Elmer Gantry

By Daniel Silliman
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In our "Books Change" series, historians of religion consider books that have changed us or have themselves been changed.

In my copy of *Elmer Gantry*, one sentence is underlined six times: “He had, in fact, got everything from church and Sunday School, except, perhaps, any longing whatever for decency and kindness and reason.”

That sums up Sinclair Lewis’ 1927 satire of scandalous fundamentalist ministers pretty well. None of the underlinings are mine, though. I have a Kindle version of *Elmer Gantry*, so this is a “popular highlight,” a sentence noted by other readers, on other e-devices.

The e-book is the latest in a line of changes in the production of the book. Its newness helps call attention to how books are consumed. Books are often thought of as just ideas. When ideas are consumed, though, they have physical form as a book. If you want to think about when and where and how books are used, it’s useful to track how books and book markets change. *Elmer Gantry* has lived through a number of important changes.

Lewis was of the first generation of professional American authors. In the early 1900s, novel production wasn’t for gentlemen with the leisure for letters anymore. It was a business. For Lewis, it was a good business. “That writer is a failure,” he said, “who cannot have his butler and motor and his villa at Palm Beach, where he is permitted to mingle almost in equality with the Barons of banking.” But he also didn’t like this: he felt his work was diminished by the market. It was so crass. “Not for gold would I recommend it as a career,” Lewis wrote.

Even as he longed for the days of gentlemen writers, however, Lewis was an active part of the business of selling books. *Elmer Gantry* was marketed masterfully. Harcourt, Brace and Company spent $5,000 advertising that everyone was talking about the book. The first printing of 140,000 was the largest to date in America, a fact they trumpeted, adding to the sense that if you didn’t buy it, you were the only

one.

When the satire made people angry, that was publicity. In Ohio, a man burned his wife's copy. The news was turned into an ad. Billy Sunday called Lewis "Satan's cohort." That was advertised too. The book was banned in Boston and the publishers couldn't believe their luck. "Reviews violent either way," an exultant Alfred Harcourt cabled Lewis. "Clergy hot. Reorders already."

Lewis was thinking of ways to sell more copies. He recommended advertizing directly to church people. He suggested a "Pulpit Edition," with negative press clippings as the preface. When Methodist leaders met in Kansas City, he planned a special campaign just for the ministers: 49 billboards throughout the city.

Elmer Gantry sold 240,000 copies amid the controversy. For the people who bought those books, consuming *Elmer Gantry* meant being part of a big public debate.

The context was different for those who bought it in 1941. Lewis' book was one of the first mass-market paperbacks in America. Publishers realized they could reach beyond urban markets, selling large quantitates of cheap books in middle America. People who never set foot in urban bookshops could buy a bit of upward mobility and the transgressive thrill of the big city if publishers would make it available. Sinclair Lewis, with his satire of American backwardness inviting readers to scoff at their fellow citizens, was published in paperback by Avon Books. An estimated 100,000 copies sold. Consuming this version of the book meant distinguishing yourself from your neighbors for 25 cents.

The most recent version of the book is consumed in a different way. The e-book is yet another context for *Elmer Gantry*. Studies suggest that people load their new e-readers with cheap classics, consuming them in the commercial sense, but not necessarily reading them. *Elmer Gantry* is often likely an aspirational purchase for some who recognize Lewis' name, and think they'll get to it someday. Maybe they even read to the second chapter, like me, and note that six people have underlined one sentence that sums things up.

Rather than classics, what's more commonly consumed in the privacy of e-reading are books seen as scandalous. They are scandalous, curiously, for the same reasons *Elmer Gantry* was: sex and religion. Erotica e-books sell quite well, as do evangelical romances. *Elmer Gantry* is a good example of how books and book markets change. It's also an example of how they don't.

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