

Book Reviews: One in brief and one at length

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(REESE, William S.) *The Private Collection of William S. Reese*. New York: Christie's, 2022. Two volumes. Small 4to. Hardbound. 198pp, (3pp); 216pp, (3pp). Frontispieces, extensive illustrations. **\$100.00.**

PETTEGREE, Andrew, and Der Weduwen, Arthur. *The Library: A Fragile History*. New York: Basic Books, 2021. Small 4to. Hardbound, dust jacket. 518pp. Illustrations. **\$35.00.**

I'm reluctant to review a book only a few months old that is already out of print, and an auction catalogue at that -- but review I must, even if interested readers have to scour the secondary market to obtain a copy. Normally an auction catalogue would not fall within the scope of this column, but *The Private Collection of William S. Reese* is destined to become a desirable classic of great reference value -- well worth making an exception. It seems that Christie's began a "sustainability project" to restrict the size of their print run so that they need not warehouse and slowly sell off old auction catalogues. Add to that the nationwide press coverage this auction received -- *CBS Sunday Morning* even included a segment on it -- and it should not come as a surprise that this impressive two-volume set sold out quickly.

Bill Reese was as tall in the flesh as he was larger-than-life in reputation, and this New Haven dealer's untimely death in

2018 at age 62 merely cements that standing. His nearly lifelong compadre William Goetzmann provides an eloquent, moving introductory essay (“Bill Reese Remembered”) that sets the stage for the jaw-dropping 400 pages of rare books, maps, prints and autograph material that follows. Starting as fellow Yale undergrads in 1975, Goetzmann chronicles some memorable adventures with Reese, such as “the thrill of seeing the famous Aztec codex -- now Yale’s Codex Reese -- as he excitedly unfurled it on the bed of his Silliman College dorm room.” That’s right, Reese began dealing in high levels at that tender age and continued as a major player at the highest levels for the next near half century. Anyone who knew Reese will confirm that “His omnivorous curiosity, his love of history, his personal stamina, his remarkable memory and his unfailing good judgment were part and parcel of his success.” Goetzmann aptly sums up what was special about his friend – what made him exceptional both as founder of William Reese Company and as collector:

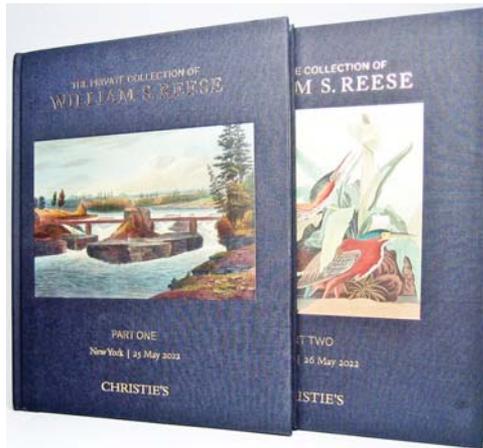
He was a master at finding and explaining a work’s larger cultural relevance. Knowing what a book meant in history and who it influenced excited him and ultimately his customers. He was happiest when he could share his insights with others or challenge them to discover for themselves the cultural value of a book or image. The series of Reese Company catalogues are his... decades-long narrative about how books and printed images created the world in which we all live.

As for the guts of this meaty pair, what to write? It is of course beautifully, exhaustively illustrated in glorious color and the description uniformly lengthy and in-depth. Interestingly, the introduction notes that, of the library of reference works available to Reese in-house, Wright Howes’ classic *U.S.iana* (1962 second edition naturally) remained his all-time favorite, the “only one [that] sat on his desk” and which he described as “still the bibliography

of first resort.” Howes’ controversial rarity gauge – a, aa, b, c, d, dd (“mildly scarce” to “superlatively rare”) – is sometimes scoffed at by some as being badly outdated at 60 years old, but Reese swore by it and Christie’s remarks “It remains uncannily accurate, especially when one considers that Howes worked in a pre-Internet age.” They actually provide a table listing which auction lots fall into Howes categories “b,” “c,” “d” and “dd” -- none of those pesky “a” or “aa” items here. Another table lists ten superb reference books authored or compiled and often published by Reese himself and notes which auction lots fall under the subject of each of these reference sources.

I won’t even attempt to describe even one of the 374 lots of Americana, exploration and natural history that fill this elegant volumes. So abundantly rich is it in drool-worthy seminal works (often primo association copies on top of it) that I wouldn’t know where to begin other than closing my eyes, opening to random pages and pointing.

Know this, though: the Thomas Streeter collection, a 7-volume auction catalogue published between 1966 and 1969, is considered by many the greatest Americana auction of the 20th century. Any of the items from that auction offered for



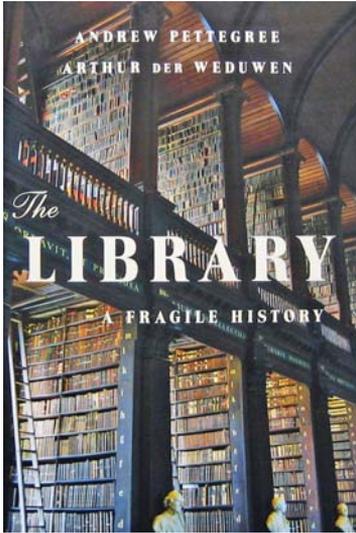
sale ever since have boasted “Streeter copy” as a selling point (and a handful of these appear in the Reese catalogue, by the way). I confidently predict that *The Private Collection of William S. Reese* (which took place on May 25-26) will stand alongside the Streeter catalogues and remembered as the 21st century’s equivalent to that

fabled auction. Any items from the Reese auction will always bear the phrase “Reese copy.”

I remember standing alone and agog before the ruins of the legendary library of Ephesus in what is today western Turkey. It was 1981 and this once-glorious edifice of stone and marble, reduced to a crumbling stand-alone façade, appeared it would topple if you looked at it wrong. Now I know that books and libraries appeal to those interested in autographs in the broadest sense (book-length manuscripts, documents, letters, etc.). Autograph collectors tend to be a bookish lot -- the fact that you're reading *Manuscripts* qualifies you. So the intimate, ying-and-yang relationship between holograph material and books -- you can't have one without the other -- makes Pettegree and der Weduwen's fine new study of the institution that has housed them for more than two millennia natural and logical grist for the mill.

This column has reviewed many titles concerning specialized rare book libraries over the past quarter century. But a history of the library as a whole? Other than academics and library science students, few ever give this any thought. Haven't they always existed? *The Library: A Fragile History* may not be everyone's spot o' tea, but any lay person willing to challenge themselves and commit to it will find it rewarding and entertaining.

My particular reviewing process doesn't involve notes taken on pad of paper or laptop, but rather Post-It notes jutting up from the pages that evoke the comment or provide the quotation. The number of Post-It notes is a direct correlation to how compelling and thought-provoking is the title under review. In more than 25 years of reviews and hundreds of titles, never have I had a book so chock full of Post-Its that the top page edges seem a fuzzy organic mess than with *The Library: A Fragile History*. With that lengthy preamble, let's delve into a smattering of some of the



many revelations amongst my mountain of notes....

Pettegree and der Weduwen only touch upon truly ancient history, for almost nothing is known of even the most fabled library of that world in the Egyptian port city of Alexandria. Precisely where it stood, how many scrolls it housed, when it was destroyed -- all is mere speculation. As for the ancient Romans, while many today think of libraries as sleepy, bucolic places (not

us bibliopoles, for whom they're lively tinderboxes), they knew libraries were a hotbed of touchy issues. "What," ask the authors, "was the public for a public library? Was the key motivation for building a library accessibility, or the demonstration of elite power? Should the library be a place of sociability or silence, a meeting place or a place of study? ...The Romans promoted important innovations in indexing and cataloguing; they sold books at auction, a practice which, when reinvented in the seventeenth century, completely transformed the process of building a library....The Romans faced all these issues and more..." Imperial and private libraries flourished, but with literacy rates quite low the unwashed public had almost no access to scrolls.

With the medieval era monasteries came to the fore and it was their scriptorium that preserved ancient texts, transferring them from crumbling papyrus to more durable codices – and in the 14th and 15th centuries came the high-minded humanist hunters of forgotten classics such as Boccaccio and Poggio. It's easy to share the indignity of these hunters as they ransacked ancient libraries ruined by insects, vermin, decay of every sort – yet Pettegree

and der Weduwen correct this picture somewhat, reminding us that “The reality of monastic book collections was that they were spread out throughout the complex, depending on the function of the books. The most regularly used items... were located in the sacristy or chapel... These would generally include the largest and most lavishly illuminated works owned by the community... We have to bear this in mind when humanist visitors expressed their disappointment at the books in the library... a reference collection of books no longer in regular use.”

Monastic book collections eventually were overtaken by schools created by these very monasteries, the nucleus for the earliest universities in Europe. These snowballed and became locations for what we would consider the earliest libraries. While the book room in a monastery was a dark, airless chamber where books were stored in wooden boxes and compartments, the book room in a cathedral school featured windows so that books could be read and studied by professors and pupils. The books rested on actual shelves (often each attached by a chain) and there were benches and book-filled lecterns.

Monasteries lost out to other institutions in the end as the great holders of book collections, but Pettegree and der Weduwen give the much-maligned monks a fair shake “for [their role in] the development of the library,” for they established it “as a sanctuary and storehouse of culture; the fixity of stock; the role of the Christian Church in the recovery of the antique; the library as a place of work and silent contemplation.”

For those who ponder the logistics and economics of making and distributing hand-lettered books in pre-Gutenberg Europe (see my review of Ross King’s *The Bookseller of Florence* in the Fall 2021 issue), Pettegree and der Weduwen offer an enlightening portrait of medieval students and their required readings. Often they simply rented the text section by section and make their own copies. The better-off pupils could of course purchase them from the bookseller, as did the nobility. “Noble patronage and courtly life

set the standard for the production of books beyond the academic and monastic world,” we learn, and subject matters therefore expanded beyond Christian theology and ancient classics to include “secular histories, romances and poems. . . .” Clearly a hand-lettered book production system is churning them out, but libraries as we know them remain far from the horizon. “We have entered a critical period in the history of the book,” the authors tell us, “when books became much more common, and bookmaking much more efficient. This coincided with a gradual rise in lay literacy rates, but most new book owners were not yet book collectors.”

As the Renaissance slowly unfolded, it’s intriguing how different regions brought varying attitudes toward their books. The authors bring out how northern Europe favored “vast expenditure lavished on manuscripts” for royalty and nobility. Italy’s many city-states with humanist scholars (whose goal was “to reconstruct a body of the writings of antiquity as comprehensible as possible”) fostered a competitive spirit “that soon gained the attention of the bankers, merchants and mercenary generals. . . .” A household room called a *studio* with a handful of expensively-acquired volumes began to appear among the affluent and “The emergence of private studies marked an important step in the developments of library space.”

As expected with any book about books that takes the long historical view, the creation of the Gutenberg Bible in 1455 in Mainz, Germany, and the advent of moveable type looms large as a world-shaking event. Pettegree and der Weduwen describe this tsunami mildly: “it had a transformative impact on the future of the library, one that would shape for ever how libraries were built, and who was able to collect books.” The authors’ statistics on that giddy, turbulent first half century (1455-1500) of printed book production, even those well-versed in the incunabula (“from the cradle”) period, are stunning:

The sheer quantity of new books in circulation drove down prices by the 1490s. By 1500, 9 million copies of printed books had been turned off the press, and more were printed each year. . . Prices had also been driven down because paper rather than parchment had now become the preferred medium of book production. This transformation was one borne of necessity, as the supply of parchment could never feed the insatiable demand of the presses. The thirty copies of the Gutenberg Bible printed on parchment required the skins of at least 5,000 calves.

What this transitional period did for libraries shouldn't surprise. "As more people amassed collections of books, the great libraries of the manuscript age lost their lustre," and Pettegree and der Weduwen's fine elaboration of many 15th and 16th century courtly collections shows that when manuscript volumes lost their snob appeal the notion of public libraries inched just a bit closer.

Martin Luther and the Reformation brought with it widespread, massive book destruction in northern Protestant as infuriated peasants burned and pillaged landlord and monastic collections. Vast quantities of manuscript and early printed books vanished. Sometimes confiscated collections remained intact and found new homes at different institutions. Ironically, our passion for autograph material first saw light of day during this period of wholesale demotion and redistribution of manuscript and book collections. "Over time, the fine pickings from the monasteries attuned noblemen to the delights of manuscript collecting. We can identify traces of the commercial exchange of manuscripts among collectors that would ultimately blossom into a significant branch of connoisseurship." The mid-16th century was especially a book holocaust in Great Britain. First Henry VIII's establishment of the Church of England causes decimation of early Catholic books and manuscripts, then under his Catholic half-sister Queen Mary came a "reversal of fortunes [that] was a disaster for institutional

book collections in England.... Given that the mere ownership of Protestant books was now unlawful, none of the colleges listed any....” Most major British college libraries now found themselves “left almost devoid of books.” Little surprise that with warring Protestants and Catholics vying to destroy each other’s heritage “the future of the library, as an institutional and social construct, looked decidedly bleak at this point in history.” Pettegree and der Weduwen paint a devastating portrait of book atrocities that decimated Europe’s libraries for many decades.

But all is not despair and ruination, for a new force stepped up to the plate. “It would be some time before institutional libraries found their role in this new world,” explain the authors, “But... Europe’s rising class of professionals eagerly embraced the opportunities of book ownership. It was here, in the personal collections of lawyers, civil servants, doctors, professors and ministers of the church, that the new products of Europe’s buoyant book market found the warmest welcome.” The reader to the rescue:

This recalibration of the library, through the creation of thousands of personal collections, brought new challenges. Crowded together in the towns where they plied their trade, the new book owners had no dusty castle or monastic scriptorium in which to keep their books. Storage and display in family homes required new and urgent architectural solutions. Nevertheless, between 1550 and 1750 a library became ubiquitous in the home of the urban professional. This was the library’s new sanctuary, and it would revolutionize the book world.

The role of the Dutch at this 17th century juncture becomes critical, as do, surprisingly, book auctions, especially in the Netherlands. Their printed catalogues become a major factor in the growth of private libraries. Amazingly, “There were at least 4,000 book auctions in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, and catalogues survive for at least half of these. They are a goldmine of

information on the ownership and sale of at least 2 million books.” Pettegree and der Wewuden’s ability to show these complex developments in an engaging, readable style that never overwhelms showcases a thorough knowledge of the machinations of the book trade and book production. No Pantheon of Library Greats would be complete without sunbeams streaming down and angelic chants filling the air in praise of Britain’s Sir Thomas Bodley, who donated his large collection to the University of Oxford. Pettegree and der Wewuden call him “without doubt a visionary.” Until Bodley no one appreciated

That libraries could not survive if one did not plan for their future, so that the initial enthusiasm did not die with its founder. Bodley, it seemed, had learned the lessons from the failures of earlier collectors: he ensured that his library would be provided with a substantial endowment, of land and property rents, to acquire books. This was key if the library was to remain supplied with the latest scholarly publications; he was rightly convinced that it was the absence of this provision that had caused so many ambitious library projects to atrophy.

He championed the then-radical notion that books should be loaned out (Oxford resisted this) and that scholars not from Oxford be granted library access. *Manuscripts’* readers will be pleased to learn that “Bodley rightly considered manuscripts, rather than printed books, would be the greatest attraction of the library. Manuscripts were essential for the work of theologians and humanist scholars, but were naturally much rarer. Few libraries had large collections, and access was tightly controlled, but the status of the Bodleian ensured that it received significant bequests of manuscript collections.... Large donations were supplemented by the Bodleian’s generous acquisitions budget. Within half a century it had an unrivalled collection of Oriental, Anglo-Saxon and northern European manuscripts.”

You can also thank Bodley for that librarian/tyrant who threatened expulsion for the faintest whispered remark (memories of undergraduate years at Loyola) – the rule of silence that abolished the rowdy conviviality of Renaissance book rooms. Bodley had other quirks, such as insisting the library not be heated, refusing undergraduates access to the stacks and above all Heaven forbid that any books in *English* (such as anything by that upstart Shakespeare) sully his ultra-serious shelves full of largely Latin texts. They also deftly work in the English parish libraries that blanked Britain later in the 16th and 17th centuries. The best example is Ipswich, where the charismatic local preacher “hit on the clever idea of encouraging monetary donations rather than gifts of books” and got the local council to find and pay for space. “Significantly,” they note, “the books were unchained, stored on shelves along the walls.” These local parish libraries proliferated. “The local vicar was often appointed as librarian,” and unsurprisingly “They were also generally theological in content, and very Latinate.” Sometimes these libraries weren’t appropriate for tiny rural villages and they shriveled and vanished through disuse.

The “Mission Fields” chapter was particularly eye-opening to this Eurocentric reviewer. Pettegree and der Wewuden survey the inroads made by Spanish Dominican and Franciscan orders in establishing libraries in Mexico and South America followed by the Jesuits in Brazil. The several hundred book collection inventories among the Pilgrims in North America (William Brewster’s at 350 volumes the largest) are touched upon, as is “the largest library in North America” in the 17th century, Harvard College, and its early struggled.

Enter the French, whose wealthy and powerful 17th century statesmen – first Cardinal Richelieu, then Cardinal

Mazarin – assembled vast libraries as symbols of power and prestige, employing pioneering professional librarians such as Gabriel Naudé to enlarge and organize their holdings. Naudé hunted books throughout Europe with a vengeance and after one

trip:

arrived back in Paris with 14,000 books, for which the cardinal was required to stump up only 12,000 livres...After two years of frantic travel, through France, Switzerland, Germany, England and the Netherlands, Naudé had furnished the cardinal with a library of breathtaking size – estimated at 40,000 printed books and 850 volumes of manuscripts. The total cost amounted to 65,000 livres....

Slowly, the concept of public libraries seemed to be coming into focus. “”Long after his death,” they write, “Cardinal Mazarin’s ambitious library programme would inspire many noblemen, diplomats, cardinals and bishops to build their own grand collections, and open them to the public... Emulation was made possible because great collectors were eager to show off their libraries to visitors; on diplomatic missions and on the grand tour, famous libraries became an essential destination for cultured envoys, bishops and young nobleman, keen to make their impression upon the world...”

Eventually manuscripts came full circle: Treasures up through and well into the 16th century, frowned upon once printed books took prominence, sought after again as antiquities in the 18th century.” That anyone would begin to pay large sums for old books just because of their antiquity was a new development,” observe the authors, “and a disruptive one.” Shenanigans ensued and the authors highlight a few of the many light-fingered dealings from figures such as Dutch collector Suffridas Sixtinus, “widely believed to have acquired his most precious manuscripts through burglary.” Clearly “The growing market for manuscripts, dominated by commercially minded scholars and librarians, paved the way for the formation of a volatile antiquarian market” (which, I might add, continues to this day). Manuscripts were absconded on a massive scale and “demonstrated what dangerous forces were unleashed

when books were no longer valued according to the set system of principles that had traditionally governed the book trade.” As if this alarming situation weren’t enough, along came the Enlightenment, with its goal of “liberat[ing] knowledge from the grip of the past. The new Enlightenment library was to consist of useful books, not those that reaffirmed traditional academic or ecclesiastical hierarchies” – a recipe for wholesale wreckage. How ironic that the Enlightenment “would turn out to be the most destructive purge of libraries until the Second World War” as Jesuit and other monastic orders were dissolved, their collections “plundered, carted off, sold or left to rot in derelict buildings.”

After such continent-wide dismantling it’s refreshing indeed when Pettegree and der Weduwen turn to the New World. The American colonies, with their fresh unorthodox approach to established practices, proved crucial to introducing real change in library concepts. The authors open, appropriately enough, with the founding in 1727 by Benjamin Franklin and friends of the Library Company of Philadelphia, which astonishingly and against all odds “flourishes to this day.” Latin? Out the window. It took this “precociously democratic” upstart far removed from the set-in-its-ways Old World to cut those ties and fill its shelves with books largely in English.

The explosion in the U.S. and Great Britain of both upper crust subscription libraries and their poor cousin, the bookshop-owned circulating libraries, in the 18th century and into the 19th is as fascinating as it was troublesome as this pair jockeyed for position. The latter gained much ground despite concerns that the novels and popular entertainments that circulating libraries carried corrupted women and youth and led to societal decay in general. At the same time there arose in England one of the most extraordinary episodes this reviewer takes away from this book: I never realized the extent of the power wielded by London bookseller and circulating library magnate Charles Edward Mudie, whose “Mudie’s Select Library” held an increasing stranglehold over British publishing

from 1844 to 1894. It dominated the U.K. market as strongly as does Amazon today in the U.S. His cutthroat buying tactics with publishers and overall usurious business practices “secured himself a national monopoly on the publication of new fiction. What he chose not to take would not be published.” How astonishing that one bookselling robber baron (who was also priggishly “deeply religious... [one of the] living embodiments of the civic virtues of Victorian commerce”) He was truly England’s Jeff Bezos – I shudder at the thought of that one dictating the reading of all of us. Pettegree and der Weduwen even posit that Mudie’s “insistence on the three-decker format was undoubtedly responsible for the verbosity of many nineteenth-century novels, as authors went to extraordinary efforts to pad their texts to the required length.” Bit of a stretch, I maintain, and “undoubtedly” rather simplistic. It’s an intriguing theory, but I’m far from convinced.

This reviewer has already prattled on far too long and quoted far too much, so let’s skip the spoiler alert and leave the modern era (mid-19th century onwards), when the “public library” as we think of it today came into being, for those interested enough to pursue this riveting read.

What I most like about *The Library: A Fragile History* is that it takes the short-sightedness of those who rashly view the internet as the death knell of the printed book and of libraries and substitutes the long historical view:

What we will frequently see in this book is not so much the apparently wanton destruction of beautiful artefacts so lamented by previous studies of library history, but neglect and redundancy, as books and collections that represented the values and interests of one generation fail to speak to the one that follows. The fate of many collections was to degrade in abandoned attics and ruined buildings, even if only as the prelude to renewal and rebirth in the most unexpected places.

Heady, provocative stuff – let's go on:

But the public library – in the sense of a funded collection available free to anyone who wants to use it – has only existed since the mid nineteenth century, a mere fraction of the history of the library as a whole. If there is one lesson from the centuries-long story of the library, it is that libraries only last as long as people find hem useful.

One more for the road:

This history of libraries does not offer a story of easy progress through the centuries, nor a prolonged lament for libraries lost: a repeating cycle of creation and dispersal, decay and reconstruction, turns out to be the historical norm. Even if libraries are cherished, the contents of these collections require constant curation, and often painful decisions about what has continuing value and what must be disposed of. Very often libraries flourished in the hands of their first owner, and then wasted away: damp, dust, moths and bookworm do far more damage over the years than the targeted destruction of libraries. But while growth and decline are parts of the cycle, so too is recovery. . . This is a story, then, of many unexpected twists and turns. What makes a library is, to a great extent, something each generation must decide anew.

Okay, a second one for the road:

The history of the library. . . is a story with many. . . false dawns and a laborious struggle to foster a reading public. Now we talk of its very survival, even though the death of the library has been predicted almost as often as the death of the book. Yet when, in the spring of 2020, a global pandemic forced all libraries to close their doors, the sense of loss was palpable. . . In

the endless cycle from destruction to greatness, libraries have always recovered: it is in our nature to leave our own stamp on society. It is by no means clear, however, that what we preserve for the future will be similarly valued by our descendants.

If such powerful, clear-headed thinking piques your attention, this is but a tiny sample from the prologue. Several hundred dense, meaty pages of detailed historical elaboration follow. If this were an opera, comparison to a marathon Wagnerian cycle would follow, if a movie a sprawling multi-generational epic with all-star cast.

The Library: A Fragile History truly brings home that throughout the last millennia libraries have slowly developed into what we have now known for a mere century and a half *despite* countless setbacks and atrocities often motivated by religion and politics. Like the washed up but determined boxer Rocky Balboa, when knocked down libraries always seem to stagger back to their feet and fight on, however bruised and battered.

One bone of contention would be *The Library's* endnotes – they are far too interesting and worthwhile to relegate to the back of the book! Plus they necessitate this reviewer flipping back and forth from current page to corresponding endnotes page literally hundreds of times. Footnotes at bottom of every text page hugely simplifies the reader's enjoyment *and* assures that all the useful data they contain will get read far more often. The 42-page bibliography at the close is likewise a gem well worth close scrutiny.

The Library: A Fragile History is a first-rate approach to a challenging, far-ranging topic, deeply erudite yet written with a light touch. It's an absorbing read and will make you think more appreciatively of your local library – realize that what many never give a second thought to has a long, complex, contentious history. Pettegree and der Weduwen's ultimate message is one of cautious optimism. There's nothing like *context* to foster interest in that which we take for granted, and *The Library: A Fragile History* accomplishes this magnificently.