

The Limited Editions Club

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The Storyteller From Virginia

FOR THE FIRST generation or so after the Civil War, the capital city of Virginia was understandably lacking in literary activity. The people of Richmond were concerned with rebuilding their community: men of letters were noticeably absent in a society absorbed by economic and political problems. By 1902, only one writer of note had appeared, but she was a woman, and under the mores then differentiating the sexes, it would be some time before Ellen Glasgow acquired the novelist's reputation which she so clearly deserved.

Not until 1919, when James Branch Cabell (to rhyme with scrabble) appeared dramatically as the author of *Jurgen*, did the local scene realize that a new and revolutionary talent had arrived. Within a matter of months, not only Richmond but the rest of the country as well were debating the merits of an author who seemingly served as an outspoken supporter of "art for art's sake."

To his contemporaries as well as to his literary critics, it seemed strange that a man of his background could produce such an escapist novel as *Jurgen*—a combination of satire and symbolism and fantasy, set in a mythical medieval French province called Poictesme, the name probably being a compound of Poitiers and Angoulême. Could this work come from a F.F.V., from a 40-year-old shy and diffident native son who had been an instructor (as well as a graduate) at William and Mary Col-

lege, a newspaper reporter in Richmond and New York, and an historian for the Sons of the American Revolution?

The answer was Yes. No doubt about it—this somewhat aloof Virginia gentleman had written a bestseller which, said some observers, was vulgar and obscene, and therefore should be censored. Promptly the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice got to work, and on October 16, 1922, Cabell and his publisher found themselves defending *Jurgen* in a Manhattan court, a curious case which was won by the defendants, thus marking another triumph for freedom of expression in Cabell's own America.

Insofar as the world of pure literature was concerned, the author of *Jurgen* had his friends and his foes. One critic fell into rapturous prose: "Cabell is the Watteau of ironists, the Debussy of prose, the Spinoza of word magic, the Prometheus of an American Renaissance." There is no record of Cabell replying to this freshet of praise, but it may be assumed that he was properly embarrassed.

From the other side, a literary commentator remarked: "Cabell's style is a curious mode out of a dozen archaic styles from the Bible to Irish poetic drama, by way of Malory and Hewlett." And lastly, this comment from Clifton Fadiman: "The world in which Cabell lives is one built up out of his own preferences. It has the beauty and formal perfection of a well-known soap bubble."

In light of all the commotion caused by *Jurgen*, it is strange to recall that it was only one of a series of related and unheralded novels which Cabell began in 1904 with *The Eagle's Shadow*. In the second of the series, *Gallantry*, Cabell invented his imaginary land of Poictesme and he continued on with his fanciful chronicle until 1930, when the series ended with the publication of *The Way of Eben*.

Almost 25 years later, when Cabell had withdrawn from the give-and-take of the often turbulent literary scene, he observed that "remarkably few persons read my books today." During

the 1940's when he spent his winters in Florida, he produced a successful work of non-fiction—*Let Me Lie*—a gallery of essays on what he called “the remarkable Commonwealth of Virginia.”

Cabell died in Richmond in 1958 at the age of seventy-nine. Up until the end, he still served as a subject of controversy, with various critics appraising his wide range of works from various points of view. In the *Commonweal*, D. H. Mosely wrote: “His is the tiresome Swan Song of that generation which had as a primary purpose in writing the blasting of tradition and the exhibition of its own shallow cleverness.”

On the other hand, the readers who liked Cabell found satisfaction in these same qualities and in what Edward Wagenknecht has called “the familiar Cabell mixture of bleak disillusion and amused persiflage, with good sense and good humor persistently breaking in.”

II

For the design of The Limited Editions Club's *Jurgen*, we turned to Ted Gensamer, a Pennsylvania-born expert in graphics who was honored, in 1973, with an exhibition celebrating a half-century of his work as one of New York's leading printers and designers. He embarked on his career as a student at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, and then went on to earn a master's degree under the tutelage of Porter Garnett at the Carnegie Laboratory Press. In subsequent years he designed, printed and published hundreds of books as well as created numerous and notable graphic designs.

Jurgen is only one of the many editions which Gensamer has created for the Club. Some years ago he conceived our two-volume edition of *Gone With the Wind*, and later performed just as creditably with two of Jules Verne's science-fiction tales, and with Mark Twain's classic, *Roughing It*. More recently his talents were invested in *Irish Folk Tales*, a book unique in format, paper and binding. In between his creative work in the

world of books, Gensamer has been a design director for academic publications and has always maintained a small print shop of his own in Manhattan where he can produce exactly what he wants in accordance with his own specifications.

In designing *Jurgen*, he selected as typeface the Monotype cutting of Bembo, named for Pietro Bembo (1470–1547), the Italian humanist and Cardinal. He was a favorite of the Medici and was secretary to Pope Leo X. He was for many years the arbiter of Italian letters and was responsible for editions of Petrarch and Dante. He helped establish the language of Tuscany as the standard literary Italian. He was closely associated with Aldus Manutius, the famed Venetian printer for whom the typeface was cut in 1495 by Francesco Griffo of Bologna. It first appeared in Bembo's *De Aetna* printed by Aldus Manutius and it was Aldus Manutius who printed Bembo's edition of Petrarch's sonnets in 1501 and Bembo's *Terzerime* in 1502. This beautiful typeface in its modern revival is favored by designers of merit for its functional serifs and the balanced proportion of its letters, which give to the printed page a high degree of harmony and individuality.

III

Selecting an illustrator for *Jurgen* was not a simple task: the nature of the book calls for a special kind of artistic talent, and after deliberation we chose Virgil Burnett, a native-born Kansan who now lives in Ontario, Canada. While an account of his life and achievements can be written in the third person, we thought it better to tell it in his own words (just as he wrote it for us):

"I was born in Wichita on January 11, 1928, the son and grandson of millers. As a child I lived not only in Kansas, but because my father was a builder of mills, in Texas, Missouri, Washington, New Jersey, and most significantly in Virginia, where as an adolescent I first encountered the works of Cabell,

which were well stocked in our local library. I remember particularly *The Way of Ecben* and the curious character Horvendile. In 1945, I was sent to New York and entered Columbia College. My initial reading of *Jurgen* occurred shortly thereafter. Its mixture of history, fantasy and eroticism were very much to my taste then as now.

"At Columbia I met Edward Melcarth who was an occasional instructor in the School of Painting and Sculpture. Melcarth's teaching permeated my early work and at his instigation I set off for Europe after graduation in 1949. I spent several glorious if impecunious months in Paris and Venice in 1950. In 1951 I was drafted into the Army and was stationed in Munich where I worked as artist-illustrator for a field propaganda company. After my separation I wandered to California, where I studied nineteenth-century illustration and poetry, took a master's degree in art history at Berkeley and in 1956 returned to France as a Fulbright Fellow. I remained for five years and since that stay have not failed to spend at least several months every year in Europe. For some years I maintained a studio in Fontainebleau where I looked daily at the work of the artists of the Valois kings of France. Since 1964 I have made my summer home in a village in Burgundy.

"I am principally an illustrator of poetry and what is called fantasy. I have prepared drawings for editions of Byron, Tennyson, Fitzgerald's *Omar Khayyam*, and the anonymous authors of *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*. I operate the Padeloup Press of Stratford, Ontario, a small firm engaged in publishing illustrated editions of modern poetry. I have exhibited in Europe and in North America and have taught at various institutions, including the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the University of Chicago. Presently I am professor of Fine Arts at the University of Waterloo in Ontario.

"I am married to Anne Burnett, a professor of Classics at the University of Chicago and author of *Catastrophe Survived* (Clarendon Press, Oxford) and other works on Greek drama

and poetry. Our North American base is a Victorian house in Southern Ontario. We have two daughters, Maud and Melissa, aged ten and twelve respectively, Tennyson heroines both."

When we first saw the illustrations which Burnett had made for *Jurgen*, we felt they deserved extra and special treatment, so we decided to have them hand-colored by *pochoir*, the costly and rare process in which the colored paints are painstakingly brushed onto the artwork, through the open areas of templates or stencils. The delicate task was performed by Frank Hudec and his assistant artists at the studios of Walter Fischer in New York City.

IV

For an Introduction we made a logical choice: Dr. Edward Wagenknecht of West Newton, Massachusetts, an authority on Cabell and an author who has, during a long and productive lifetime, published some sixty books, most of them in the field of his choice—the character portrait. Among the titles are *The Man Charles Dickens*; *Mark Twain: the Man and His Work*; *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Portrait of a Balanced Soul*; and a comprehensive trilogy dealing with Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton. He has also written history and fiction, and edited many anthologies, including the bestselling *Fireside Book of Christmas Stories*.

He has been a regular contributor to our Introductions, specializing in the writings of Mark Twain, although his first contribution, forty-five years ago, was his Introduction to "The Chimes" by Charles Dickens. Between 1944 and 1974 he wrote introductions to seven of our Twain books—in fact, to all the Twain books we produced for our members during that time. Our association with him over so many years has given us great pleasure.

Dr. Wagenknecht was born in Chicago at the turn of the century and was educated at the University of Chicago. His de-

cision to become a writer was made at the mature age of six, after he had read *The Wizard of Oz* and sensed the power of the printed word. Just last year, he and Anthony Slide observed a Hollywood centennial by publishing *The Films of D. W. Griffith*, and then observed the American Bicentennial with *The Pictorial History of New England*.

His acquaintance with Cabell goes back over a number of years—to 1952, when he contributed a chapter on Cabell's work to the *Cavalcade of the American Novel*, published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston. At that time he became a friend of Cabell's and continued the warm relationship until the author's death. Later, Mrs. Cabell asked him to edit the Virginian's letters, a task he relished and which resulted in the publication last year of *The Letters of James Branch Cabell* by the University of Oklahoma Press.

V

As to the binding, we have used a fine buckram, stamped in gold with an illustration by our artist on the front cover and the spine. The book has been bound at the Tapley-Rutter Company of Moonachie, New Jersey, under the direction of William F. Fortney. Of all the many editions of *Jurgen*, this volume, the twelfth and last in our 44th Series, stands supreme.

THE DIRECTORS



Our Second 250 Publications

In 1959 we published for our members the first illustrated bibliography of the publications of The Limited Editions Club. This special volume was titled *Quarto-Millenary*, and was an outstanding example of bookmaking excellence. Its sub-title proclaimed the range of its contents—"The First 250 Publications and the First 25 Years 1929-1954 of The Limited Editions Club. A Critique, A Conspectus, A Bibliography, Indexes."

We printed 2250 copies, of which 1500 were distributed to our members. We then offered 750 copies to our members for their friends; thereafter to those libraries, institutions, universities and bibliophiles who wanted the book. We quickly exhausted our supply, and since then, the book has become rare, much sought-after, and costly to buy at second-hand.

Now, having printed the 500th title in an unbroken series of publications, we feel that some note should be taken of the event. Therefore, we have begun work on the design and compilation of a companion volume to our *Quarto-Millenary*. This will be an illustrated and detailed bibliography of our second 250 publications for the years 1955 through 1976.

Similar to *Quarto-Millenary* in size, contents, format and binding, it will mark another milestone in the history of our Club, which has long been recognized as pre-eminent in the world of fine books.

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