Nicholas A. Basbanes. *A Splendor of Letters: The Permanence of Books in an Impermanent World*. New York: Harper Collins, 2003. 444 pp.; \$29.95 (US) (hardcover). ISBN 0 06 008287 9.

Nicholas Basbanes tells us that with this volume he has completed a trilogy that he began in 1995 with *A Gentle Madness; Bibliophiles, Bibliomanes, and the Eternal Passion for Books* and continued in 2001 with *Patience & Fortitude; A Roving Chronicle of Book People, Book Places, and Book Culture*. With 80,000 copies in print, *A Gentle Madness* must be the most popular book about books ever written, and its popularity is deserved, for Basbanes is a gifted story teller and prose stylist possessed of an unflagging curiosity and comprehensive knowledge of books, booksellers, collectors, and libraries. Readers even mildly afflicted with bibliomania have found his books irresistible.

A Splendor of Letters departs from the formula of its two predecessors, which were constructed around tales of legendary collectors, collections, and libraries. The central concern of this latest book is the survival of print itself. The subtitle, *The Permanence of Books in an Impermanent World*, has an optimistic ring to it, and Basbanes does indeed believe that the book has a future. However, a subtitle like *The Impermanence of Books in an Unthinking and Violent World* might better have reflected the actual contents. Basbanes has much to say about the destruction of books and libraries, covering man's history from classical antiquity to the present, from Carthage to Iraq. He demonstrates by many tragic examples that oppressors almost instinctively understand that to vanquish a people slaughter is not enough: their words too must be destroyed. Thus the burning of Mayan codices by the Spanish, the burning of the works of Jewish authors by the Nazis, and the burning of Cambodian literature by the Khmer Rouge, to cite but a few examples. He also catalogues the many other enemies of books, from worms to librarians, taking to task those who sell off precious items or even entire collections, sometimes in order to buy computers, or who destroy original printed documents once they have been "preserved" on microfilm. He even finds some booksellers and eminent collectors among the guilty, pointing to those who break up illustrated books and atlases in order to sell them a page at a time.

There is some light amid this darkness. Basbanes describes the measures that have been taken to rebuild devastated libraries, to replace destroyed collections, to save documents by reprinting, restoration, and deacidification, to rescue documents from thoughtless

disposal, to preserve their contents by filming or digitization. This has been the inspiring work not only of devoted librarians and archivists, but also of concerned individuals, such as Nicholson Baker and his American Newspaper Repository. In closing Basbanes examines the implications of electronic texts, and the problems associated with changing formats, obsolete equipment, and decaying media.

A Splendor of Letters affords the reader an authoritative overview of the history and fate of the printed word. How authoritative one can judge by examining Basbanes' sources. They are extensive. The bibliography for *A Gentle Madness* is thirty-seven pages long. *Patience and Fortitude's* bibliography numbers twelve pages, but the font is much smaller. The same font is used in *A Splendor of Letters*, and its bibliography of 14 pages contains 270 items, mainly monographs. Of those items, 111 or 41% of the total have been published since the appearance of the first volume of this trilogy. Basbanes is obviously a serious reader. In the second and third volumes he also includes a list of the individuals whom he interviewed, 56 in the case of the third volume. Of these 56, the names of 16 appeared in the list in the second volume; so Basbanes interviewed 40 additional individuals to support his work on this third volume. Basbanes describes himself as an investigative reporter and a literary journalist, and it is the skills of a master of his craft that he brings to this distillation of history, contemporary knowledge and research respecting the printed word.

Fans of Basbanes should be aware that in addition to the above trilogy a fourth volume appeared in 2002: *Among the Gently Mad: Perspectives and Strategies for the Book Hunter in the Twenty-first Century*. This is a book for collectors, written by a collector. Through examples, many of them personal, Basbanes delivers a set of precepts for book hunters and buyers. But it is more than a self-help manual, and is a pleasure to read in its own right. By the way, Basbanes is not retiring just because the trilogy is complete. According to his Web page (<http://nicholasbasbanes.com>) the working title for his next book is *Every Book Its Reader*.

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