

THE LITTLE CRITIC

EDITED BY LIN YUTANG

On the Art of Bookselling

EVERYBODY knows that writing is an art, but few realize that there are great subtlety and finesse in book-selling as an art. I don't mean to say, of course, that all the salesmen on Foochow Road are artists, although a few of them may be considered as connoisseurs of rare books, Sung editions, etc. But they are more like the curio dealers than what I have in mind to describe as bookselling artists.

Generally speaking, there are four kinds of booksellers. The booksellers most frequently met with are those who do not read much or even at all. They just stock whatever their customers ask for. They make or lose money in spite of themselves. They are not much of an artist. I know of a bookseller of this type who began with hardly any capital at all, can not even read or write his own name, but he is so influential with the school teachers and "literate magnates" in one district in the South that he practically monopolizes the whole book trade there. According to my estimate, he can make at least \$50,000 a year after deducting all expenses. The life of this old gentleman is a great romance which I hope some day I may have the pleasure to write.

The second is the romantic type. He wants to sell books, because he likes to read them. Probably he was a great book-worm at school, but he is entirely devoid of a sixth sense which is so essential in successful bookselling. Often he begins with from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars and ends with a great sigh of relief when some one comes along who is willing enough to pay nothing to take over his shop. How he later hates the bookselling business, he alone knows. Samuel Johnson was the prototype of this group.

The third is the successful type. He has wide interests in all sorts of things and a large range of reading anything from the main currents in European philosophy to the latest discovery on the life of caterpillars. He not only reads and knows how to read but he stocks and knows how much and what to stock. But above all, he knows how to popularize them, by advertising, gossips and whispers, which is the sixth sense of a successful bookseller. There is a great bookseller in Peiping whom all the European tourists as well as Chinese professors and college students know. He is an artist.

But the fourth and the greatest of all booksellers who I have only discovered during the past one or two years are those who do not directly sell books. They sell a new commodity known as "whispers." The arch-bookseller of this type is Alexander Woolcott, author of *While Rome Burns* and anthologist of *The Woolcott Reader*. He has the rare distinction of having both of his books listed among the ten best-sellers for 1935 in America. On top of that his previous book had already enjoyed a record selling in 1934. He is a rare bird indeed.

Bookselling always has a very alluring appeal to me. I have decided not to be ashamed of my profession now.

Arnold Bennett's rise to his great authorship was chiefly due to the personal enthusiasm of a bookseller. Mr. Alexander Woolcott is another genius in bookselling. He is a man whom only the United States could produce, for high-brow literateur as he is, he sold cereals for the Cream of Wheat Company in Chicago. No other country would tolerate reading a book written or recommended by anybody who sold cream of wheat! But from the latest report given in the *Chicago Daily News* I have learned that this admirable Woolcott has just resigned his post from the cereal company.

Now, just to show how strong the influence with his American audience is: *Good-bye, Mr. Chips*, his original enthusiasm, is now in its 158th thousand. *The Lost Horizon* which began to sell after his recommendation, sold over seventy thousand. His own book *The Woolcott Reader*, published on December 2, 1935, sold 83,207 copies before the year rang out. That is the last word in Americanism. Dramatic? It is melodramatic!

How he sold Cream of Wheat, I really don't know, for I bought an all-wave radio last year purposely to listen to his weekly Sunday night "oral column" called *The Town Crier* but the machine just wouldn't work on that wave-length. However, I think I know how he sold books. Mr. Woolcott originally gained his following by telling stories when he was being paid by publishers to boost specific books. His secret lies in the proper stimulus which is connected with his personal enthusiasm and possibly with infrequent mention of book titles. That, in short, is the secret of success for a professional "best-seller" booster. You see, there are so many good books cropping up every day that no one could possibly read them all. Tze-lu, that great, faithful and straight-forward Peter among Confucius' disciples, would bitterly resent to be told of another good book if he had not yet finished with the previous one. (子路有聞, 未之能行惟恐有聞). If one has recommended Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, it is wise for him not to mention Montaigne's *Essays* for a few months to come. That fellow Gibbon would cause enough conjugal havoc and sleepless nights. It would be, of course, all right to recommend sandwiching Gibbon with a nice snack like Isadora Duncan's *My Life*, for instance. But you can't stuff people with too many of them. That would cause indigestion. Now, please allow me to quote a passage from the preface in *The Woolcott Reader*. It is so good and irresistible:

"For instance, *A Lost Lady* by Willa Cather should certainly be here, and so, of course, should *God and My Father* by Clarence Day and *An Habitation Enforced* by Rudyard Kipling. They are absent only because difficulties were encountered in obtaining what your radio announcer glibly refers to as "the permission of the copy-right-owners" I wanted to include the *Forest Loves* by Maurice Hewlett, because so many young people are growing up in the world without ever having heard of that glowing romance. But it proved to be too long. Of course, a place above the salt belongs by every right to *Good-bye, Mr. Chips*, but too many of you have read it too recently."

Note the subtlety, the finesse, the charm and the art with which Mr. Woolcott seduces his listeners to approach

these books. (And by the way, if you are interested in this book, call up the Commercial Press.) It is so Woolcottian. If you can resist buying or borrowing a copy of *Good-bye, Mr. Chips* or the *Woolcott Reader*, you can do something that I can't. The ultratemporate Liu Hsia-hui (柳下惠) could remain erotically unperturbed when embraced even by very provocative women. Francis Bacon advised men not to read good books because there are too many of them and life is too short, but read only the best which are comparatively fewer. One of my last New Year resolutions was to treat new books like beautiful women—be temperate! But how often I have been misled into temptations in spite of my ardent prayers!

A good booster of "best-sellers," therefore, is like an experienced seducer. He must give only gentle hints and not brazen, naked praises. And, of course, he must have a large following and give hints to them to get in on a good thing which are accepted as such. The great booster of Yuan Chung-lang (袁中郎) last year is a fine example. He didn't even write a proper essay on Yuan, but continuously mentioned him in a casual way in his essays. The second series of "Adventures of Lao-Tzan" (老殘遊記二集) is another. He must be an artist.

I think the way Mr. Woolcott sold cream of wheat must have been somewhat like Will Rogers' selling the idea of chewing gum. "How sweet!" my lady friends used to comment on it. Mr. Woolcott is really inimitable. He told the *Chicago Daily News'* interviewer (which story is copyrighted and, I believe, syndicated too) the following:—

"Mine was a kind of oral column, presenting me as a citizen leaning over the fence and talking freely with his neighbors. If the broadcasts had any audience, it was because my obliging neighbors enjoyed listening to me report my likes and dislikes on books, plays, pictures and events of the day. I also said I could not in self-respect guarantee to keep silent about Hitler, Mussolini or any other bully, jingo, or lyncher. It would be unfair to try and continue under censorship, for the fact that taboos existed would lessen my own interest in the broadcasts and make them deteriorate in short order."

That sounds very much like in China. But no, for he continued:—

"And finally, to complete the ruin of my self-hero worship, came floods of telegraphic and long-distance messages from new sponsors, from radio chains, offering me practically anything I wanted on the air—more money, freedom from censorship, elaborate compliments, love, kisses, guarantees, etc., etc. My martyrdom was a wreck. I could never be a Savonarola."

To associate a bookseller with a Savonarola would be unthinkable in China. That would be *faux-pas*, and yet, and yet.....

For his last Sunday night "Town Crier" broadcast on December 29, Alexander Woolcott chose a poem by Clarence Day from "The New Yorker Book of Verse" recently published. It was too bad that the poet was then just dead. The poem is called "Farewell, My Friends" which I, too, like so well that I think it very appropriate to quote in closing. It reminds me of what Isadora Duncan said just before her automobile accident "*Je vais à la gloire!*"

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WEEKLY INTERVIEWS

Dr. Zok Tsung Wang

Interviewed by V. T. BANG

"YOU are not a patient again, I hope," said Dr. Wang, with a smile, as I stepped into her office filled with people of all kinds: men, women, children, rich and poor, old and young, the fashionable and the sloppish. "Oh, no, not anything of the kind," I hastened to reply. "I want to interview you."

"I am busy just now. Will you wait?"

"Surely."

So I sat down to wait, making myself as comfortable as I could in a straight-back redwood chair that stood near the door. There isn't much to see in a doctor's waiting room, except the patients who come and go. I watched the people who like me sat in the room waiting but with a different purpose. Their faces were radiant, with anticipation and gladness. And the men who came with them had the expression of glad expectation. One by one they left, feeling wiser and surer of the life they were to bring forth.

The doctor came out. "What do you want of me?" she asked.

I told her again that I wanted to interview her. "Not that you need publicity," I added, apologetically.

"I do not worry about that. My patients and my friends take care of that." And seeing me surprised at her remark, she explained, "I do not mean, of course, that they are my press agents—to borrow your professional term. I mean the kind of service I give them is a guarantee for publicity." This I can readily believe, for Dr. Wang is one of the very few obstetricians in this country who enjoys a reputation and a prestige in the medical world. She is also a surgeon of considerable skill. Her technique is faultless, and she possesses that presence of mind so necessary to her profession. She comes from a family of brilliant scholars. Her grandmother, nicknamed "Tiger Wang", was the founder of one of the first two girls' school established in the city of Soochow. "Tiger Wang" was a colorful figure of the nineties. She had a courage and conviction which few men of her time had. She was what can really be called a feminist. But her slogan was not so much equality with men as education for women. She and another man of advanced thinking, as few Soochow men

were so advanced, founded the two schools for girls. One has long ceased to exist. But the school of "Tiger Wang" still remains and is considered one of the best high schools of the city. Perhaps the most interesting thing that Dr. Wang's grandmother ever did was in connection with the campaign for the abolition of bound feet. What pain it must have caused her we do not know, but she succeeded in bringing her own feet to their natural size. Then she made a series of sizes of shoes illustrating the different stages which a bound foot underwent before reaching its natural size. She exhibited these shoes for demonstration. Dense indeed was the crowd who attended these exhibitions! Because of the strictness and precision with which she did her work, she was nicknamed "Tiger Wang". Some of this precision, in addition to the desire for perfection, Dr. Wang inherits.

"What is in your mind?" she continued after a pause. I did not tell her my reminiscences of her grandmother whom I came to know as a child and in whose school I was registered three times, but three times I failed to appear on the opening day for fear of the "tiger"!

"I want to ask you your opinion regarding birth control," I abruptly answered.

"I see the visit of Mrs. Sanger has worked up all you reporters."

"Please do not call me a reporter", I protested.

"Never mind what I call you. You are my friend anyway—or else I wouldn't be talking to you. I hate interviews. I think they are so insincere. But not to disappoint you, I shall tell you what I think of the whole question of birth control. There is a place for it in our social life. But it should not be used as a slogan for propaganda, much less should it be exercised in a dogmatic way. Birth control information can be given out only when it is needed from medical and social points of view."

"I understand you have some kind of a birth control league," I put in.

"Yes, it is called the Birth Control Information Bureau."

"What is its work?"

"It employs a social service worker who visits the different clinics. Information is sent out through these clinics, but, as I have just said, only when it is medically and socially needed."

"From your years of practice do you think birth control information is needed among your patients?" I asked.

"Yes, certain information is needed for certain patients", was the reply. I hesitated to ask what information and what kind of patients.

"Do many come to the bureau for information?"

"Not many."

At this point she politely told me that she had to go out to make calls. I knew how busy she was, being the President of the Women's Christian Medical College, the holder of innumerable honorary positions, and the mother of an eight-year old boy.

"Farewell, my friends—farewell and hail!
I'm off to the Holy Grail.

I cannot tell you why.

Remember, please, when I am gone,

'Twas Aspiration led me on.

Tiddlely—widdlely tootle-oo,

All I want is to stay with you,

But here I go. Good-bye."

SUNG I-CHUNG.