

the dean's corner

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Curses, and a blessing

Thomas a Kempis captures my sentiments when he writes, "I have sought for happiness everywhere, but I have found it nowhere except in a warm corner with a little book." I doubt that Thomas was antisocial any more than I am. It's just such a glorious part of life to sit down with a book and have an exclusive conversation with a perfect stranger on a topic of mutual concern. It's all to the good if you don't happen to agree completely.

I love books. I always have. I'm about life the way the monk, Jakob Louber, was about monasteries:

A monastery without books is like a state without resources, a camp without troops, a kitchen without cookery, a table without food, a garden without grass, a field without flowers, a tree without leaves.

All right, already, but it's true, nonetheless. The American Library Association cringes when a librarian says he loves books. I can't imagine why. Imagine the AMA poo-hooing a physician who says she loves healing? Or the ABA complaining about lawyers who love money? Okay, just kidding about that last part.

So many enchanting books come across my desk, literally. Barzun's *From Dawn to Decadence* has enough provocations (it's close to 900 pages) to make everyone mad. Norman Davies' *Europe*, even with its

mistakes, may be the best written history in the last decade. Jeremy Campbell's *Liar's Tale: A History of Falsehood* is at once wonderful, and a wonderfully disturbing bit of angst. Finally, there is James Hynes's *The Lecture's Tale*. If you don't mind laughing at academics (and who does!?), here is one of the finest satires on university life in recent years. (Its raunchiness for the last 75 pages almost ruins an otherwise hilarious novel, but it's still worth the read.)

Every now and again there comes along a really wonderful book that makes you smile with great pleasure because you know you probably would have missed it had you been in any other profession. Marc Drogin's *Anathema!* is just such a book. Drogin has collected a short history of medieval scribbling and book curses. It's a miscellany of musings by scribes or authors who wish to have one last word on, well, words. It's a delightful read for anyone who loves reading.

For example, there's a 12th Century scribe who, after his Ulster saga of Cuchulainn, opines,

But I, who have written this history, or rather fable, am doubtful about many things in this history or fable. For some of them are the figments of demons, some of them poetic imaginings, some true, some not, some for the delight of fools.

For sheer, brutal truth, there is John Taylor in his *Miscellanies* who pips,

Some things are very good, pick out the best,

Good wits compiled them, and I wrote the rest.

Some of us would be tempted to rearrange those lines to better fit our image and (*soi-disant*) reputation.

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But the best part of this book is its curses, however. Curses aplenty for those who steal, lose or otherwise treat a book shabbily. Book curses can be traced back to the 39th century B.C.; but even if we count only those specifically citing a certain book, we can still get back to the 7th century B.C. “If you rub me out” writes a scribe of the 1st or 3rd century A.D., “I will slander you to Euripides.” For those who would cut up books, “He shall be excommunicated for one year.” Threats, curses and banes on existence filled books that were taken but not returned, lost or otherwise mistreated. “Whoever steals or sells it, may there be anathema on him.” If the book could not be secured by chains, then the reader was bediviled with curses:

If anyone unfairly
his scribe puts down,
In hell’s murky waters
May Cerberus him drown.

For some, the curses must get bigger: “Christ curse upon the crook/Who takes away this book.” Yet another goes one step higher: “This book is one, and God’s curse is another; They that take the one,

God give them the other.” Bishop Leofric of Exeter merely called upon the thief a simple matter: “[L]et him lie under perpetual malediction.” From 1461, “Hanging will do/for him who steals you.” For the 15th century matters were yet more extreme, and no death was too good:

Whoever steals this
book

Will hang on a gal-
lows in Paris,

And, if he isn’t hung,
he’ll drown,

And, if he isn’t
drown, he’ll roast,

And, if he doesn’t
roast, a worse end will
befall him.

And you think fines are a
big deal. Ha!

From the Monastery of
Emmeram, we discover:

If anyone takes this book
from Emmeram without
permission, may he fear the
judgment of the Lord. Whoever
takes this book and does not
afterward return it in good
condition, may he do penance
forever as his just reward.

Other bookkeepers
were just salty enough to rail,

Who takes this book
from holy St. Nazarius,

The Judge’s wrath
will make his life
precarious.

But this was not enough for
some who added,

May whoever steals
me cease

Ever to have a
moment’s peace.

Some will surely argue that I’m merely celebrating a bygone age. Books, almost superfluous now some would argue, no longer mystify, no longer carry the same cache, if they have any at all now amid the world-wide-everythingism. Perhaps. Yet I’ve always felt the medievals knew more than we. They did after all have the first book detection system – chains – that we, in our arrogance, didn’t employ until we had lost enough books to buy several systems. While they did not know as much as we do, they certainly knew better with the little available to them than we do the glut we wallow in today.

You’ll note above that the medievals are forever invoking God’s name about books and writings. It makes you wonder. St. John begins his Gospel, “In the beginning was the word... And the *word* became flesh and dwelt among us.” The word. Supersensible. Accidental? I wonder. It’s not a curse really, but a phrase some might be tempted to call a blessing.

MY Herring
Dean of Library Services

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DACUS LIBRARY / WINTHROP UNIVERSITY / ROCK HILL, SC 29733
