

Why Do They Read It?

Explaining that bewildering American phenomenon, Gone with the Wind - how it changed the reading habits



A NATION that presumably has no time for books has found time for a novel that contains only twenty-five pages less than the Sears Roebuck catalogue. When the Pulitzer Prize Committee gave its annual fiction award this year to *Gone with the Wind*, the news was greeted with popular approval. A few critics, and some more exacting persons, had hoped for another choice, but by and large, it was considered a natural and inevitable selection. Millions of satisfied readers nodded approval and smugly felt their enthusiasm vindicated. For the first time a Pulitzer prize has been awarded to a novel with a sales record of over a million copies.

Gone with the Wind was published June 30, 1936, and by Christmas of that year it had sold a million copies, setting a record as the fastest-selling volume in history. It is 1037 pages long, and if all the copies sold to date could be piled one upon another, the stack would be two hundred and fifty times taller than the Empire State Building.

The Hollywood producing firm which bought the motion-picture rights has received 100,000 letters suggesting various film stars for the rôles of Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler, leading characters in the novel.

A New York taxicab driver has claimed the record for reading the book through in the shortest possible time—eighteen and a fraction hours. The average is a week, though it can easily be done in three days with time out for meals and sleep. If all of the 50,000,000 Americans who are old enough and literate enough to read the book were to follow this procedure, the time expended would amount to 410,000 years, or, in round numbers, infinity.

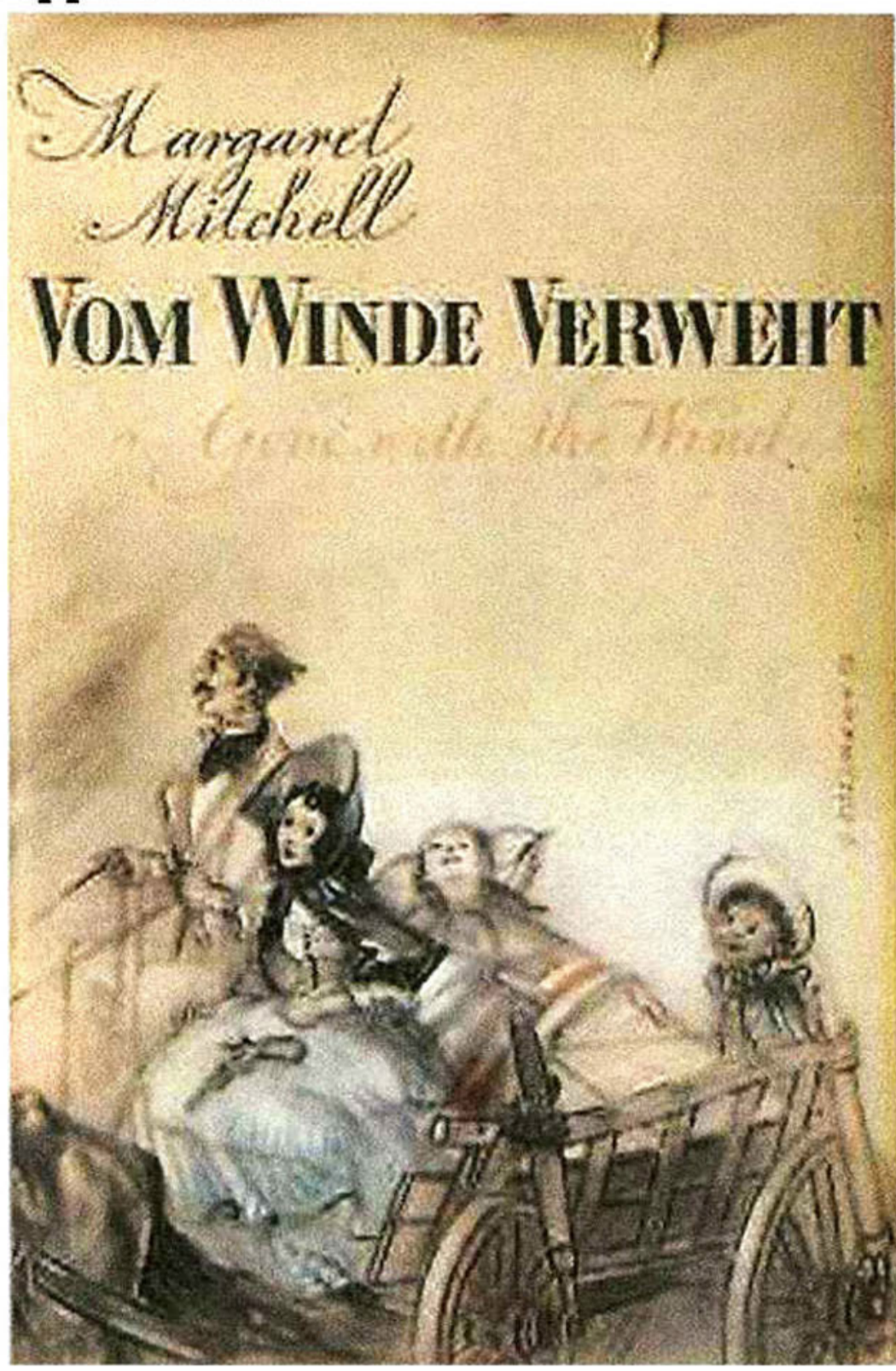
Nothing like it has ever happened in the publishing industry. *Anthony Adverse*, a forerunner in size and romantic appeal, was a tremendous seller for two years, but it sold a mere 300,000 copies in its first six months and only about 750,000 in three years. The combined books of Joseph Conrad, when he was at the height of his fame, sold a million copies in five years.

A lot of other time—enough if used wisely to under-



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stand the relativity theory or discover a cure for cancer—is being spent by critics and publishers to divine the reason for this mass immersion in a story about the South after the Civil War and what happened to certain people whose lives were disrupted and left dangling by the surrender at Appomattox.



In part, it is an ordinary phenomenon of taste. The



Civil War has always been popular as a fiction subject with Americans, because it contains more elements of human drama than any other crisis in the country's history. It set us against each other, and it left the South in the appealing position of a beaten but beautiful foe. The Southerners were charmingly romantic in their perpetuation of the dispute at a higher level. They continued rebellious in spirit, proud and gracious of manner, and dignified among the ruins of their economic system.

But there have been other books about the Civil War and the Reconstruction days. Stephen Crane, without ever seeing a battle, wrote a magnificent story about a young Federal soldier, *The Red Badge of Courage*. It made Crane famous, and it is still a favorite. There were thousands of other books about the struggle and its aftermath between Crane's book, written in the nineties, and *Gone with the Wind*. Yet these two stand out, and because both writers followed the same method of preparation, it may be that there was method in their system. As a boy, Crane read everything he could lay his hands on that pertained to the War. He lived with a dream of himself as a young soldier. He executed his book with simplicity. Margaret Mitchell did likewise. She lived for seven years with her characters, and she knew them thoroughly, even to the clothes they liked to wear and the foods they liked to eat, and how much money they had in their pockets at any given moment. When she executed her book, she did it with the simplicity of rushing narrative.

Both Crane and Miss Mitchell recognized, perhaps intuitively, that the primary task of a writer—poet, novelist, or playwright—is to tell a story, a story about ordinary human beings with ordinary feelings and intellects, who are faced with the solution of problems imposed upon them by history, God, or other human beings. This, in essence, is the drama of man: He is operated upon by forces over which he has no control, and with the rational elements within him—mind and conscience—he must accept them as his experience and continue to exist with and despite them. The Civil War and the South afterward are the best laboratories in America for this drama. All they need are good tale-tellers. Crane was an artist. Miss Mitchell, though not a great artist and possibly a one-book writer, is a great tale-teller.

But these things do not explain the phenomenal sale of her book. They expose reasons for a normally good

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sale. If *The Red Badge of Courage* had appeared in place of *Gone with the Wind*, it might have had a normal sale, a fairly good sale, or it might have been lost in the shuffle of too much good reading. It is a brief book, for one thing, and it centers on a single experience. There are no women in it. Ladies all over the country would not go to visit their neighbors with copies clutched to their bosoms, to sit solidly and with determination on the overstuffed lounge and proclaim with prophetic voice, "You simply *must* read this book!"

That is what happened to *Gone with the Wind*, and its story has nothing to do with the popular triumph of art. It belongs to another class of miracles—the kind we shall have to look backward to understand.

Historical romance had always been popular way back to Walter Scott. (At the turn of the century, historical novels had a staggering success: *Richard Carvel*, *The Crisis*, *When Knighthood Was in Flower*, *Janice Meredith*—all these sold from a half-million to a million copies.) So had war. Before 1860 such books as *Napoleon and His Generals* and *Washington and His Generals*, though stodgy and little read, had huge sales. After the Civil War a horde of disabled veterans became book agents and went around the country dropping tomes of the great conflict on every library and kitchen table. They fell with a dull thud, for they were immense and pedantic. But they were purchased, and in thousands of homes became the only companions of the family Bible. People liked to read about the War.

Then the Civil War drifted away. Its garrulous veterans died out; young men invented automobiles, airplanes, and all sorts of amazing things. A lot of potential young writers were busy at brooding, and there was talk of social consciousness, the inequality of the masses, eugenics, slum clearance. Among the books popular at that time were *The Winning of Barbara Worth*, by Harold Bell Wright, and *The Harvester*, by Gene Stratton-Porter. The War had given way to the Wild West and the wheat fields, but the formula was the same: simple folk fought with gun and Christian conscience against Satan, wind, and death.

In 1912 there was a marked change. Theodore Dreiser, in *The Financier*, began to debunk heroes and make them helpless victims of gross passions; Edith Wharton told, in *Ethan Frome*, a stark and naked tale of horror and frus-



tration which as late as 1936 was made into a successful play; Owen Johnson put forth a document attacking snobbery at New Haven, in his *Stover at Yale*. The intellectual revolution had come: realism, scientific intrusion into the supernatural, disrespect for wealth, long and cerebral tales, and recognition of conceit as poor blind fear were all represented in the book lists. The new age had begun.

The World War stopped it. A simple, primary madness enveloped the earth. Great men spoke with the minds of morons. Everybody forgot books, labor, social consciousness, and everything but battle. Then, suddenly, the War was over. America soon woke up to find herself with prohibition, woman suffrage, freedom of the sexes, the radio,

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air transportation, and universal higher education. The newspapers were printing foreign news on the front page.

The book business, as always, was the mirror of the age. Ernest Hemingway and James Joyce and a host of others began to write four-letter words and insinuate even worse things. Marcel Proust, rotting in a cork-lined room in Paris, became a great man. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote *This Side of Paradise*, and high-collared old men and heliotrope ladies staggered under the shock. The Lost Generation and the Younger Generation emerged—contemptuous, irreverent, flaunting their jazz and their flappers and their great discoveries of anatomy, fertility, and reproduction. Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* became their Bible; Edna St. Vincent Millay's line, "My Candle burns at both ends," was their theme song; Joyce's banned and ununderstandable *Ulysses* was their god. Everything was now going to be revealed, and it was going to be all right, too.

Revelation came quickly. Fitzgerald, just out of Princeton, fired the opening gun in 1920 with his little tale that talked in a big voice, a tale which then was frightening and daring, and which now seems mild and innocuous. In Europe, Joyce, going blind, saw his monument to the stream of consciousness printed and promptly banned, much to the joy of the first wave of American postwar tourists, who read the last forty pages and discovered why Adam and Eve were thrown out of Eden.

Not all of the new world was anatomical and glandular. A novel called *Main Street*, by Sinclair Lewis, made it all right to consider American life in the Middle West dull. H. G. Wells's *Outline of History* demonstrated that chronology and sequence can be absorbing facts and that it is not difficult, after all, to find out everything of importance that has happened on the earth. Wells helped to open up the stream of history to lay readers and to prove to them that human nature is much the same here, there, now, and yesterday.

Meanwhile, women were gleefully mastering the much-vaunted theory of the equality of the sexes. They were reading books on psychology, psychoanalysis, and sex, and, since there was no rule against their entrance into speak-easies, as long as they knew Jack, they poured this knowledge out to bartenders who were amazed, thrilled, and finally bored. Men were (continued on page 69) elated to find that women were not supernal mysteries of beauty and fortitude—just babes who were constantly in need of cigarettes and who wept a curious mixture of mascara and salt water into their beer. Women discovered

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what men had been doing in taverns and saloons for centuries.

All this had its reflection in the current literature, notably in Michael Arlen's *The Green Hat*. This story of postwar London night life, which made the odd point that syphilis and nymphomania are incompatible, was banned from libraries (thus increasing its sale) and became a stage vehicle for a rising young actress named Katharine Cornell. It ended as a movie about the nobility of a woman's love, with Greta Garbo insinuating that you could look at nobility in two ways.



This latter phenomenon was not anachronistic. Neither decency nor prudery had vanished from the world; nor had thought descended to chaos. The year 1921 saw *The Sheik* and *If Winter Comes*, both in the half-million sales class; but there was also a higher type of emancipated fiction. Sherwood Anderson in 1921 was awarded *The Dial's* first annual award of \$2,000, as the most promising American author, for his *Triumph of the Egg*. In the same year John Dos Passos wrote *Soldiers Three*, the first and most important American War novel. There followed Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* and *Arrowsmith* and John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga*.

Lytton Strachey took the stuffiness out of biography. With his *Eminent Victorians* and *Queen Victoria*, a new type of biography was born. Thereafter, the private lives of great people were revealed as very much like the lives of ordinary people, with the same appetites, passions, doubts and distempers. André Maurois and Emil Ludwig followed the example of Strachey, and, following them, the debunkers were drawn up eight abreast, banners flying. Everything was debunked—the innocence of children, the happiness of old men, the honesty of statesmen.

The popularization of biography and history was followed by the popularization of science, though this blessing of the modern age was not subjected to exposure as the result of harassed glands and diseased tissue. Science remained glorified, but was explained—explained as the only real truth, because it was willing to admit its mistakes.

The theory of the soul did not jibe with popularized science. Cold facts and logic showing the inconsequence of man against the universe left a vacuum that was filled by reducing great men and gods to the same level of inconsequence, and the vogue which Strachey had innocently begun grew to the scope of a manufacturing plant, supplying tons of missing self-importance. Every man was an infinitesimal mite and so, therefore, were Napoleon,

Margaret Mitchell



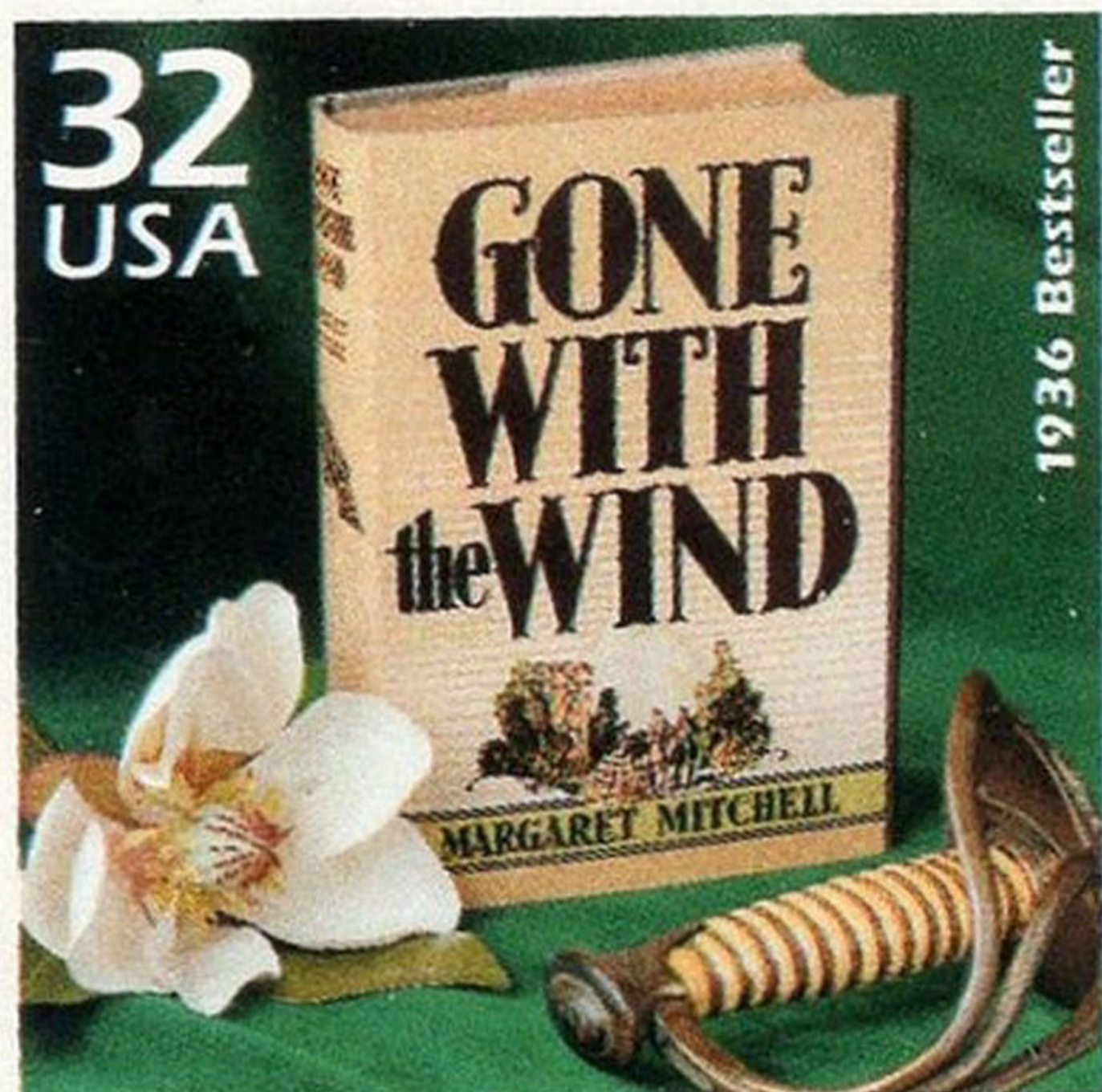
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Washington, Christ, and Mohammed.

By 1927 the novelty of the new age was wearing off. Comfortably settled in historical perspective, people began to relax. Everybody was making money, and things were swell. America was the greatest country on earth.

The World War returned to mind. People dared to think about it again, retrospectively, with a little nostalgia and some grievance. To swell this mood there came, in 1929, Hemingway's salute to glory, *A Farewell to Arms*, and Eric Remarque's classic, *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

Hemingway, who did not forget to include the new generation's conception of love, showed the War as it was—frightened men stampeded by their own machines of death. Remarque's book was turned down by four publishers because its candor in speaking of trench life was considered too much for the new type of stomach, made delicate by gin. It finally appeared, was printed in twenty-five languages, and sold 4,860,000 copies throughout the world.



With the depression in 1929 the wheel of change slowed down, came almost to a stop. Women's skirts, once half-way up the thigh, were down again to the point of inquisition on the calf. Prohibition was such a failure that good liquor was obtainable anywhere (well, fairly good); Americans were getting bored with their new toys: the paint had worn off endocrines, gangsters, debunked religion, and amateur love. In 1931 a gentle, moving book by Pearl Buck, *The Good Earth*, eased aching minds; in 1932 Walter Pitkin's *Life Begins at Forty* salved the raw fears of the Lost Generation and the Younger Generation as they looked toward this age with no more security than a doctor's certificate stating that their arteries had not definitely hardened. In 1933, in the midst of the depression, came Hervey Allen's *Anthony Adverse*.

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It may have been Mr. Allen's sheer good fortune that it arrived at that time. It was an escape book when people wanted to flee reality; it was a lot of book for the money, and it was a good story. On the other hand, writers work ahead of their times, and Mr. Allen may have sensed, when he planned his book, that people were again ready for romanced history. Just as Joyce labored through the War on *Ulysses*; just as Dreiser and Millay and the other rebels were at work in America long before the twenties, so Allen imperturbably wrote his book while flaming youth was discovering the mathematics of insanity. And long before Allen had finished his labors on *Anthony Adverse*, Margaret Mitchell had begun to write *Gone with the Wind*.

The American people are not a nation of book readers.

We have been accused of this time and again, perhaps with some justification. We read a great many newspapers and magazines, but Mr. R. L. Duffus, who surveyed the reading habits of the average American, found that he averages only seven books per year—two of which he buys. He borrows from libraries two books a year, borrows from friends one book a year, and secures two books a year from rental libraries. He sees twenty-five times more movies and examines almost fifty times more magazines than he does books. He spends more money on greeting cards than he does on books. But he bought *Gone with the Wind*.

It is still a complex affair, this appetite for a long romantic story of the Civil War, but some reasons obtrude. It is a simple book, bereft of obscenity, lacking the inductive vagueness of the stream-of-consciousness school, yet frankly realistic and concerned with a woman who, in all sincerity, is a harlot. It states its story without comment, without lectures on abnormal psychology. Nevertheless, these things are present. All the modern improvements are in the book; but they are not pointed up. Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler retained a touch of Joyce, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and the aftermath of the Civil War was interpreted in modern terms with Scarlett O'Hara emerging as the modern prototype of Thackeray's immortal Becky Sharp.

Thus literature returned to the people.

It had flown far away, into rarefied atmospheres where its means of communication were hindered, so that the good folk of earth, listening intently, heard only mumblings and turned off the station, picking up a magazine for entertainment. The magazines did not flirt with the danger which is always present when language is used to explain the inexplicable. On the other hand, they often had to be satisfied with second- and third-rate writers because so many first-rate writers were spending

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their time learning to spell simple Anglo-Saxon words and worrying how to break the facts of life to the world. A cleavage resulted, a cleavage which left popular fiction on one side, and significant fiction on the other. Good fiction was not popular enough, and popular fiction was not good enough. The public, as is its custom, accepted this situation with resignation.

But the appetite remained, and when one of the adventurers returned from Parnassus and spoke again in discernible tones, the flock answered. If you wonder why *Gone with the Wind* is so popular, think what a Dickens, a Thackeray, or a Fielding could do for America—for the greatest single chunk of people ever made simultaneously literate—a chunk of people yearning for a tale well told, for the sake of its telling, by a teller who loves the tale and the art of telling it. There has never been any other secret to popular literature. Once in a while a writer stumbles on it.

Now there is still a newer type of book which bodes wonders for the future. Doctor Alexis Carrel's synthesis of medicine, science, and biology, *Man the Unknown*, takes the next step beyond that taken in the last decade. It has been a best-seller for two years. Doctor Hans Zinnser's *Rats, Lice and History*, explaining that typhus had as much to do with man's downfalls as paranoia, made a great impression. At present, Doctor Victor Heiser's story of mass sanitation in the Orient, *An American Doctor's Odyssey*, is carrying on the work of acquainting people with the practical facts of those green hills far away. And perhaps fifteen years from now there will be a novel that will sell two million copies in its first six months. It will probably be about a doctor, a mental telepathist, and a mellowed and sweet Scarlett O'Hara. And it will be about the Civil War.

SCRIBNER'S