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Robert Darnton, *Pirating and Publishing: The Book Trade in the Age of Enlightenment*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. vi + 391 pp. Notes and index. \$34.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780195144529.

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Robert Darnton has been enriching our understanding of the Enlightenment and its relationship to the French Revolution for over half a century. From his early work on Mesmerism, through his exploration of the literary underground of the Old Regime, his magisterial study of the many publications of the *Encyclopédie*, his dive into the forbidden bestsellers of the pre-Revolution, his recent literary tour of booksellers, to the present volume focusing on pirate publishing, we have been introduced to the high Enlightenment, to the Grub Street of desperate hacks, and to everything in between. From the big name philosophes to the low-life *libellistes* to the very smart police inspectors of the book trade to the readers who modeled their lives on the passionate texts of Rousseau, Darnton has been an invaluable guide not just to the literary forces that shaped this remarkable period in French history, but also to the wide variety of fascinating characters who wrote, produced, censored and interfered with, smuggled, sold, subscribed to, purchased, and read the amazingly powerful object that was, and is, the *book*.

In this newest work, Darnton's focus is on publishers. He has already taught us a lot about publishing in this period, especially in his study of press baron Charles Joseph Panckoucke, the self-interested mastermind in Paris behind the re-publications of the Enlightenment's iconic *Encyclopédie*, and especially the creation of the *Encyclopédie Methodique* that followed it.^[1] But now he concentrates on the huge number of publishers of French books who functioned outside the French borders and who trafficked in counterfeit works. He calls them pirates, for they maneuvered beyond the law, beyond the strict censorship and system of royal privilege that existed in France proper, and beyond the tight-fisted monopoly of the Parisian Guild.

Darnton argues that these "pirate publishers contributed mightily to the Enlightenment. In fact, they made it happen" (p. 292). They transmitted and propelled works by celebrity authors filled with explosive content, and we learn how that content reached an unprecedentedly wide readership with the help of these literary bandits. Half a century before the Revolution, pirates did their part in eroding the *ancien régime* by attacking exclusive rights, by undercutting privilege. How did they do it?

We tend to think of the Enlightenment as the brainchild of famous intellectual giants who created the classic texts that we know so well. And of course these authors—Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot,

Condillac, Condorcet, Raynal, Mably, Beaumarchais, Mercier, all of whom appear in this book—were of enormous importance. But the elite consumers of beautiful, expensive volumes produced in Paris, approved by the royal censors and sold by the governing Parisian Guild, paled in comparison to the enormous number of readers of much more affordable books made possible by entrepreneurial pirates of those same works who envisioned a far larger market. Books made outside of the country by publishing pirates were then not only smuggled back into France to retailers in such provincial cities as Lyon, Rouen, Toulouse, Marseille, and Nîmes, but also reached the rest of Europe, providing access and diffusing ideas to a much broader reading public than has formerly been recognized. Ordinary people were devouring this material. This was the “democratizing” of the Enlightenment, as Darnton calls it, distant both geographically and in spirit from the French capital and from the establishment oligarchy of Parisian publishing. This ready market for books among the bourgeois and even laboring class—we know from the death inventories studied by Daniel Roche that artisans bought these books—was, Darnton argues, the way the Enlightenment became a movement. [2]

Oddly, although there was a clearly seditious element to this piracy, its thwarting of the system of publishing privilege—the closest thing in the *ancien régime* to a copyright—and its undermining of the “literary despotism” of the Paris Guild, these pirate publishers did not necessarily embrace the Enlightenment message. Many in fact did not. They were in it for profit. They dealt mostly with complete sets of substantial works, but also *nouveautés*, always with an eye on the money such productions would bring in. They were in business, and they aimed to provide what would sell. “Piracy was above all a race to the markets” (p. 218). Or, as one contemporary put it, “the problem is not in finding works to print—good, admirable, marvelous things—the main concern, the unique object that requires all of our attention, is before printing anything to be sure that we can make some cash from it.” (p. 246). When they were right they made fortunes. When they were not, they fell on hard times, and many crashed into bankruptcy. Some rose again improbably from the ashes.

More than five decades ago Darnton happened upon an extraordinary treasure, the untapped archives of the Société typographique de Neuchâtel (STN), a publishing house founded in 1769, whose riches he has mined to great effect ever since. This source of documentation, including more than 50,000 letters by, to, and about those involved in the book trade, has informed much of his writing, and its bounty plays a major role in the present book. But the STN turns out to be one of many such publishing houses that existed across the long Eastern borderlands of France. There were sociétés typographiques also in Geneva, Lausanne, Berne, Yverdon, and Maastricht, and a host of smaller individual publishers as well. Darnton calls this geographical expanse that housed the dozens and dozens of pirate publishers the “Fertile Crescent,” stretching from Holland through Switzerland and down toward Avignon. The map on page sixty of his book brings home the scope, density, and sheer pervasiveness of this phenomenon far better than any long list of the involved cities can do. The Enlightenment was indeed produced by foreign pirates outside of France.

Frédéric-Samuel Ostervald was the head of the STN, where he, his wife, and especially his daughter Mme. Bertrand, who married his business partner, conducted their savvy family enterprise. Women played a central role as publishers and their allies, a topic to which a bit more attention could have been given. Mme. Bertrand’s insight and deep understanding were especially noteworthy. She had a keen nose for what we would today call marketing and market research, stressing the importance of long experience, of personal contacts and connections: “To

succeed it is necessary to have particular talent and a lengthy practice. It is necessary to do apprenticeship while young.” (pp. 203-204). Never sentimental, her advice was shrewd: “Drop a remark, with a casual air, about a new, corrected, and augmented edition. Pretend that you have been delegated to buy it for a friend, or find out, without seeming to be concerned, whether this corrected edition...which you think is being produced in Switzerland, will sell well. Once we have that information, we will either abandon the enterprise or we will offer it right away, by subscription, determined not to begin the printing until we have sold a sufficient number” (pp. 201-202). But she cautioned about the risk of being too aggressive, of advertising too frequently in the periodical press, or sending around prospectuses, or listing in catalogues works that in fact might never appear if not enough interest was shown on advance notice. Such bluffing could seriously damage long-term credibility.

To a degree that has not been properly understood, the Enlightenment authors whose names we know so well negotiated with these pirates, and some, like Louis-Sébastien Mercier, became close friends with his STN family. Writers of course wanted their works more cheaply available and more widely read. The publishers had to print but were impatient with obscure authors. They far preferred to cultivate the sometimes egomaniacal celebrities. Such sociability was necessary but also challenging, indeed sometimes maddening. In one example, d’Alembert toyed with them but the plan never materialized. In another, the prolific Voltaire’s endless shenanigans drove them wild. Just when they thought they could put out a definitive edition of his works, he would tinker, modify, augment, change titles, and play his publishers off against each other with obvious glee (pp. 90-91). In fact, it is not clear we will ever have a complete Voltaire, as he makes mischief from the grave: the hunt for his writings goes on to this day, with the Voltaire Foundation at Oxford still trying to track down over a hundred known but missing letters).

Darnton discusses the economics of these pirate companies, the expense of paper being at least half of the production cost of the book. The mold, the sheets, the sizing, the quality, and the deliverability all had to be taken into account. There were elaborate negotiations with and dependencies upon supply chains for book production, and then, for distribution, reliance upon often unreliable shipping agents, boatmen, and wagon drivers. Darnton discusses not only how long it took for things to be transported by the postal service, but also the high cost of mailing and the fact that recipients generally paid the postage. The cost of even these pirated, counterfeit works was considerable, but still within the grasp of humble earners. Darnton explains what money was worth and how book prices compared to salaries. While he does not do this in terms of the equivalence in loaves of bread as he did so graphically in *The Business of Enlightenment*, it is still very helpful. Many scholars unhappily neglect this kind of all-important context.

Publishing was dangerous. Operating as it did outside the law, piracy was a “constant struggle against disaster” (p. 295). It involved large investments, with all the concomitant risks and gambles. There were attempts among publishers to cooperate and band together into confederations that exchanged books to diversify their stock and keep their lists varied and interesting, but there was also fierce competition, a great deal of spying, lying, duplicity, and outright fraud. Rival publishers formed alliances, but also set traps for each other. As Darnton comments wryly, “honor among pirates was a dicey basis for joint ventures” (p. 168). Understandably, but somewhat ironically given that they themselves were rule breakers, these publishers sought clients who were trustworthy, who had good reputations and would not renege on a deal, people who were not only solvent but whose private lives were exemplary and thus

worthy of extended credit. Such clients had integrity and “heart,” and they needed to be scouted for, located, and vetted by men in the field.

One such individual was the subject of Darnton’s 2018 book, *A Literary Tour de France*, which followed the five-month voyage of the STN’s sales rep Jean-François Favarger as he visited, sleuthed, sussed out, and sweet-talked booksellers.^[3] Favarger makes a few fleeting appearances in this book too, but we see there were many other indispensable middlemen who played similar roles, networking, negotiating, informing themselves, and gathering essential news to bring the publishers for whom they worked up to speed.

Information was everything. The pirate publishers all needed to take the pulse of the market. There was a great thirst for this literature, but somebody had to learn for a fact what was selling, how fast, in what format, and ideally this person could meet and woo and bargain with the authors. One such colorful fellow, “our man in Paris” as Darnton calls him, was the very perceptive Quandet de Lachenal, writing reports back to the STN with verve about his encounters and even including dialogue in his narratives. Highly opinionated, he provided useful feedback to the STN for a relatively long spell, until he got caught with too many forbidden books that he hoped to sell himself, was denounced, forced to flee, financially ruined, and died obscurely. This tragic scenario was fairly common, not just for traveling scouts and literary agents, but also for some of the publishers themselves.

And yet they continued with their perilous work. In his lively chapter called “Underground Geneva,” Darnton describes those who put out the works of Helvétius and d’Holbach and others who dealt in Voltaire’s brochures against *l’infâme* that his principal publisher Gabriel Cramer would not print. There is also the fascinating Genevan publisher Jacques-Benjamin Téron who, despite bankruptcies and prison terms, bounced back and explained that he liked “to be employed in an occupation that has plenty of variety in itself and that provides a pleasurable variety of connections with clever persons and different kinds of characters” (p. 133). This gives some insight into why so many vied for these jobs and were willing to risk so much. Capitalism was cruel, and yet this pirating work, with all its traps, secrecy, and leaks, could be wild fun.

Darnton is very closely wedded to the archive, following the dossiers at a granular level. We feel his thrill of discovering the contents of the correspondence, of unfolding for the first time letters still sealed with wax or once-wet bread. At other times we feel his disappointment when something cannot be documented exactly: “As no minutes were taken at the meeting on July 20, 1779, it is impossible to know exactly what happened....” (p. 155); “A gap in the archives makes it impossible to follow Ostervalde’s response to this overture” (p. 167); “A gap in the correspondence makes it impossible to determine what agreement Manoury and the STN reached....” (p. 271). There are many other such instances, following a succession of letters as far as they go. Darnton has always been able to move gracefully from this micro-analysis to his larger points about the Enlightenment’s lofty goal of elevating everyone out of darkness, of changing the common way of thinking.

Darnton bookends this work with a sign-off and a look ahead. At the beginning he announces that “this book brings my research to an end....” (p. 6). At the finish, his very last sentence reads “I hope [this book] has something to say to readers in the digital age” (p. 300). As a librarian—head for many years of the Harvard University Library and trustee of the NY Public Library—he would of course be preoccupied with such questions, not just digitization but globalization

and the exciting new kinds of access to technologies they make possible for scholars. He notes that he has “construct[ed] history from trails though paper” (p. 300). Future scholars with digital archives literally at their fingertips will gather information and find their inspiration in new and different ways....

Personally, I would like to see Darnton address again the social aspects of reading, how books move and activate people. This is of course an almost impossibly thorny task. He tackled a specific case of it head-on in his well-known article from *The Great Cat Massacre*, “Readers Respond to Rousseau,” where he had hard evidence, and of course, he has alluded to it throughout his career.[4] But how can we know or measure the motivating absorption of ideas from texts? Can we capture what made the reading of certain works not just interesting but profoundly, forcefully meaningful? Some texts were experienced as energy, so that they not only shaped public opinion but converted theory to practice, beliefs to behaviors, words to deeds. This may be asking too much, yet for Darnton to attempt this task is certainly on my wish list.

NOTES

[1] See Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: Publishing History of the Encyclopedie, 1775-1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

[2] Daniel Roche, *The People of Paris: An Essay in Popular Culture in the 18th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

[3] Robert Darnton, *A Literary Tour de France: The World of Books on the Eve of the French Revolution* (London: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[4] Robert Darnton, "Readers Respond to Rousseau: The Fabrication of Romantic Sensitivity" in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*. (London: Penguin Books, 2001): 215-256.

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