



*The Aldus Society*  
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## Pages for the Ages

Bibliophiles to Join in Celebration of the Book, Its Enduring Nature  
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**By Bill Eichenberger, Dispatch Book Critic**

Bookworms through history

*"A room without books is a body without a soul."*

-- Cicero (106 B.C.-43 B.C.)

*"As good almost kill a man as kill a good book. Who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's image; but he destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were in the eye."*

-- John Milton (1608-84)

*"I conceive that a knowledge of books is the basis on which all other knowledge rests."*

-- George Washington (1732-99)

*"While you converse with lords and dukes, / I have their betters here -- my books."*

-- Thomas Sheridan (1751-1816)

*"I would rather be a poor man in a garret with plenty of books than a king who did not love reading."*

-- Thomas B. Macaulay (1800-59)

*"The things I want to know are in books. My best friend is the man who will get me a book I ain't read."*

-- Abraham Lincoln (1809-65)

*"Books are delightful society. If you go into a room and find it full of books -- even without taking them from the shelves they seem to speak to you, to bid you welcome. They seem to tell you that they have got something inside their covers that will be good for you, and that they are willing and desirous to impart to you. Value them much."*

-- William Ewart Gladstone (1809-98)

*"Books are the windows through which the soul looks out. A home without books is like a room without windows."*

-- Henry Ward Beecher (1813-37)

*"If books are not good company, where will I find it?"*

-- Mark Twain (1835-1910)

Books, like sharks, are almost perfect in their evolutionary design.

How could they possibly be improved?

Yet the death of books is regularly forecast -- dating as far back as 1894, when Octave Uzanne penned an article for *Scribner's Illustrated Weekly* ominously titled "The End of Books."

"I do not believe (and the progress of electricity and modern mechanism forbids me to believe)," he wrote, "that Gutenberg's invention can do otherwise than sooner or later fall into desuetude as a means of current interpretation of our mental products."

More than a century later, the Friends of the Ohio State University Libraries and the Aldus Society beg to differ.

On Thursday and Friday, they'll present "A Celebration of the Book" in honor of the sharklike codex that keeps on ticking.

"In this age of computers and DVDs and cell phones, if we didn't have something like the book, then someone would have to invent it," said Bill Rich, an Aldus Society board member. "If someone came out with the first book today -- something so easy to use, so portable, so beautiful -- people would flock to it."

By 1455 at the latest, Johann Gutenberg had perfected his printing press and forever changed the course of human civilization.

"The book will never die," said Paul Watkins, another Aldus board member. "It's a 600-year habit.

"The book is highly portable: You can read it in the bathtub without fear of being electrocuted. You can read it in a tree -- I think Umberto Eco was the one who suggested that. You can read it in bed. You might not want a laptop on your chest in bed."

The book is likely to endure, but will people continue to read it?

The National Endowment for the Arts recently concluded a survey showing that book reading has dropped 10 percent since 1982.

John Y. Cole, director of the Center for the Book at the Library of Congress, called the results troubling.

"The report shows that we have to continue to make the case for books," he said. "We can't let up.

"Books are essential for the promotion of critical thinking, for historical development, for a sense of perspective, to encourage the imagination."

In her poem *The Boston Athenaeum*, Amy Lowell wrote:

For books are more than books, they are the life  
The very heart and core of ages past,  
The reason why men lived and worked and died,  
The essence and quintessence of their lives.

Nicholas Basbanes, who will speak at the Celebration of the Book, is the author of the bibliomaniacal trilogy: *A Gentle Madness*, *Patience & Fortitude* and, most recently, *A Splendor of Letters*. The latter's subtitle leaves no doubt on which side its author falls in the "Death of the Book" argument: *The Permanence of Books in an Impermanent World*.

If adults are reading fewer books these days, the ones they're choosing still retain remarkable power, Basbanes said. "Important matters are still defined in our culture by books. Look at Iraq. There wasn't all that much new in Bob Woodward's book (*Plan of Attack*), and yet when it came out, suddenly the issues coalesced. The book gave what others had been writing immediate credence.

"The same can be said of the Richard Clarke book (*Against All Enemies*)."

In his next book, tentatively titled *Every Book Its Reader*, Basbanes will explore the ability of books to change lives and the course of history.

For example, he said, "The Wright brothers were largely self-educated. They might not have conquered powered flight if they'd pursued a traditional course of education. They found their ideas and answers in books."

Victor Hugo knew just how powerful books could be. He compared Christ's feeding of the 5,000 with loaves and fishes to Gutenberg's invention of the printing press, which brought forth books and "marked the transition of man-slave to the free man."

That transition, Basbanes said, is almost literally true.

"Abraham Lincoln is another of my heroes. He didn't have any formal education beyond the second grade. It was Lincoln who said, when he met Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*:

" 'So, this is the little lady who wrote the big book that made this great war.' "

In the late 1990s, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's E-Lab Book Project set as its goal the destruction of "the paper industry." For the time being, though, books made of paper are still being cranked out.

"I know it's an old story, but when Harry Potter came out, a 700-page book without illustrations, and it's

aimed at kids so adept at videos and computers, and it sells in the millions," Basbanes said.

"The day the Potter book came out was 'the day the (computer) screens went dark.' A book did that, a book with magic that continues to dazzle."

So why would one have to "celebrate" the book? Shouldn't these truths be self-evident?

"Well, we're calling it a 'Celebration of the Book,' " Watkins said, "but I think we're doing it for our own amusement and delight. I can't speak for Aldus or for the Friends, but we're not doing this out of any sense of obligation. We're simply sharing our joy and pleasure in books with others."