Modern Library, but the partners were incompatible and Boni left the firm after eighteen months. Horace Liveright was more interested in publishing new American writers, and he sold the Modern Library in 1925 to Bennett Cerf and Donald S. Klopfer. Of the 115 Modern Library titles published by Boni and Liveright, 64 appeared in 1917 and 1918.

The new owners were ambitious and exceptionally capable young men in their twenties. Within five years they transformed the series; later they built Random House on the foundation of the Modern Library. They broadened the scope of the Modern Library to include older classics and more American authors, made major improvements in format and design, and turned the series into an extraordinary cultural and commercial success, seemingly erasing the tensions between culture and commerce that usually characterize the publication of serious books. How they did so is the focus of Satterfield's excellent and well-written book.

Gordon B. Neavill (Library and Information Science Program, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI 48202) is the author of several articles on the Modern Library and is currently making final revisions in a descriptive bibliography of the Modern Library series.

Satterfield traces the evolution of the Modern Library from its origins to the slow decline that began in the 1950s and accelerated in the 1960s. The book is a cultural history of the Modern Library, not a bibliographical history. Satterfield has made good use of the Random House archives at Columbia University and immersed himself in the periodical literature of the period. His analysis of Modern Library advertising comprises the intellectual core of the book and is of immense interest. Satterfield's lack of hands-on familiarity with the nearly 800 titles published in the Modern Library between 1917 and the mid-1980s results in occasional confusions and missed opportunities to strengthen (or qualify) his arguments but does not seriously detract from the value of the book.

The first chapter, "Establishing the World's Best Books," deals with the Boni and Liveright period. Relying primarily on secondary sources and contemporary periodical literature, he places the Modern Library in the context of the vitalization of American publishing in the early years of the century, brought about largely by the entrance into the industry of publishers like B. W. Huebsch and Alfred A. Knopf, and the emergence of a cultural bohemia in Greenwich Village, in which Albert Boni was actively involved. Boni and Liveright was incorporated in March 1917, and the first twelve Modern Library books appeared in May, a month after American entrance into the First World War. Satterfield reproduces and discusses a Modern Library advertisement in the *New Republic* that describes two American soldiers in France, an avid reader and a sports fan, becoming absorbed in an earlier Modern Library advertisement. He concludes, "With its appeals to the intellect (Booky) and the pocketbook (Hank), the Modern Library purveyed a common culture to seal a symbolic trench affinity. The Modern Library presented itself as a truly democratic manifestation...for it offered a form of culture financially available and intellectually palatable to highbrows and lowbrows" (22).

Chapter 2, "Advertising the World's Best Books," focuses on Modern Library advertising after Cerf and Klopfer took over the series. "Recognizing that the Modern Library needed a more aggressive sales strategy," Satterfield writes, "Cerf and Klopfer initiated a large-scale advertising campaign specifically directed at America's largest class of book buyers, urban, middle-class professionals" (38). They defined their audience as the nation's "civilized minority" (Satterfield defines what they meant by this in some detail), emphasized the Modern Library's low price, and linked the Modern Library to an egalitarian ideal. They also courted women readers. Satterfield notes that women "appeared in illustrations as often as men in their advertisements and more frequently as actual readers" (54). And he notes that Modern Library advertising in the 1920s and 1930s often used inclusive language or the personal "you" instead of the then-ubiquitous masculine pronoun.

Chapter 3, "Booming the World's Best Books," deals with marketing and

distribution. The Modern Library was distributed through bookstores and the book departments of major department stores. The scarcity of bookstores and their uneven distribution in relation to the American population led O. H. Cheney to describe distribution as “the tragedy of the book industry” (*Economic Survey of the Book Industry, 1930–1931* [New York: National Association of Book Publishers, 1931], 224). Cerf and Klopfer worked closely with existing retail outlets. They acted as their own sales representatives on the East Coast, visiting booksellers from Portland, Maine, to Richmond, Virginia. This was the heart of their market. Cheney notes that half of the leading book outlets at this period were located in New England and the Middle Atlantic states of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. These states accounted for 51 percent of total U.S. book sales. New York alone accounted for 31 percent of total U.S. book sales.

Satterfield rightly emphasizes the attention Cerf and Klopfer paid to promoting and selling the Modern Library, but I think he gives them more credit than they deserve for innovation in this area. He describes several experiments in the 1930s, including a Book-a-Month Plan and a chain-selling scheme in which Modern Library readers would earn commissions on books they sold to their friends and in turn on books their friends sold. These schemes were short-lived if not stillborn. I’m pleased, however, that he discusses Sarah Ball, a figure of the 1930s reminiscent of Christopher Morley’s fictional Roger Mifflin. Convinced that vacationers needed access to good books, she traveled throughout New England in a truck emblazoned with the Modern Library’s torchbearer device, placing Modern Library books on consignment in resorts, inns, and tearooms. It is not clear how much her efforts contributed to the Modern Library’s bottom line, but Cerf and Klopfer were fond of her and she remained in touch with them until her death in 1962. In the main, however, Cerf and Klopfer worked within the book trade’s existing distribution channels. The innovators at this period were those who found ways of reaching readers who lacked access to bookstores — publishers like Grosset and Dunlap, whose popular reprints were sold in a variety of retail outlets, the Book-of-the-Month Club, and Robert de Graff, the founder of Pocket Books, who originated the practice of distributing paperbacks through magazine wholesalers.

Chapter 3 also deals with advertising. Much of publishers’ advertising is directed toward booksellers. Cerf attempted “to persuade culturally minded booksellers to see the Modern Library as both a sacred object *and* a commodity” (78). He did so with “wit and ingenuity,” never more so than in a classic *Publishers’ Weekly* ad that challenges the adage that books can’t be marketed like soap. The Modern Library was a familiar brand name. Adapting the slogan of Ivory Soap, the advertisement is headed “They Float!” and depicts a young woman seated in her bath with five Modern Library books floating on the surface of the water.

Chapter 4, "Packaging the World's Best Books," addresses format and design. Cerf believed that the Modern Library's chief selling points, after title selection, were price and format. Satterfield argues that the partners "sought to imbue the series with 'class,' a term connoting an elegance of style and refined taste that both men greatly admired" (88). Cerf and Klopfer sought and achieved a high standard. Both men collected fine press books, and Random House was originally established to publish and distribute limited editions. Between 1925 and 1940 they called on Elmer Adler, Lucian Bernhard, Rockwell Kent, and Joseph Blumenthal to transform the appearance of Modern Library books.

Greater familiarity with the physical books would have been useful in this chapter, for the contributions of these designers were even more impressive than Satterfield acknowledges. Beginning in 1929, when balloon cloth replaced the imitation leather bindings inherited from Boni and Liveright, each Modern Library title was published in bindings of four different colors, with the top edge stained to match the color of the cloth. Kent's newly designed endpapers were initially printed in three different colors and coordinated with the bindings. Endpapers in three different colors may have been overly ambitious for books retailing at ninety-five cents. After a couple of years (and for the rest of the Modern Library's balloon cloth era) Kent's endpapers were printed in a single color and used with all four bindings.

It should also be noted that Satterfield underestimates Joseph Blumenthal's contribution to the redesign of the series in 1939. Satterfield states that Blumenthal's "only significant change was to replace the balloon-cloth bindings with thick, solid board covers" (117). Kent's endpapers were retained, but the new binding was completely redesigned and the page size was increased half an inch to 7 by $4\frac{3}{4}$ inches. Blumenthal replaced Adler's uniform title-page with individually designed title-pages. He created the title-pages himself, setting them at his Spiral Press, and then made electrotype plates for the use of the Modern Library's regular printers. Most of the titles in the larger format had newly designed jackets. The pictorial jackets were done by a variety of artists, including Valenti Angelo and E. McKnight Kauffer. The most prolific was Paul Galdone, who produced 35 jackets in 1939 and 1940 alone. The non-pictorial jackets were designed by Blumenthal and featured his classically elegant typography; examples include Machiavelli's *The Prince and The Discourses* (1940) and Milton's *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose* (1942).

Successful publishing, as Satterfield's book vividly demonstrates, involves more than the editorial function. It is only in the final third of his text that he turns to editorial matters. In Chapter 5, "Selecting the World's Best Books," he notes that Cerf and Klopfer "built their list to reflect their own cosmopolitan literary tastes. They selected popular titles 'in the modern spirit' with a cosmopolitan flair that attracted a significant portion of the professional-

managerial class, including the critically demanding intelligentsia" (119). Over time they built a list that included works that appealed to a wide range of readers. Most major modern authors were represented, as were the greatest writers of the past. The Modern Library accommodated Virginia Woolf and Daphne du Maurier, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* and *Madame Bovary*, Proust and James T. Farrell.

The Modern Library was an evolving canon with titles added and dropped on a regular basis. Cerf and Klopfer started with 109 active Boni and Liveright titles. The series grew to nearly 500 active titles by 1970; over the same period the list of discontinued titles grew to about 300. The mix of titles in the Modern Library at a given time was the result of several factors. Cerf and Klopfer could include whatever they wished from the public domain. The public domain included older works whose copyrights had expired. It also included all works by foreign authors published in the United States prior to 1 July 1891 and works published since that date that failed to meet the requirements of the copyright law's manufacturing clause. Copyrighted works could be included only with the permission of the original publisher or copyright holder. Some copyrighted titles, like *The Thurber Carnival* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, were secured for the Modern Library after repeated offers extending over a period of ten or fifteen years. There were many copyrighted titles that Cerf and Klopfer were never able to get.

Titles were dropped from the series primarily because of poor sales. Satterfield notes that Cerf and Klopfer promised booksellers in 1928 that titles selling fewer than 2,000 copies per year would be replaced. In practice the criteria for discontinuing titles were more flexible. In 1942/3, one of the few years for which sales figures for the entire series are available, 54 of the 281 titles — nearly 20 percent — had sales below that threshold. Some discontinued titles sold well at one period and then slipped from favor. Others were failures from the start. *The Great Gatsby*, published in the Modern Library in 1934 when Fitzgerald's reputation was at a low point, was one of the worst selling titles in the series and was dropped after four years. Original publishers occasionally served notice that reprint contracts would not be renewed. Satterfield states that Alfred Knopf "often refused to renew contracts with the Modern Library" (138), but I am aware of only two titles that he withdrew from the series, Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* and *The Magic Mountain*. Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* was withdrawn after the author decided she did not want her works to be available in reprint editions, but that was Cather's decision. Thirty years later J. D. Salinger became the second author to pull his works from the Modern Library when he asked Little, Brown not to renew the reprint contracts for *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Nine Stories*.

The final chapter, "Closing the World's Best Books," deals with the rise of paperbacks, the expanding educational market after the Second World War,

and two controversies during the war that damaged the Modern Library's reputation. The first controversy surrounded the decision in 1943 to drop Stendhal's *Charterhouse of Parma* from the series. The *New Republic* published an open letter protesting the decision. Cerf's response was sharp and peevish. Citing poor sales and paper shortages, he declared that the Modern Library "had no choice...but to drop such a laggard from the series." The episode festered among academics and intellectuals for a decade. Over a year later, the little magazine *Pharos* published a special issue on Stendhal in which Harry Levin charged that the Modern Library's publishers had "committed [a] cultural outrage against their country." James T. Farrell, writing in 1946 about the commercialization of publishing, asserted that the Modern Library's editors were "gradually watering down their stock." When Jason Epstein founded Anchor Books, the first quality paperback series, in 1953 — a decade after the fact — he boldly staked a claim to the intellectual audience by making *The Charterhouse of Parma* his first title.

The second controversy attracted the attention of the reading public as a whole. At issue was *An Anthology of Famous English and American Poetry*, a Modern Library Giant edited by William Rose Benét and Conrad Aiken. In May 1945, as the anthology was being prepared for publication, Ezra Pound was taken into custody in Italy and returned to the United States to face charges of treason. Cerf insisted on the removal of all of Pound's poems from the volume. He ignored Aiken's strenuous objections but agreed to list the twelve omitted poems and to include the statement that Aiken had been "overruled by the publishers, who flatly refused at this time to include a single line by Ezra Pound."

The deletion of the poems was widely condemned. Lewis Gannett in the *New York Herald Tribune* compared the action with Nazi book burning. Many of Cerf's friends, including Henry Steele Commager, Max Lerner, and the Random House editor Robert Linscott, opposed the decision. W. H. Auden, the most prestigious poet published by Random House, informed Cerf that he would leave the firm over the issue. At this point Cerf began to question whether he was right. He devoted his "Trade Winds" column in *Saturday Review of Literature* to the controversy, giving his side but also reprinting Gannett's column. He invited readers to let him know their views. A slim majority of the 289 letters that came in opposed the exclusion of Pound's poems. When *An Anthology of Famous English and American Poetry* was reprinted in July 1946 the twelve poems were restored.

Satterfield's otherwise excellent account of the affair is faulty in two respects. He indicates that Saxe Commins, the Random House editor-in-chief, was sympathetic to Aiken. My sense is that Commins was even more strongly opposed to the inclusion of Pound's poems than Cerf. He also states that *An Anthology of Famous English and American Poetry* "had been a series mainstay

for over a decade when Cerf contracted with Conrad Aiken in 1943 to revise its American selection" (151). Here he is confusing the Modern Library Giant, first published in December 1945, with Aiken's *Comprehensive Anthology of American Poetry*, which had been in the regular Modern Library since 1929 and appeared in a revised edition at the beginning of 1945. Shortly thereafter someone at Random House had the idea of also packaging it with an anthology of English poetry that Benét had recently submitted and publishing both as a Giant. The motivation may have been to provide Aiken with a bit of additional income to compensate for the royalties he lost during the periods his two poetry anthologies in the regular Modern Library were out of stock because of wartime paper shortages. The twelve poems that were ostentatiously removed from *An Anthology of Famous English and American Poetry* continued to be available in *A Comprehensive Anthology of American Poetry*, as were Pound's poems in other Modern Library anthologies.

My own research on the Modern Library, still largely unpublished, parallels Satterfield's in many respects. I have drawn on my own work as well as Satterfield's in the course of writing this review. *The World's Best Books* is a focused and illuminating study of how the Modern Library was marketed to American readers from its early years to the period following the Second World War. It is not a comprehensive history of the series. The first and last chapters in particular could be more fully developed. Satterfield has not used all of the available sources for the Boni and Liveright period, and a full analysis of the Modern Library's decline in the postwar period could be a book-length study in itself. The book is well conceived, full of fresh insights, and breaks new ground in its analysis of Modern Library advertising. I admire Satterfield's work and have learned much from it.