

Book Reviews

Zaid, Gabriel. *So Many Books: Reading and Publishing in an Age of Abundance.* Trans. Natasha Wimmer. Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2003. 144p. alk. paper, \$9.95 (ISBN 158988003X). LC 2003-7643.

A bilingual colleague of mine translated the original Spanish title of this book for me: the *Los demasiados libros* of the original Spanish conveys the notion of “too-muchness,” an excess, more than enough. But rather than lamenting the impossibility of reading all the books that are published or decrying the quality of most of it, Mexican poet and critic Gabriel Zaid muses on, then celebrates this phenomenon of the post-television era. Unlike his fifteenth- and sixteenth-century counterparts, who found the ready availability of printed books a disturbing and sometimes dangerous trend, Zaid offers the argument that the more books we have available, the more opportunities there will be for readers to have private conversations with authors and their books.

According to Zaid, more books are published in the world today than there are children born every year. This seems surprising in our media-laden culture (in fact, in a National Endowment for the Humanities–sponsored study that was published the week I was writing this review, researchers found that people were, indeed, reading fewer books.) More people want to write books than read them, says Zaid—a fact that seems to be borne out by industry statistics. R. R. Bowker has reported that total book output in the United States rose 19 percent in 2003 and over ten thousand new publishers registered for ISBNs. The business side of books and publishing does not worry Zaid at all; he suggests that manufacturing processes and standardization make

books cheap enough for anyone to buy. For readers in the twenty-first century, it’s not the price of the book that is out of reach but, rather, the cost of our time; Zaid claims this is the most expensive part of reading. Books’ relationship to commerce may create a sense of unease among dedicated readers, as though the thought of buying and selling books somehow diminishes their inherent sacredness. But nothing is just a commodity, according to Zaid. Books may be media, but they are not part of the mass media. Unlike television and film, which have the scroll-like characteristics of the texts of antiquity, books can be skimmed; they don’t require electronic help screens and they can be read at the reader’s own pace. Television and movies seem cheap to the consumer, but that’s because they are funded by advertisers; this investment requires that the products of the media industry attract large audiences—appeal to the lowest common denominator—in order to recoup costs. Books, on the other hand, don’t need a mass readership, just their “natural readership.” Just a few copies of an important book, read by a few fit readers, can change lives, or change the direction of the conversations members of society have with one another.

Zaid does offer a few tongue-in-cheek suggestions on the plethora of books in the marketplace that no one is reading: perhaps authors could insert five-dollar bills in their works to repay readers for their time, or a cadre of literary geishas could attend to authors’ desires to be read, giving them the literary equivalent of tea and pleasant conversation. But this is Zaid just being playful. He is less concerned with the numbers of books and authors



than that books find their proper “constellations”; they must have an identity, be part of a coherent collection that orients the reader. An individual book must be part of an assemblage (Zaid’s word) that “rescues books lost in chaos.” A good bookseller, a good librarian, will see to it that no book need be orphaned. Book dealers and librarians are the intermediaries who will “filter the chaos and create meaningful constellations, facilitating the writer’s exchange with the reader.”

This slight, but satisfying, book joins what seems to be a new genre of memoirs and essays on the pleasures of reading (e.g., Alberto Manguel’s *A History of Reading*, David Denby’s *Great Books*, Nicholas Basbanes’s *Patience and Fortitude*). Zaid the author managed to convey to this reader his own passion for books—from his description of learning to read and acquiring the ability to combine individual letters of the alphabet into the “miracle of the full word,” to the way mature readers can be liberated, transported from reading the page to reading life itself. Perhaps it takes a person outside the library profession to remind us of the foundations of our work, to challenge the notion that it is thought-filled reading, and not information, that changes the way we think and live in our culture. Not a required purchase for most libraries, but a book every librarian ought to read. —*Cecile M. Jagodzinski, Indiana University.*

Isaac D’Israeli on Books: Pre-Victorian Essays on the History of Literature. Ed. Marvin Spevack. London: British Library (ISBN 0712348298); New Castle, Del.: Oak Knoll Pr. (ISBN 1584561319), 2004. 266p. \$49.95. LC 2004-299690.

Who was Isaac D’Israeli? A descendant of Italian Jews who emigrated to England in the eighteenth century. An independently wealthy man of letters who spent his days at the British Museum and his nights in

his home library of 25,000 books. The genial author of poetry and fiction, popular miscellanies (*Curiosities of Literature, Literary Character of Men of Genius, Calamities of Authors*, etc.), and a well-regarded history of the reign of Charles I. Father of the flamboyant prime minister Benjamin Disraeli, his polar opposite in temperament, Isaac D’Israeli is now a forgotten figure except for a handful of quotations in old collections that have migrated to the Internet. One quotation, “There is a society in the deepest solitude,” seems to apply to the author himself.

This handsome collection of highlights from D’Israeli’s writings on the history of books signals an attempted revival. The editor, Marvin Spevack (a prolific Shakespeare scholar), is currently at work on a companion critical study. In his preface, Spevack places D’Israeli in the context of his “revolutionary times” and points out his interest in historical and cultural processes. Selections are grouped under the following headings: Writing and Reading, Printing and Publishing, Books, Authors & Co., Preservation and Destruction, Property and Politics, and Libraries. Also included is a famous (some say famously inaccurate) biographical essay by Benjamin Disraeli entitled “On the Life and Writings of Mr. Disraeli,” written in 1848, the year of Isaac’s death. The volume concludes with a directory of personal names, helpful for understanding D’Israeli’s phenomenally broad range of references, ancient and modern.

Superficially, D’Israeli is an old-fashioned bibliophile writing in elaborate prose about authors who were already obscure in his own lifetime. However, the patient reader comes to appreciate D’Israeli’s knowledge, judiciousness, originality, and humor. D’Israeli believes that a historian must consult the original sources and cite them punctiliously. His wide reading allows him to draw general