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Introduction

This is a book about books and a book about ideas. It is a book about places to begin and some curious and weird things that are probably all true. It is a book about finding a good book to read. It is a book about branching out into new areas, about learning some things about literature, history, science, and mathematics. It is about enriching your life, about widening your horizons, and perhaps about adding some spice to your conversation. If any of the jumping-off spots cause you to accept some of my recommendations, then I will have succeeded.

Prior to the invention of movable type by Johannes Gutenberg (about 1439), books were very rare commodities because they had to be copied by hand, one at a time. Printing allowed many identical copies to be made, but printing runs rarely exceeded a few hundred copies. Still, knowledge has been disseminated at a more and more rapid rate up to the present day.

From 1751 to 1772, French, Prussian, and British scholars published the *Encyclopédie*. It was an attempt to summarize everything that was known at the time concerning science, arts, and crafts. Today the US Library of Congress contains over thirty-two million books in 470 languages, and there are billions of web pages. Now, if you read a book a week, that amounts to fifty-two books in a year and twenty-six hundred books over fifty years. A lifetime of reading by an avid reader could pretty easily fit in the average American house. Even the best of us can only scratch the surface of all that has been published. Where should a humble person, eager to learn, begin?

I would not have an interest in reading a whole volume of any general encyclopedia, but I once read the 102 chapters of *The Columbia History of the*



Figure 1.1 The author talking about Renaissance astronomy.

Source: Photo by Shana Hutchins.

 *World* (1987), which runs to  pages. Writer David Denby went back to Columbia University at the age of forty-eight and retook Western Civilization. Then he wrote a lovely book called *Great Books* (1997), which is meatier than Cliff Notes but not as demanding as many volumes of the Great Books of the Western World championed by the University of Chicago.

Carl Sagan said:

What an astonishing thing a book is. It is a flat object made from a tree with flexible parts, on which are imprinted lots of funny dark squiggles. But one glance at it and you're inside the mind of another person. [...] Writing is perhaps the greatest of human inventions, binding together people who never knew each other, citizens of distant epochs. Books break the shackles of time. Books are proof that humans are capable of working magic.¹

Now when it comes to authenticity in scholarship, there is a gray zone. Helen Schmerer, who taught reference librarianship at the University of Chicago, said, "There is no *truth*, just the facts according to some particular source." As an example, let us consult the famed eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia*

Britannica (1910–1911), considered by some to be the most authoritative encyclopedia ever published.

This particular example is about Girolamo Savonarola (1452–1498), a rabble-rousing Dominican friar who became *de facto* ruler of Florence. He was eventually burned at the stake for his sermons against corrupt (i.e., rich) citizens and Catholic clerics, particularly the Borgia family, whose patriarch was Rodrigo Borgia, also known as Pope Alexander VI. In the eleventh edition of the *EB* we find this passage:

Pleasure-loving Florence was completely changed. Abjuring pomps and vanities, its citizens observed the ascetic régime of the cloister; half the year was devoted to abstinence and few dared to eat meat on the fasts ordained by Savonarola. Hymns and lauds rang in the streets that had so recently echoed with Lorenzo [de Medici's] dissolute songs. Both sexes dressed with Puritan plainness; husbands and wives quitted their homes for convents; marriage became an awful and scarcely permitted rite; mothers suckled their own babes; and persons of all ranks—nobles, scholars and artists—renounced the world to assume the Dominican robe. *Still more wonderful* [my emphasis] was Savonarola's influence over children, and their response to his appeals is a proof of the magnetic power of his goodness and purity.

“Still more wonderful”? Since when is abandoning your family and the sacrament of marriage part of the Christian heritage? Clearly, the author of this article departed from objectivity. This author was Linda Villari, wife of Pasquale Villari, who published a two-volume biography of Savonarola in 1859 and 1861.

One time while leafing through a book on interesting mathematical things I came across  result given in our chapter “A Mathematical Sampler” as Equation 10.7. It turns out that the compiler of that book did not realize the author of a particular *Scientific American* article was pulling an April Fool's Day prank on the reader. We all know that you cannot believe everything you read, but it is always surprising when you realize you have been duped.

As pointed out by Samuel Arbesman in his book *The Half-Life of Facts*, “Whatever fact first appears in print, whether true or not, is very difficult to dislodge.”² Did you know that a Brontosaurus is really named something else (i.e., apatosaurus)?³

Never mind what you know about exponential growth rates. The writer who asserted nearly forty years ago that 75 percent of the people who had ever been born are alive today was *wrong*. A *lower* estimate of the number of

people who have lived on Earth since 50,000 BC is about 108 billion! Only about 6.5 percent of all people ever born are alive today.⁴

As you read the material presented here, ask yourself the following question: “How can this be true or accurate?” Some of it is pretty bizarre, but so far as I can tell, it is all true, or at least it is according to the sources referenced.

Endnotes

1. <http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php?date=2012/11/09> (accessed December 31, 2012).
2. Arbesman, Samuel, *The Half-Life of Facts: Why Everything We Know Has an Expiration Date*, New York: Current, 2012, p. 86.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
4. <http://www.prb.org/Articles/2002/HowManyPeopleHaveEverLivedonEarth.aspx> (accessed February 14, 2013).