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About Books

What is a book? A silly question? Not at all, for the problem of definition is, as is usual in any discussion, a thorny one. One could render any kind of statistical discussion of books almost impossible by accepting the functional definition given by Franklin Spier, an American publisher: "A book is a book only when it is read; without a reader it is just so much paper, glue, and cloth." Such a definition suggests the special attitude with which some people approach books. It is a defensible attitude, but would anyone other than a bookman consider an analogous definition for his product? Imagine a butcher saying, "A steak is a steak only when it is eaten; without an eater it is just so much protein, fat, and carbohydrate." And imagination boggles at the task that would be faced by an anatomist, or especially an embryologist, if he attempted to apply similar definitions in naming parts of the body.

But, no matter how we define books, we can agree with the statement of the writer of Ecclesiastes: "Of making many books there is no end." He may have been lamenting the laborious production of books by hand, as is suggested—at least to a novice in exegesis—by the completion of the sentence with "and much study is a weariness of the flesh." But to take the text literally as a blunt statement of fact is also possible and more relevant to our times, when books flood from the presses in an ever-widening and endless stream.

How big a stream? How many books? Even if books are defined as physical units, the best answer is still an approximate one, for definitions differ from country to country. According to the UNESCO *Courier* for February 1957, definitions of books differ in some of the following ways. In the United Kingdom, any publication priced at sixpence or more is a book. In other countries, a minimum number of pages defines a book: 17 in Iceland, 64 in Hungary, 100 in Italy and Ireland. In still others, there is no fixed definition: India, Indonesia, and the U.S.S.R. make no distinction between books and pamphlets but classify them all as books. The U.S. makes a commercial distinction: pamphlets and governmental publications are excluded unless they are sold commercially.

UNESCO proposes that a book be defined as a "nonperiodical publication containing 49 or more pages"; that both books and pamphlets should be included in national tabulations but recorded separately; and that government books, atlases, reference books, and academic papers be included if they are sold commercially.

Until such agreement is reached, we can do no more than give estimates based on differing standards and varying statistics. UNESCO estimates that some 60 countries publish books at the rate of more than 5000 million annually. A startling figure and one that would doubtless have made the author of Ecclesiastes "stare and gasp." It is not so startling when it is compared with the world population. In these terms the annual production of books is only about two per person or about four per person capable of reading.

So much for quantity. Quality is a different matter, as we can see when we look at a list of the ten best sellers in the U.S. during the last 60 years. The list is topped by Charles Monroe Sheldon's *In His Steps* (8 million copies), and Micky Spillane occupies three of the ten places with *I, the Jury*, *The Big Kill*, and *My Gun Is Quick*. The inadequacy of a quantitative criterion for judging books is apparent; the list illustrates the aptness of Logan Pearsall Smith's remark: "A best seller is the gilded tomb of a mediocre talent."—G. DUS.