

The Baroness and the Baronet

The Scarlet Pimpernel and his creator

Michael Gorman

A humble flower

The scarlet pimpernel is a small wayside flower of a plant of the genus *Anagallis*, having opposite leaves and flowers with a five-lobed calyx. In a series of books, an 18th century British aristocrat called Sir Percy Blakeney adopted the flower as his pseudonym and the symbol under which he led a small band of fellow aristocrats. The League of the Scarlet Pimpernel used stratagems, disguises, and often foolhardy courage to rescue French aristocrats from the Jacobin rule episode of the French Revolution. Sir Percy/the Scarlet Pimpernel was the invention of the Hungarian Baroness Emma Orczy, who wrote about him in books published between 1905 and 1940.

Archetypes

character (noun): 2a: one of the persons of a drama or novel. –Merriam Webster

archetype (noun): 1, ...also: a perfect example. –Merriam Webster

Characters who live on in the general mind as singular examples of a special type of humanity appeared in many of the books that I loved as a child and young adult. Even in this twittery, digital age, they reside in our collective memory, transcending in many ways the books that tell their stories. Dr. Doolittle, who could talk to animals; Bilbo Baggins, hobbit and representative of the common man; Mary Poppins, the magical nanny; Sherlock Holmes, the super-logical detective; Bertie Wooster, the good-hearted aristocratic dope; Jeeves and his fish-powered preternatural intelligence; Leslie Charteris's proto-Bond, Simon Templar, better known as "the Saint"; Peter Pan, the eternal boy; Mr. Toad, the reckless driver; Scaramouche, Rafael Sabatini's dashing rogue; Bulldog

Drummond, the upper-class thug; Robin Hood and King Arthur, figures of righteousness from the kind of mythical history at which the British excel; d'Artagnan, the gallant and impulsive Gascon musketeer; James Bond, a teenage boy's idea of a sophisticate; and Superman, the other man of steel. The archetype of our day – Harry Potter, the boy wizard – will live on in the popular imagination just as long as all those characters in the books I first read long ago.

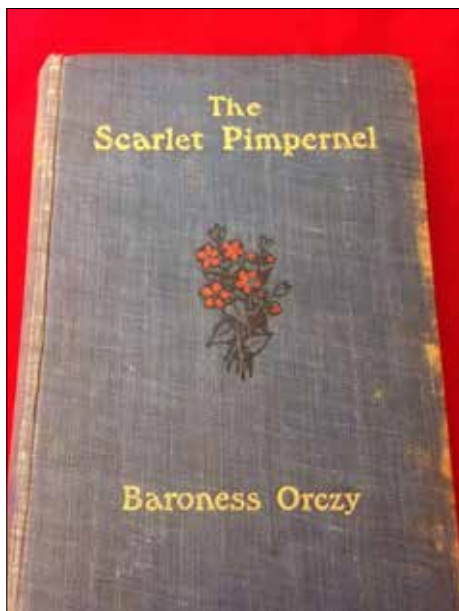
Such characters and other creations who transcend the books in which they appear would seem to have little in common. A few were invented by writers of genius; some by middlebrow writers and frankly inferior authors, some by comic book writers, and some by the anonymous creators of folk tales. In one sense, they defy analysis and criticism and just *are*. Some of their creators are in love with the characters for which they are remembered – see, for example, Dorothy L. Sayers's obvious infatuation with her detective, Lord Peter Wimsey; some come to loathe them – the best-known example being Arthur Conan Doyle, who tried, without success, to kill off Sherlock Holmes.

The enormously popular though often pedestrian writer Agatha Christie invented two such archetypes – Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot – while her much more gifted contemporaries (think for example of Graham Greene) did not. It is not a matter of literary merit but of characters who lodge in all our minds and live in them long after the plots and other characters of the stories in which they appeared are forgotten. Many great characters of literature appear in only one story – any number of Shakespeare's inventions; Hugo's Inspector Javert; Dickens's Uriah Heep, Scrooge, Mrs. Gamp, and on and on; Thackeray's Becky Sharp; Austen's Emma Woodhouse;

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as used on the cover of the Delphi Classics Collected Works



The woman and an 11th edition, published in 1905.

<http://www.wheelerantiques.co.uk/classic-literature/the-scarlet-pimpernel-by-baroness-orczy-1905-11th-impression-illstd-hm-brook>



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and Cervantes's Don Quixote. In contrast, the characters of whom I write here generally appear in often-lengthy series of books and stories and go on to have extended lives in films and on television. Some survive their authors and feature in books, films, and television series written by others. Sherlock Holmes is the best example of the latter. He is the chief character of literally hundreds of books of Sherlockian apocrypha (as himself and in thin disguises like August Derleth's "Solar Pons") and in many films and television productions over the decades – latterly in inexplicably popular creations that bear as much relation to Doyle's stories as a bucket of fried chicken does to a meal in a three-star Michelin restaurant. Other archetypes who endure in books by others are Hammett's Philip Marlowe (still walking down mean streets); Fleming's Bond (still sexist, drinking too much, and licensed to kill); and Wodehouse's Jeeves and Wooster (the literary equivalent of repainting the Sistine Chapel).

One important quality that many of the archetypes have in common is that of doubleness, secret identities, and alter egos. Harry Potter is an unremarkable suburban London boy as well as a master of magic; Bilbo Baggins is a quiet-living hobbit stuck in his rural ways as well as an intrepid hero-voyager; Superman is the mild-mannered journalist Clark Kent until he dons his faintly camp uniform; in Dumas's novel the unjustly imprisoned Edmond Dantes escapes and reemerges as the mysterious Count of Monte Cristo; Chesterton's Father Brown is a simple parish priest and a first-rate detective; Raffles, the burglar created by E.W. Hornung, is also an aristocratic man about town who has the impeccable credential of playing cricket for England; Miss Marple is both a village busybody and a super sleuth; Robin Hood, the arboreal outlaw leading a popular revolt (of noble Saxons against evil Normans – an enduring example of a-historical racism) is also Sir Robin of Locksley, a dispossessed nobleman; and Jeeves is both a humble gentleman's gentleman and a super-brain. Like spies (think of le Carré's George Smiley, the master spy who looks like a deputy bank manager), they are not what they seem and people who know them in one guise often have no idea of what they get up to when doing the things that



The young Baroness

make them enduringly famous.

The Scarlet Pimpernel, the mysterious and daring rescuer of French aristocrats who is also the blithering late 18th century courtier Sir Percy Blakeney, is one of the most famous and enduring archetypal heroes with a secret identity.

The life of Baroness Orczy

Baroness Orczy, Pimpernel's creator, was a woman who lived more than one life – in her case consecutively not simultaneously. She was born in September 1865, in Tarna-Örs, a village on her family's large Tisza-Abad estates in the north of Hungary, a country that was half of the Dual Monarchy – the heart of the sprawling Austro-Hungarian Empire. She bore the title *bárónő* (baroness) from birth. Her father, *báró* (baron) Felix Orczy de Orci, a composer, and her mother, *grófnő* (countess) Emma Wass de Szentegyed et Cege, were descended from very grand Hungarian and Romanian aristocratic families. As the baroness wrote: "In Gotha's *Freiherrliches Taschenbuch* ... the ancestry of the Orczy family is traced back to the entry of Arpád and his knights into Hungary two hundred years before the Norman Conquest." In such a family one had to have an ample sufficiency of names and she was duly

christened Emma Magdolna Rozália Mária Jozefa Borbála Orczy de Orci. All that was reduced to “Emmuska” (little Emma), by which she was known for the rest of her life.

In 1868, Baron Felix made a decision that was to have far-reaching effects on his family. He decided to introduce modern machinery on his estates to improve agricultural production and efficiency.

Among other things, he built a steam mill that threatened and frightened his agricultural workers. Their alarm was so great that they persuaded the parish priest to say a mass to keep away the devil and to bless buckets of holy water to douse the steam mill. A hundred and fifty years ago, peasants who worked the land in central Europe employed the same hand-tools and farming techniques as their medieval ancestors. They hated the clanking, smoking machines, thinking them both an invention of Satan and something that would deprive them of their livelihoods – threatening the end of a centuries-old way of life. They may have been wrong about Satan but, as were the Luddites of England decades before, they were dead right about the menace to their jobs and patterns of life. (Much as employees of today are right to fear the robots, applications of “artificial intelligence,” and other uses of technology that threaten working-class livelihoods and ways of life.) The Luddites smashed the looms that would end hand-weaving; Baron Felix’s peasants rose up and destroyed machinery, burned the farm buildings (barns, cowsheds, etc.), and wiped out that year’s crops. Their uprising, like that of the Luddites, was futile and self-harming, but was enough to scare the aristocratic Orczys. Baron Felix, a man of the arts and clearly without the skills or temperament necessary to be a successful agricultural overlord managing a technological transition, took his family to the safety of Budapest, the Hungarian capital. In some ways the devastation was a blessing in disguise. He became director of the national opera company, but after three years of a somewhat contentious tenure,



The Scarlet Pimpernel's floral namesake.

resigned and moved again – first to Brussels and then to Paris.

The peripatetic family consisted of the baron and countess and their two daughters, the older Madeline and Emmuska, who both attended convent schools. The family lived on the depreciating income from Tisza-Abad and the baron’s fees for conducting and composing. Madeline died in 1873. The baron was keen on his remaining daughter pursuing music both as something fitting for a young aristocratic girl and possibly to follow him into music as a profession. This despite no less a person than his friend Franz Liszt telling the baron that Emmuska’s talents were not those of a professional musician. In her memoir, *Links in the Chain of Life* (1947), Orczy recalls playing the piano, more than 60 years earlier, for the Abbé Liszt and being touched by his slender hand as he said “*Non! C’est ne pas cela*” (No, that isn’t it), telling her that she would never “make the piano sing.”

From a young age, Emmuska knew that her interests and gifts lay in the arts – she was enthralled by music, painting, drawing, and literature. When she was six and seven, she wrote stories of, in her words, “doughty deeds” and “noble heroes.” By the age of 15, she had already lived the very different lives of a landed aristocrat in her native country and of an upper-class bohemian in foreign capitals. Then her life took another and decisive turn. The baron decided to relocate his family to London. Emmuska, now a teen-ager, knew very little English.

The family lived at 162 Great Portland Street (near the junction with Clipstone

Street), a house that was owned by a Hungarian called Ferenc (Francis) Pichler. The house no longer exists (there are dreary offices on the site) and was probably destroyed in the bombing of London during World War II. They later lived in Wimpole Street, famous for being the place where the poet Elizabeth Barrett lived and was courted by the poet Robert Browning, and after that in Kensington. The Orczys mingled in elite musical and diplomatic circles in London of the 1880s and 90s. Emmuska’s memoir of the period is studded with famous names – musicians, actors, politicians, royalty – and tells of balls, house parties, and soirees in the last years of the Victorian age.

The young woman who burned with the desire to create had learned that the life of a musician was not for her, so she turned to fine art and enrolled at the West London School of Art, carrying the recommendation of no less than Sir Frederick (later Lord) Leighton, then president of the Royal Academy. Later, she attended an independent art school. Heatherley’s, founded in 1845, was the first to admit women on equal terms into life classes. There are many eminent artists among its graduates (Rossetti, Millais, E. H. Shephard, Kate Greenaway, Sickert, etc.). Heatherley’s still flourishes in Chelsea in West London. She must have displayed above-average talent: some of her paintings were accepted for the Royal Academy annual shows. In 1894, Emmuska Orczy married an artist (chiefly an illustrator) called Henry Montagu Barstow who was a fellow pupil at the art school. Their only child, a son, was born in 1899. The marriage lasted until her husband’s death in 1943 and was “one of perfect happiness and understanding, of perfect friendship and communion of thought,” according to the baroness.

The mathematician and philosopher Bertrand Russell, an Earl and member of the highest level of British aristocracy, wrote that only those who had lived in the period before World War I could know what perfect happiness was. That *douceur de vivre* seems to have been true for those who were rich and well connected, though

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a cursory knowledge of the conditions of those who were neither will tell you their lives were quite different. The baroness and her husband, though not rich, were extremely well connected. Her memories of the last decade of the 19th and first of the 20th century tell of a life of great gaiety and encounters with the crème de crème of late Victorian and Edwardian society. Her memoir of the period could easily provide the basis for the kind of glossy BBC aristocratic soap opera that goes down so well in the American market.

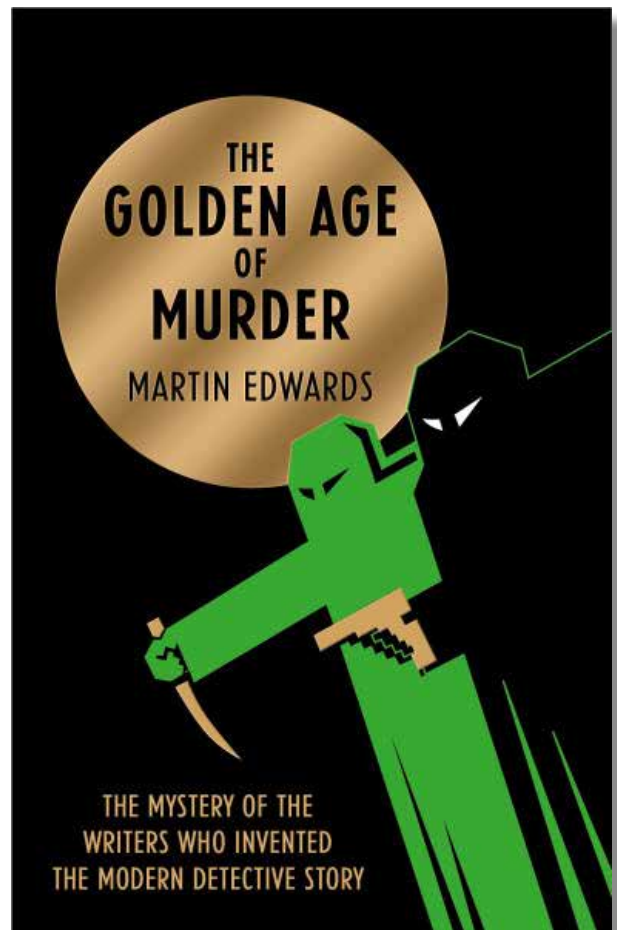
In the chains of my life there were so many links, all of which tended toward the fulfillment of my destiny. —the baroness's memoir, page 57

Though meeting modest success as an artist, Baroness Orczy still felt that she had not found her true destiny. If neither music nor fine art, what was it to be? Moreover, there was the matter of money. Her husband, though gifted, was not a wealthy man. It was a combination of a chance conversation and of her great interest in and knowledge of the theater that led her to become a writer. The first from overhearing a neighbor, someone whom she thought unsophisticated, boasting of having sold short stories to a magazine. If such a person could do that, why not she? That belief combined with her fascination with drama gave rise to her first adult attempt at serious writing — a story called “The Emperor’s Candlesticks.” It was, apparently, novella length, since magazine publishers rejected it as too long. (Later, she turned it into a play and then into her first published novel, 1899.) Undaunted by the rejections, she studied the nature and structure of many stories that were published in the numerous popular magazines of the period and used what she learned to write in two stories — “The Red Carnation” and “Juliet: a Story of the Terror” — that were accepted and published in, respectively, *Pearson’s* and *Royal* magazines. Such is the mutability of money that the £10 she received financed a trip for herself and her husband to Paris (today £10 might get you two glasses of wine in a Parisian outdoor cafe). A later lengthy stay in Paris was of great significance for her future literary career. She writes of wandering through the streets of the old quarter “... along the pavements which to my ears still echoed with the footsteps of Robespierre and Danton, of Charlotte

Corday and Madame Roland, with the clatter of the tumbrils and the shouts of *Ça ira* of the revolutionary mob thirsting for freedom ... past every corner of this old Paris I seemed to be thrust back into a life which I had lived not so very long ago.” She, with her almost mystic belief in destiny, knew that she had found her vocation and the themes that, though she did not know it then, would lead to the creation of the Scarlet Pimpernel. Her industry and self-belief, bolstered now and then by what amounted to visions, led her to a prolific, lucrative, and lengthy career as a popular author.

In another push from the hand of destiny, the baroness had the sudden idea of writing detective stories while riding home on the top of a London omnibus from the National Gallery (a Velasquez exhibition) on a foggy evening. She created two detectives. The first, Bill Owen, “The Old Man in the Corner,” was a highly original character, always to be found at the same table in one of the ABC (Aerated Bread Company) tea shops, drinking milk, eating cheesecake, fiddling incessantly with a piece of string, and solving crimes. His “Watson” was a female journalist, Polly Burton — a necessary link to the world for an armchair detective. The Old Man first appeared in a story published in 1901. Another collection of stories — *The Case of Miss Elliott* (1905) — was included by Martin Edwards in his *The Story of Classic Crime in 100 Books* (2017). Her other detective, Molly Robertson-Kirk, who appears in the stories gathered in *Lady Molly of Scotland Yard* (1910), is a sleuth who joins the police to save her fiancé who has been falsely accused of murder. She relies on her knowledge of domestic details and on the kind of “feminine intuition” that would not pass muster today to solve crimes and ultimately to exonerate her fiancé. Having done that, she marries him and retires (much to the disapproval of, among others, Dorothy L. Sayers).

The baroness, though remaining a member of the Detection Club (an asso-



Not only does the baroness make for interesting reading herself, but many books have been written about her and her characters.

ciation of distinguished mystery writers chronicled by Martin Edwards in *The Golden Age of Murder*, 2015), abandoned detective stories for the historical romances that made her famous. As her writing career developed, she and her husband moved from London to Thanet, on the eastern coast of Kent — a bleakly flat landscape — and then to a house called Snowfield with a 20-acre garden in the village of Bearsted near Maidstone in the lovely Kent countryside. The house, which still exists, is a Grade II protected building described in the official listing as “C19, rebuilt circa 1911 by A.N. Prentice in an early C18 style, for Montagu Barstow, husband of Baroness Orczy” and with “all detailing carefully worked ... virtually unaltered since. High standards of craftsmanship throughout.” The baroness and her husband were passionate about gardening. She wrote that “the making of that beautiful Kentish garden was one of the great joys of our lives.” They lived there until 1918.

In one of the most vivid scenes in her memoir Baroness Orczy described attending a court ball, attended by the King,

Queen, and Prince of Wales and numerous foreign ambassadors, on July 16, 1914, after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in late June but before the outbreak of the First World War in August – a glittering assembly of the European ruling classes on the edge of the catastrophe that would sweep many of them away. She skates over the war years, mentioning Belgian refugees who were first welcomed in Kent, then overstaying it – and her work on behalf of authors and musicians who had been reduced to poverty. The latter was partially the cause of her unspecified “breakdown” that necessitated a change of scene and climate. The couple rented a villa in Monte Carlo for a period of months, then returned to Kent for the rest of the war. After the war, a monetary crisis caused the loss of her Hungarian inheritance, but by then she was earning tidy sums in royalties from her writing (stories, books, and plays). They purchased the Villa Bijou in Monte Carlo and moved there in 1919. The interwar years were happy and productive. They also purchased a house in Italy overlooking the Bay of Spezia, there creating their third garden; they travelled in North America; and the baroness continued to write best-sellers. However, even the privileged could not ignore the darkness that

crept over Europe in the low, dishonest decade of the 1930s. Though the baroness’s political sympathies were of the aristocratic right – monarchy, imperialism, and the rest – she saw through Mussolini and his Fascists. They sold their Italian villa and retreated to the Villa Bijou in Monte Carlo. When World War II started in September 1939, the British in Monaco thought themselves safe, though isolated, by being surrounded by Vichy France. Mussolini invaded the principality in 1943, an *annus horribilis* for the baroness because that was the year her beloved husband died. She endured a measure of privation, but nothing compared with most of the rest of Europe. She returned to London after the war and died in November 1947 at the age of 82, her works as popular then as they had ever been.

The writings of Baroness Orczy

Our author’s first venture into publication was a collaborative work – *Old Hungarian Fairy Tales*, described as adapted and illustrated by Baroness Emmuska Orczy and Montagu Barstow, published in London by Dean and in Philadelphia by Wolf in 1895. Her last published book was *Will o’ the Wisp*, published in London by Hutchinson in 1947. In those 52 years, she published more than 55 novels and books of stories as well as some plays. Twelve of those books (novels and collections of stories) centered on the Scarlet Pimpernel. Almost all the rest were historical romances. Of the latter, two of the more successful were *The Laughing Cavalier* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1913) and *Leatherface* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1916). Both were set in Holland in the late 16th century amid the struggle of the Dutch, led by Willem I, Prince of Orange (1533-1584), for freedom from Spanish rule. *The Laughing Cavalier* was inspired by the famous painting by Frans Hals (in the Wallace Collection in London; its hero is an adventurer called Percy Blake) who is not only the model for the Hals painting

(the actual model is unknown) but also a distant ancestor of Sir Percy Blakeney, the Scarlet Pimpernel. His adventures were continued in *The First Sir Percy* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1929). *Leatherface*, not to be confused with the protagonist of rubbishy horror films, is a mysterious, resourceful servant of Willem of Orange, a man who wears a leather mask to help save his master and country. All her romances are what used to be known as rattling good yarns, rooted in historical fact but with invented characters and situations and a sheen of chivalric adventure and romance far removed from the grim actualities of war and revolutionary struggles. Other notable romances include *Pimpernel & Rosemary* (London: Cassell, 1924), which is set among the Hungarian nobility in Transylvania and features a descendant of the Scarlet Pimpernel, and *A Spy of Napoleon* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1934), set in 1868 during the reign of Napoleon III and dealing with the conflict between Bourbon-supporting aristocrats and the upstart Bonapartes. It was made into a film (1936) starring Richard Barthelmess and Dolly Haas.

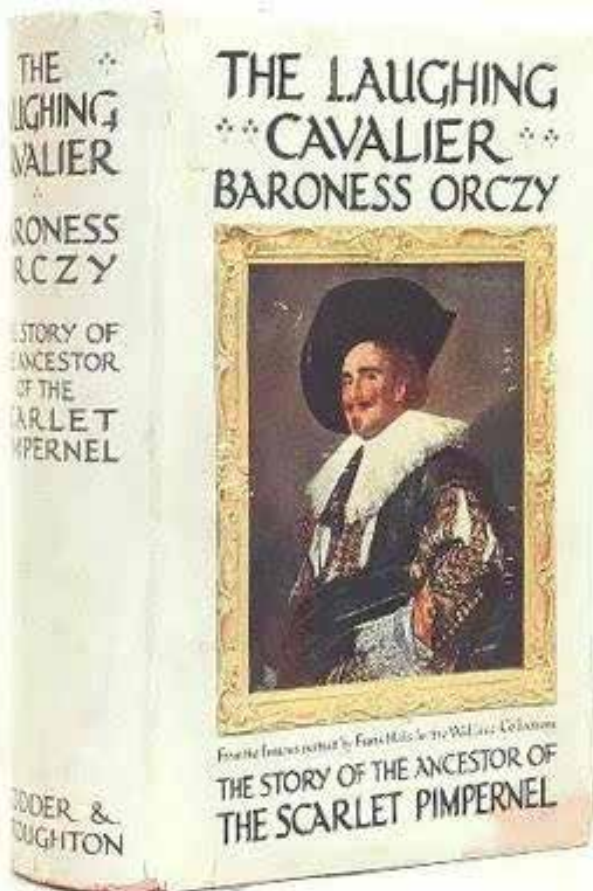
The Scarlet Pimpernel

*They seek him here, they seek him there
Those Frenchies seek him every where
Is he in heaven, is he in hell?
That damned elusive Pimpernel.*

The baroness wrote “I have so often been asked the question: ‘But how did you come to think of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*?’ And my answer has always been ‘It was God’s Will that I should.’ And to you moderns, who perhaps do not believe as I do, I will say ‘In the chain of my life there were so many links, all of which tended to bring me to the fulfilment of my destiny.’” Her memoir contains a disquisition on the importance of characters to novels. She contrasts Dickens with Thackeray, whom she considered the finer writer but conceded that he never created characters who live on in the minds of readers, as do Pickwick, Pecksniff, Micawber, and hosts of other Dickens creations. She wrote that the idea for, and outline of, stories and incidents set during the French Revolution came to her when she and Barstow were in Paris, but she was at a loss for the central memorable character she knew was essential to the project. In her telling, God or destiny took a hand. In

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photo/Michael Gorman



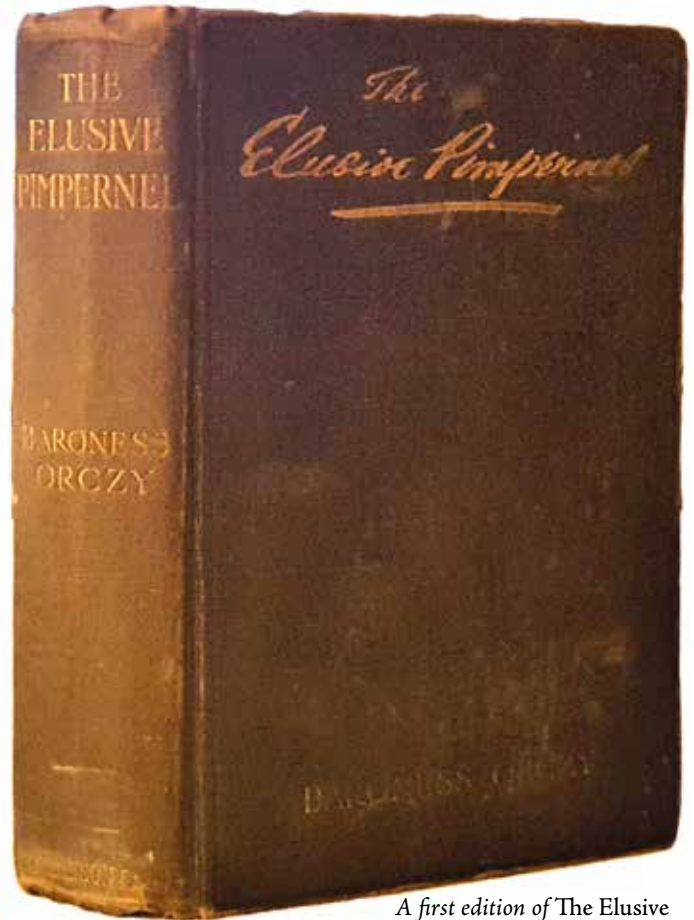
1903, she was sitting on a bench on the platform of the Temple underground station waiting for a Circle Line train to take her to Kensington. A “dull, prosy” place “foggy too and smelly and cold” but she had a vision. “I saw – yes, I saw – Sir Percy Blakeney just as you know him now. I saw him in his exquisite clothes, his slender hands holding up his spy-glass; I heard his lazy drawling speech, his quaint laugh ... it was a mental vision of course and lasted but a few seconds, but it was the whole life story of the Scarlet Pimpernel that was there and then revealed to me.” She had her central character and set to work to write her first book about him – *The Scarlet Pimpernel* – in five weeks, which she claimed were the happiest of her life. She said that, though she wrote it as a novel, in her mind’s eye it was a play with dramatic scene upon dramatic scene. The manuscript met with refusals from, among others, the major publishers Macmillan, John Murray, and William Heineman. When she told the last of these that she was thinking of turning the novel into a play, he said that he would consider publishing the book if the play were a success. With her characteristic pertinacity, she wrote the play with the collaboration of her husband. After two years of more and various troubles, in January 1905 the play *The Scarlet Pimpernel* opened in the New Theatre in London, starring two well-known actors – Fred Terry as Sir Percy and Julia Neilson as Marguerite, his wife. The critics were not kind and the initial bookings were poor, but word of mouth prevailed and the play went on to have a London run of more than 2,000 performances. Rejected by major houses, the baroness found a sympathetic publisher for her book in Arthur Greening, a farouche character and former song-and-dance man who had founded a small and not very successful publishing house. *The Scarlet Pimpernel* was an almost instant best seller for Greening & Company, but the firm declared bankruptcy seven years later, partly due to litigation by Lord Alfred Douglas, the man who was the source of Oscar Wilde’s downfall.

The Scarlet Pimpernel books and stories have relatively simple structures and are fundamentally character driven. They reflect the baroness’s worldview in that the French aristocrats are, in general, noble and wronged; the Revolution, no matter its origins in the “thirst for freedom” from

the cruelty and injustice of the Bourbon *Ancien Régime*, had degenerated to mob rule in the bloody excesses of the Terror; the revolutionaries are brutal and venal or fanatical zealots; and only English aristocrats could overcome their evildoings. The Scarlet Pimpernel and his associates in the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel were the ideal of the English gentleman, chivalrous, resourceful, honest, and trustworthy – what a pity they have few if any counterparts in real life!

The *Scarlet Pimpernel* (1905) is the first and in many ways the best of the series. It is set in 1792 at the height of the tumult at the end of the French Revolution. It was the year in which the King was executed, though the “Terror” and its revolutionary tribunals did not begin until March of 1793. The Blakeney’s marriage is at the heart of the story. Sir Percy Blakeney’s wife is the beautiful former star of the Comédie-Française, Marguerite St. Just. (Is it a coincidence that the marguerite is a daisy, a small flower like the pimpernel?)

Sir Percy Blakeney, as the chronicles of the time inform us, was in this year of grace 1792, still a year or two on the right side of thirty. Tall, above the average, even for an Englishman, broad-shouldered and massively built, he would have been called unusually good-looking, but for a certain lazy expression in his deep-set blue eyes, and that perpetual inane laugh which seemed to disfigure his strong, clearly-cut mouth. It was nearly a year ago now that Sir Percy Blakeney, baronet, one of the richest men in England, leader of all the fashions, and intimate friend of the Prince of Wales, had astonished fashionable society in London and Bath by bringing home, from one of his journeys abroad, a beautiful, fascinating, clever, French wife.



A first edition of *The Elusive Pimpernel* from 1908

He, the sleepest, dullest, most British Britisher that had ever set a pretty woman yawning, had secured a brilliant matrimonial prize for which, as all chroniclers aver, there had been many competitors.

All marriages are mysterious, and this one more than most. Why did such a beautiful and intelligent woman marry someone who was, to all appearances, a nincompoop with no interests other than his clothes and court gossip? The baroness was writing a romance, so the idea that she might have married for his riches does not arise. We know, as Lady Blakeney does not, that Sir Percy is really a resourceful and intelligent man, a master of disguise and the sword, and an intrepid rescuer of potential victims of the guillotine.

Marguerite St. Just is accused by émigré aristocrats in England of denouncing the Marquis St. Cyr and his family to the Jacobins, thus causing their deaths. (One of the many echoes in *The Scarlet Pimpernel* of Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*.) This allegation leads to the couple’s estrangement. She is weary of his inanity; he is appalled by her betrayal of her class.



Merle Oberon and Leslie Howard, 1935

Say what you will about the baroness, but she was a world-class storyteller and a writer of drive and verve. The opening words of the novel set a vivid scene, leaving the reader in no doubt where her sympathies lay:

A surging, seething, murmuring crowd of beings that are human only in name, for to the eye and ear they seem naught but savage creatures, animated by vile passions and by the lust of vengeance and of hate. The hour, some little time before sunset, and the place, the West Barricade, at the very spot where, a decade later, a proud tyrant raised an undying monument to the nation's glory and his own vanity. During the greater part of the day the guillotine had been kept busy at its ghastly work: all that France had boasted of in the past centuries, of ancient names, and blue blood, had paid toll to her desire for liberty and for fraternity ... daily, hourly, the hideous instrument of torture claimed its many victims – old men, young women, tiny children until the day when it would finally demand the head of a King and of a beautiful young Queen.

Amid all this carnage, a covered cart driven by “an old hag” is permitted to leave Paris without inspection because the driver claims her son has the plague. Too late, a captain of the guard realizes that the gate-keeper has been fooled.

The cart contained the CI-DEVANT Comtesse de Tournay and her two children, all of them traitors and condemned to death.’ ‘And their driver?’ muttered Bibot, as a superstitious shudder ran down his spine. ‘SACRE TONNERRE,’ said the captain, ‘but it is feared that it was that accursed Englishman himself – the Scarlet Pimpernel.

(Her eccentric use of capitals might remind the reader of some of today's tweeters.)

The tale rattles on to Dover, where the aristocrats and their rescuers land, to the salons of the Prince of Wales and French emigres, and to the League plotting another daring rescue. We meet a major character in the series, Chauvelin, an agent of the French government and a “not very prepossessing little figure ... then nearer forty than thirty – a clever, shrewd-looking personality, with a curious fox-like expression in the deep, sunken eyes.” Chauvelin is hell-bent on discovering the identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel and, because the Jacobins are holding her brother Armand, blackmails Lady Blakeney into aiding his search. Though the Blakeney family are estranged, she confides in Sir Percy and he promises to rescue her brother. After he has left for France, Marguerite discovers that he is the Scarlet Pimpernel and, foolhardy with love, leaves for France to join him. Sir Percy manages to outwit Chauvelin and

rescue not only Armand St. Just but also the Comte de Tournay. They and the now happy couple leave for England in the boat *The Daydream*. It is hard not to be carried along by the sheer élan and pace of the storytelling. They, combined with the charisma of the central character, make it and the subsequent books irresistible to many readers.

Other Scarlet Pimpernel books

The Scarlet Pimpernel adventures continued through nine more novels – from *I Will Repay* (1906) to *Mam'zelle Guillotine* (1940) – and in two short-story collections – *The League of the Scarlet Pimpernel* (1919) and *Adventures of the Scarlet Pimpernel* (1929). They featured not only the Blakeney family, the various members of the league (Lord Anthony Dewhurst, Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, and more than a dozen others), and the ever-outwitted Chauvelin, but also many historical figures of the age – the Prince of Wales (later King George IV), Robespierre, Danton, Marat, and the Baron de Batz. They have a remarkable consistency of tone and character, great narrative drive, and arresting dramatic scenes, from rural hovels in France to gilded salons in England. They also have some inevitable similarities of plot, since the basic story always involves the rescue of “innocents” from their cruel and vindictive oppressors, and the methods of rescue invariably require daring ruses and life-risking exploits. To an Orczy fan, it would be as pointless to complain about those similarities as to moan about the “sameness” of Bach's fugues.

One bibliographical curiosity is the book *A Gay Adventurer: Being the Life of Sir Percy Blakeney, Baronet* / by John Montagu Orczy Barstow. London: Long, 1935; which was re-published in the U.S. as: *The Life and Exploits of the Scarlet Pimpernel (Sir Percy Blakeney, Baronet)* / by John Blakeney; with a foreword by the Baroness Orczy (New York: Washburn, 1935). I doubt the English edition would bear the same title if published today. Did the American publisher insist on the baroness's son using a pseudonym? What was the contribution of the baroness to her son's work?

The afterlife of the Scarlet Pimpernel

The Scarlet Pimpernel lives on, more than 70 years after his creator's death. He

See PIMPERNEL, page 8

PIMPERNEL, from page 7

lives on in the books, which are still in print; in the films and television versions of the stories; and above all in the popular imagination. Take, for example, Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty, an Irish priest who saved many people from the Fascists and Nazis while serving in the Vatican during World War II. His story has been told in two books with similar titles – *Scarlet Pimpernel of the Vatican*, by J.P. Gallagher, 1968; and *The Vatican Pimpernel*, by Brian Fleming, 2008. Then there is the Swedish diplomat, Harald Edelstam, who rescued Norwegian resistance fighters sought by the Germans in occupied Norway in World War II; and then went on to rescue dissidents during the reign of the appalling Pinochet in Chile in the 1970s. His wartime nickname was *Svarta Nejlikan* (the Swedish for Black Pimpernel). Many other heroic resisters of oppression (real and fictional) have been called names including “Pimpernel,” because even people who have never heard of Baroness Orczy catch the reference.

Films. There were three silent films in which the Scarlet Pimpernel was the central character. The first, in 1917, starred

Dustin Farnum and was an adaptation of the 1905 play. The first and in many ways best talkie was *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1934), directed by Harold Young and starring Leslie Howard and Merle Oberon as the Blakeney and Raymond Massey as Chauvelin. Leslie Howard, cinema's epitome of an “English gentleman,” was the son of a Hungarian refugee. One of his last film roles was of the hero in *Pimpernel Smith* (1941) who rescued victims of the Nazis. Other Scarlet Pimpernel films have starred David Niven (1950), Anton Rogers (1969), and Anthony Andrews (1982) as Sir Percy. Lovers of low British comedy will appreciate *Don't Lose Your Head* (1967), the 13th “Carry On” film, (released as *Carry On, Pimpernel* in the U.S.) in 1967 and starring Sid James as The Black Fingernail and Kenneth Williams as Citizen Camembert.

Television. The Scarlet Pimpernel has featured in TV productions. The two best are *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1982), produced by London Films, starring Anthony Andrews and Jane Seymour as the Blakeney and Ian McKellen as Chauvelin, and designed by none other than Tony Curtis. It is quite faithful to its sources. That cannot be said

for what I consider a better entertainment and with superior acting – *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1999-2000), a co-production of London Films, A&E Television, and the BBC, starring Richard E. Grant and Elizabeth McGovern as the Blakeney and the marvellous Martin Shaw as Chauvelin.

The Scarlet Pimpernel has lived on from the time the baroness first saw him in a London Tube station to today and will live on as long as people appreciate great characters, historical romances, and rattling good stories.

Collectors' note

Reading copies of the Pimpernel books are easily found. One can amass a collection of the Scarlet Pimpernel books that are hardback reprintings in the decade in which they were published. Even a first edition in “good” condition of *The Elusive Pimpernel*, for example, can be had for less than \$50. But the price rises steeply for some of the first editions and signed firsts. The Greening first of *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1905) cannot be had for less than \$1000.

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This Month's SHELFIE



Guess Whose Shelf This Is, and Win Big!

This month we commence a member contest. Club members should submit a “readable”* photo of a shelf they possess, and other members will guess whose shelf it is.

The winner will receive a copy of a Caxton Club publication, to be selected by mutual agreement between a member of the publication committee and the winner. Such prize copy will bear a special bookplate naming the recipient and the occasion. The winner will also be identified in a subsequent issue of the *Caxtonian*, along with the name of whose shelf it is.

Unidentified “shelfies” remain open and available for identification for three months; the contest will be closed for those not identified in that time and the owner disclosed.

*“Readable” means that part of the spine imprint on at least one-third of the books can be deciphered.

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Caxton Club COUNCIL NOTES

Leora Siegel, Secretary

The Caxton Council met February 20 at the Newberry Library to attend to the affairs of the Club.

Susan R. Hanes, Cochair of the Membership Committee with Jackie Vossler, presented the following two individuals as Caxton Club candidates. Susan Hanes moved and Kevin Sido seconded the motion. Both candidates were unanimously approved.

Mary Fons (Resident) is a writer, editor, and public speaker specializing in the history of American quilts and quilts in popular culture. She is editor in chief of *Quiltfolk* magazine and has hosted instructional programs on quilting for public television. She is the

author of *Make + Love Quilts: Scrap Quilts for the 21st Century* (2014) and *Dear Quilty* (2015). She has maintained a popular blog, PaperGirl, for over a decade. Mary serves on the board of the International Quilt Museum at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. She holds a BA in theater from the University of Iowa and an MFA in writing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Mary came to the Caxton Club by way of our website, and was nominated by Margaret McCamant and seconded by Mary Marony.

Elaine Walker (Junior Resident) is an online MLIS student with the University of Southern Mississippi. She is currently working as the Caxton Club Archives Intern at the Newberry Library. She is broadly inter-

ested in book history and book arts, in literature and in history. Nominated by Paul Gehl and seconded by Suzanne Karr Schmidt.

President Arthur Frank announced the appointment of this year's Nominating Committee. Susan Hanes is the Chair, with Committee members Bob McCamant and Martin Starr. The Committee's charge is the selection of candidates to serve as officers of the Club for a two-year term of service, and the Council Class of 2022, which has a three-year term. The Committee will report to the Council at the April meeting and a vote will take place at the annual membership meeting in May.

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From the ARCHIVES

Paul Gehl, Archivist-Historian

A Mystery

Here's a mystery from the Caxton Club Archives. In his magisterial 1995 history of the Club, Frank Piehl illustrates a Caxton Club bookplate and explains that it was adopted in February 1918 for use in books in the Club's library. Just at that moment the Club was abandoning its rented rooms and was about to move the library to the Art Institute. Apparently the officers wanted to affix this plate to Caxton books so they would not be confused with the museum's collection. The plate Frank illustrates is a handsome one, but complex. The logotype the Club adopted in 1896 is seen on the tympan of a hand press. Printer's tools, two open books, and the date 1470 (for William Caxton's earliest printing) also appear, and the whole is surrounded by a circular border in which is lettered "The Caxton Club of Chicago. Ex Libris." A caption notes this design was by Coella Lindsay Ricketts, a noted calligrapher (and at the time President of the Club). The approval of the plate is recorded in the Council minutes, but the design is not

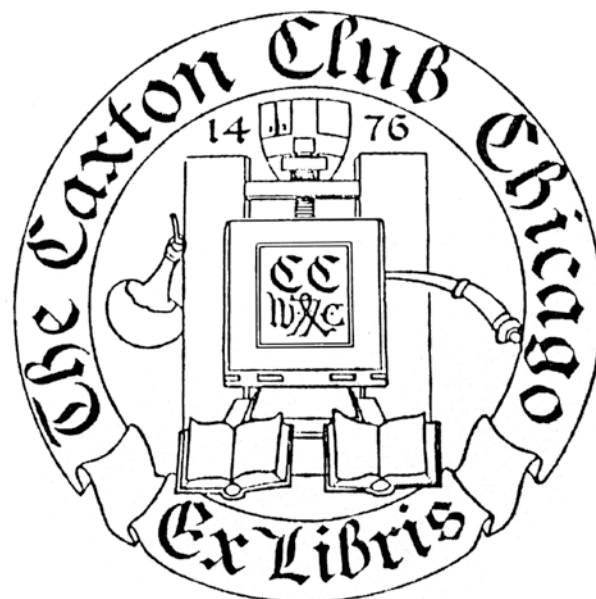
described nor is a specimen tipped in.

Frank credited the illustration to the archives of the Club, where he had done extensive research for his book. Subsequently, he encouraged the Club to donate its archives to the Newberry Library and logged many volunteer hours in the years that followed organizing it properly and creating an inventory. Alas, no printed version of the plate seems to

have survived. Recent researchers – notably new member Elaine Walker, who refolded and created a new inventory for the archive, and Lou Pitschmann, studying on behalf of the 2020 Keepsake Committee – have not found the original that Frank used. Lou did find four other bookplate artists who worked for the Club lurking in the archives, along with two proposed designs and a fair amount of deliberation, disagreement, and delay on the matter of bookplates. Two designs by Ricketts do survive in his papers at the Lilly Library, but without indication of which, if either, was formally adopted.

The plot thickens further when we discover that the bookplate does not show up in any of the books the Club donated to the Newberry over the years, nor have we been able to locate the books that Louis Silver bought from the Club in 1960 and donated to DePaul University. Hence our questions to the membership: Have you ever seen this or any other Caxton Club plate? Was it produced and used? And perhaps more fundamental still: What happened to the version Frank Piehl saw?

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Book- and manuscript-related exhibitions: a selective list

(Note: on occasion an exhibit may be delayed or extended; it is always wise to call in advance of a visit.)

American Writers Museum, 180 N. Michigan Avenue, second floor, Chicago, 312-374-8790: **“Bob Dylan: Electric”** (Dylan’s influence on American music, literature, and culture), through April 30. **“Frederick Douglass, Agitator”** (exploring the writer and “self-made man”), through May 31.

Art Institute of Chicago, 111 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, 312-443-3600: **“The New Contemporary”** (44 iconic works by artists such as Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Jasper Johns), Galleries 288, 290–299, ongoing. **“Super/Natural: Textiles of the Andes”** (explores how Andean cultures developed distinct textile technologies and approaches to design), Gallery 69, through June 16.

Chicago Botanic Garden, Lenhardt Library, 1000 Lake Cook Road, Glencoe, 847-835-8202: **“Spice Rack”** (illustrations of plants known for their spices), through June 2.

Chicago Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington Street, Chicago, 312-744-6630: **“Chicago! The Play, the Movies, the Musical ... the Murders”** (photographs and artifacts of Chicago from the original theater piece), Randolph lobby, through December.

Chicago History Museum, 1601 N. Clark Street, Chicago, 312-266-2077: **“Silver Screen to Mainstream”** (American fashion in the 30s and 40s), opens April 8.

Intuit Museum of Outsider Art, 756 N. Milwaukee Avenue, Chicago, 312-243-9088: **“Susan Te Kahurangi King: 1958-2018”** (rarely exhibited works of this Chicago-based artist), through April 14.

Museum of Contemporary Art, 220 E. Chicago Avenue, Chicago, 312-280-2660: **“Laurie Simmons: Big Camera/Little Camera”** (four decades of photographic work), through May 5.

Newberry Library, 60 W. Walton Street, Chicago, 312-943-9090: **“Chicago 1919: Confronting the Race Riots”** The Library has announced its participation in this multi-venue event, but details had not been disclosed at press time.

Northwestern University Transportation Library, 1970 Campus Drive, fifth floor, Evanston, 847-491-7658: **“African Aviation in the 1970s”**, ongoing. E-mail transportationlibrary@northwestern.edu to schedule an appointment.

Pritzker Military Museum and Library, 104 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, 312-374-9333: **“Lest We Forget: Sailors, Sammies, and Doughboys Over There in World War I”** (explores the experiences of those who served in the war), through mid-May.

Smart Museum of Art, 5550 S. Greenwood Avenue, Chicago, 773-702-0200: **“Smart to the Core: Embodying the Self”** (various artists explore the visual construction of selfhood), through May 19.

Spudnik Press Cooperative, 1821 W. Hubbard Street, suite 302, Chicago, 312-563-0302: **“Eternal Recurrence: New Editions from Spudnik Press Cooperative”** (26 artists will exhibit), opens April 5.

University of Chicago, Joseph Regenstein Library, Special Collec-

tions Research Center Exhibition Gallery, 1100 E. 57th Street, second floor, Chicago, 773-702-8705: **“Augie March”** (in conjunction with a Court Theatre production), opens April 29.

Contact Bob McCamant (bmccamant@earthlink.net) if you’d like to take over the preparation of these listings.



Art Institute/Textiles of the Andes
MANTLE (DETAIL), 100 BC/AD 200

Chicago Cultural Center/Chicago!
SEA MANDELL, GOAT ISLAND ARCHIVE



Chicago History Museum/Silver Screen to Mainstream

Caxtonians Collect: Paul Saenger

Interviewed by Robert McCamant

Paul Saenger served for over a quarter century as head of collection development for the Newberry Library, where he raised more than a million dollars for the acquisition and curation of rare books and manuscripts.

He went to Edgemont High School, a public institution noted for its academic excellence and celebrity graduates. The faculty were mostly serious teachers, and he had no trouble at the end of his junior year in gaining early admission into Columbia College in the New York. At Columbia, he fell into the crowd around the historians Orest Ranum and Peter Gay, the latter of whom had by then already made a national reputation as the author of *The Enlightenment*. But Saenger chose to move on to the University of Chicago for graduate school where he received a NDEH title IV fellowship that paid for the entirety of his PhD in history. At the U of C, he specialized in Renaissance history; Hannah Gray was his dissertation advisor. With Ford Foundation support, he spent three years in Paris where he wrote a dissertation based on scores of medieval manuscripts and incunables.

In 1972, because of the dearth of academic jobs due to the War in Vietnam, he decided to go to library school, a course of action which most of his professors discouraged, but which Hanna Gray strongly supported. That decision was also influenced by Julian Brown, the very distinguished Keeper in the Department of Manuscripts at the British Museum. As a scholar and head of acquisitions at the Newberry, Saenger made many voyages across the Atlantic (largely at his own expense) to do research and to purchase rarities for the Library.

His first job as a librarian was at Northwestern University, where he was bibliographer for history and the social sciences including psychology. Eventually he moved to the Newberry, where for many years he was the George A. Poole III Curator of Rare Books.

Among his accomplishments was to co-author the grant that established the Center for Renaissance Studies, which under his influence offered courses in medieval paleography and the bibliography of early printed books, modeled on those of the Ecole des Chartes in Paris. Taking as a model the consortium of universities that supported the Center, he pioneered the Joint Acquisition Program by which six Midwestern universities including the University of Illinois, Loyola, and North-



Hand colored woodcut illustrating Maccabees in Anton Koberberger's German vernacular Bible of 1483, from the Mundelein College Rare Book Collection at the Newberry Library.

western co-purchased scores of manuscripts and early printed books and documents.

But if you Google Saenger today, the

thing you will not miss is that he is the author of *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading*, which appeared in 1997. I cannot do the topic justice here, but his thesis was that word separation, first introduced into written Latin in Ireland in the seventh century, was responsible for the modern practice of silent reading. The ancient Greeks and Romans belonged to an oral culture, read aloud and relied extensively on memory. The ancient

Romans wrote in continuous rows of letters. Introducing space between words permitted readers to more easily decipher meaning. The phenomenon took root in the British Isles and then spread to the Continent, in the eleventh century, enabling the development of scholasticism and spirituality based on the very private and solitary reading of books of hours and other works composed for private meditation.

There is even a talk by Saenger about the process by which he deduced the theories behind his space thesis. If you type "Paul Saenger You Tube" into Google, it currently comes up first; it is from a talk he gave at the National Gallery of Art.

(He is also the compiler of *A Catalogue of the Pre-1500 Western Manuscript Books at the Newberry Library*, and the translator of *The French Book: Religion, Absolutism and Readership, 1585-1714*, by Henri-Jean Martin.)

He believes that today's climate provides a great opportunity for collectors, whether institutional or private. "While the world is more interested in artifacts now than ever before – witness the way people pore over them as reproduced on the internet – prices for them have not risen as much as might be expected. One of these days the market will start to value them based on the fact that they are irreplaceable."

One of his proudest projects at the Newberry was negotiating to take custody of many truly rare books belonging to the libraries of nearby institutions which no longer wished to have responsibility for them. The faculty and students were guaranteed access, but the schools were no longer required to preserve them. Saenger obtained funding from the Breslauer Foundation for that purpose. The many schools included Mundelein College, McCormick Theological Seminary, Concordia University, and the Chicago Theological Union (see adjacent photo). It all adds up to making the Newberry a more useful place for scholars.

"What makes any library useful is the way related materials can be looked at side-by-side. The filing systems, the librarians, and the fellow-patrons conspire to multiply the contents of each book. Our culture really needs the 'monuments to the written word' that can still be found in places like the Newberry, the Bodleian, or the *Bibliothèque nationale* in Paris," he concludes.

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Bookmarks...

No April Luncheon

As is its custom, the April luncheon will be on spring break.

Join the **Chicago Literary Hall of Fame** and **City Lit Books** for a panel discussion inspired by the Caxton Club's newly released *Chicago by the Book: 101 Publications That Shaped the City and Its Image*.

The discussion will focus on the book's entry on the Illinois Federal Writers Project.

Moderator: Donald G. Evans. Panelists: Liesl Olson, Newberry Library Director of Chicago Studies; Kenneth Warren, University of Chicago scholar; S.L. Wisenberg, author; Mary Wisniewski, Nelson Algren biographer

The Illinois unit of the Federal Writers Project employed some of Chicago's finest literary talents, most before they were known to the general public. **Richard Wright, Nelson Algren, Studs Terkel, Margaret Walker, Sam Ross, Arna Bontemps**, and others turned out narratives for this government agency that included the guide book we'll use as the centerpiece of our discussion.

We'll explore this government initiative to support artists as well as other such endeavors and discuss its impact it on future careers.

This event is free and open to the public, including light refreshments, and is made possible through partnerships with the Caxton Club and City Lit Books.

DETAILS: **Thursday, April 25**; City Lit Books, 2523 N. Kedzie, Chicago. Free parking in back.

Reception **6 pm**; panel discussion **6:30 pm**; shop closes at **8 pm**. The event is free, but reservations are required by April 23 for Caxton Club members. Reserve at caxtonclub.org, call 312-255-3710, or email caxtonclub@newberry.org

Dinner: Wednesday, April 17, Union League Club Eric White on the Gutenberg Bible

Eric White, curator of rare books at the Princeton University Library, will discuss his latest book *Editio Princeps: A History of the Gutenberg Bible*. For this work, Dr. White was awarded the DeLong Book History Prize, given annually to the author of the best book on any aspect of script or print published in the preceding year. Among its achievements this handsomely illustrated book traces the ownership history of every known copy of Gutenberg's Bible. A limited number of copies of *Editio Princeps* will be available for sale and signing for \$125 each. Dr. White has specialized in early European printing. He joined Princeton in 2015 after 18 years as curator of special collections at Southern Methodist University.

April dinner: Union League Club, 65 W. Jackson Boulevard. The evening will follow this order: Social gathering 5-6 pm; program at 6 pm; dinner immediately to follow. Program is free and open to the public. Beverages available for \$6-\$12. Three-course dinner: \$63. Reservations are required for either program only or dinner/program combination. Reservations must be received no later than NOON, Monday, April 15. Payment required for dinner reservations cancelled after deadline and for no-shows. To reserve call 312-255-3710 or e-mail caxtonclub@newberry.org

Beyond April...

MAY LUNCHEON

Brother can you spare a dime... novel? They were the sensational precursors to pulp fiction, but since they were fragile and cheap they were in danger of being lost, until a couple of libraries teamed to digitize them. Matthew Short from NIU will be telling the fascinating tale! May 10 at Union League.

MAY DINNER

On May 15 at the Union League Club, Lynne Marie Thomas, head, rare book and manuscript library at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, on "Making Mr. Darcy: Cultural Context for the Regency Gentleman."