

THE BOOKS THAT LAST FOREVER

*A Norwegian Novelist Discusses
Our Common Literary Heritage*

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"BOOKS Are the Best Christmas Gifts" . . . Some thirty years ago this was the slogan of Norwegian publishers when they advertised the books published during the months of October and December—at that time virtually the only season when books were published in Norway.

Tryggve Andersen took it as a title for a short story: "Böker er den bedste Julegave." It tells of a young and ambitious author who just for once, to gain the leisure necessary to write his planned masterpiece, has sent out a pot-boiler which, of course, becomes a best-seller. For the first time he and his wife are able to celebrate Christmas in modest luxury. They sit together on New Year's Night sipping their wine, he looking through the half-finished manuscript of the great book that he will need years to write and rewrite, she reading for the third time his latest novel, chuckling and humming with delight. . . . And the sweet young temptress starts talking. But this book is really so

good! Isn't it also a vocation to make everyday people see the loveliness of simple things, young love and the kindness or funniness of old people? On the author's desk the lamplight is falling full on the pages of the exacting manuscript and on a small glittering object, his Christmas gift to his wife, which she removed when she went out to cook their supper: a gold bracelet in the shape of a snake with eyes of rubies.

The story was nothing if not obvious, of course. But Tryggve Andersen (who never wrote a best-seller) has written some of the finest short stories in our language. Such was his prestige among us that for years we young Norwegian authors felt uneasy—and did undertake thoroughgoing examinations of conscience—if any book of ours happened to be-

come a best-seller. I vividly remember the first time one of my novels went into a third printing how fearfully I read and reread my book to find out if I had subconsciously sacrificed anything of my artistic integrity for a wider appeal. And how radiantly happy I felt when Tryggve Andersen himself deigned to tell me he thought "Jenny" was a good book.

And yet I remember also the delightful feeling of comfort and relaxation when, after a strenuous day of skiing in the woods above Oslo and a substantial holiday supper, I snuggled into my favorite chair at home to read one of the new books everybody was talking about that year—and which everybody has forgotten long ago.

After all, the spiritual history of a country (embodied in what the people's long-

range judgment preserves as national literature) has been created by a process of selection and elimination from the whole imaginative output of that people. As long as tales have been told or books have been written somebody has always raised the lament that far too many people tell tales or write books, also that the majority of listeners or readers do prefer the chaff to the grain.

In his preface to an Old Norse translation of some lives of the saints the author, a Dominican of the Convent of Oslo, complains that young people want to hear about valiant knights and fair ladies, about war and love and adventures into the supernatural—but the lives of St. Benedict or the Fathers of the Desert fail to interest them. Now this particular translation is made with consummate artistry, a source of delight and admiration to students of our old language. To plod through the "adventure sagas," on the contrary, is a tough job. They are the tales each generation of readers will want to have retold in the language of their own times be-

cause the subject matter, the adventure stories, are the everlasting material of escapist literature. The things people want to escape from, the realms of free fancy where courage and virtue will get substantial rewards and the powers of evil are riding for a fall—these differ with the time situation. And our ideas of virtues and vices differ considerably too in different generations. The light literature of any age may be of profound historical interest in this respect—even if it sometimes takes both zeal and patience to read the novels our mothers or great-grandmothers used to be thrilled by. And yet we too want to hear essentially the same stories, told in a different vein.

Among the things I shall miss the most, when someday I return to Norway, will be a small pile of books—some of which were given to me when I was a small child, all of them guarded jealously over more than fifty years. My whole family was bookish. All of us were given many books on Christmas and birthdays. Of course, most of these volumes were lost or soiled or torn—or were lent to someone and never returned. But I kept that small, personal collection of mine intact.

. . . Friends may have saved some of the more valuable books from my library in Norway: seventeenth-century editions of the Sagas, rare volumes I used to show visitors, editions of English and Scottish ballads which I bought in London with the money that came to me from my first English translation. My friends in Norway, of course, would know that these volumes cannot be replaced. But they would know nothing of that other shelf—where I kept the books of my childhood. The first books I ever bought with money I had earned myself: volumes of Norwegian and Danish verse I saved to buy when I was very young; one-shilling editions of Keats and Poe I read ages ago, while lying in a mountain meadow, my vacation companions of 17; my father's book about his travels in Greece, with his dedication. . . . I shall never see them any more. Germans are living in my house today. We know that they are prepared to destroy everything on the day they leave Norway, just as they are now doing in Italy. . . . Well, I remember them all, page by page, the look and the feel of them, and nobody can take that away from me.

It really is true, that kind of books are the best Christmas gifts. And I wish every child in America (and in Europe also, when better times return) would be given, at least once or twice in their lives, a book to treasure and to return to innumerable times.

It need not always be a book the child would understand completely, the first time he tried to read it. If I were an American mother, I would give my boy in his teens (or why not my daughter?) for instance a good edition of "The Federalist," "Moby Dick," Dana's "Two Years Before the Mast." But I am sure that American mothers, and fathers also,

have selections dear to them— which they will give their children and young people to keep, to grow up with, to explore and to love.

And yet, as I said above, the books which have the power to live on through the centuries—the books we sometimes call the Classics— have drawn their vitality from all the past world of the imagination. They have taken life from the written and unwritten, from the good or bad or indifferent body of literature—as

the trees which make the forest have drawn nourishment from the mold formed from decayed leaves, from the small saplings which lacked the vigor to grow up, from the flowers that last a springtime. Let us not despise the lesser growths on that account. Ultimately, their destination was to serve and prepare the ground for the growth of the strong things. But in their lifetime, they meant nourishment or shelter, loveliness or joy to the living things that knew them.