In A Splendor of Letters, Nicholas A. Basbanes continues the lively, richly anecdotal exploration of book people, places, and culture he began in 1995 with A Gentle Madness (a finalist that year for the National Book Critics Circle Award) and expanded in 2001 with Patience & Fortitude, a companion work that prompted the two-time Pulitzer Prize–winning historian and biographer David McCullough to proclaim him the leading authority of books about books.

Basbanes now offers a consideration of the many pressing issues that surround the role of books in contemporary society, such as the willful destruction of books and libraries in Sarajevo, Tibet, and Cambodia, and the spirited efforts to restore them. The matter of discards at various libraries takes on an entirely new dimension as well, with fully researched stories about the kind of attitudes that may lead to the loss of “last copies” of important works.

In vivid detail, Basbanes examines the many materials that have been used over the centuries to record information -- among them clay tablets, papyrus scrolls, slabs of stone, palm leaves, animal skins, and hammered sheets of gold and copper. Also discussed are the various debates that continue to rage about preservation, which may mean saving and storing books on paper indefinitely, or as electronic data, which are by nature ephemeral.

In this beautifully packaged edition, Nicholas Basbanes brings to a close his wonderful trilogy on the remarkable world of books and bibliophiles.
Nicholas A. Basbanes has a love affair going with the printed word. Not just the book --- the printed word, be it chiseled on stone 2,000 years ago, scrawled on wallpaper, palm leaves or cloth, or even imprinted on a computer screen the day before yesterday.

That is the main message delivered in this, the third of a trio of books he has written celebrating the triumphs, tragedies, perils and potentialities of print. A SPLENDOR OF LETTERS, a kind of miscellaneous grab bag of print-talk, was preceded by A GENTLE MADNESS (1995) and PATIENCE & FORTITUDE (2001). Truly, a man obsessed with his subject.

A SPLENDOR OF LETTERS is a book full of fascinating bits of information on all sorts of subjects relating to the printed word. This is at once its main attraction and its principal drawback. Much of the information packed into these pages is interesting in itself, but the book has no single overarching theme, seemingly no real purpose except to display the authors enthusiasm and interest for his subject.

Among the many topics touched upon in this bag of scholarly/literary potato chips are the disappearance of many important texts produced by ancient civilizations; the question of whether a modern copy of an ancient book can or should replace the original; the wanton destruction of valuable libraries in places like ancient Carthage, Nazi Germany, Sarajevo, Cambodia and Tibet; the morality of physically mutilating books in order to turn their valuable illustrations into objects of commerce; the morality of breaking up great library collections so their contents can be sold off for cash to meet current needs; the best means of preserving printed records for the longest time; and --- inevitably --- the already looming question of whether electronic books will make the familiar object we hold in our hands today a mere museum curiosity anytime soon.

Basbanes tries hard to be objective about all of this. He has sought out people on all sides of every question he considers --- but his sympathies obviously seem in the end to lie with the preservationists and the physical book rather than with its electronic doppelganger.

Every new development in the advancement of print has been greeted, he assures us, by people who saw it as the end of literature. He has resurrected a Medieval monk named Johannes Tritheimius, who urged his fellow monks not to stop copying manuscripts by hand just because printing had been invented (The written word on parchment will last a thousand years. The printed word is on paper. How long will it last? The most you can expect a book of paper to survive is two hundred years...).

And even so modest a modern forward step as the idea of equipping pencils with rubber erasers rang alarm bells among educators (the easier errors may be corrected, the more errors will be made).

Basbanes seems thoroughly at home rummaging around in the distant past to describe fascinating documentary finds in odd corners of Egypt, Pakistan and similar remote places. His tales of great modern-day book collectors are also interesting. And he devotes much of the latter part of his book to the computer-vs.-physical book controversy, reporting for instance that computer files are proving to be a terrible means of preserving data because the swift pace of technological advance in computerd
makes obsolete whatever machines could read them when they were created. And he has uncovered a delightful quote from someone named W. T. Williams back in the 1980s --- that is, in computer terms, back in prehistoric times: Man is the only computer yet designed which can be produced entirely by unskilled labor.

A SPLENDOR OF LETTERS is informative and entertaining. The only problem with it is trying to answer the question: What, exactly, is it about?

--- Reviewed by Robert Finn

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