



BN UNIYAL

A senior journalist with a passion for books and travel, BN Uniyal opens up a new world for us to explore

Visiting fine books

Bologna belies those who predict the demise of the book

At Bologna's city centre, Piazza de Nettuno, we are queuing up early one September morning for the coach that is to take us to Ravenna for a day trip. Just then someone from behind sends a relay mail up the queue for me. It is an A4 size sheet of paper folded in the middle and stapled at the top. I unfold the sheet. A review of Geoffrey Nunberg's *The Future of the Book* downloaded from the net opens out. "The death of the book has been duly announced," says the review, "and with it the end of brick-and-mortar libraries..." I turn back to see if I can spot the bookseller who sent up the review. There is a smiling face deep down the line with a pair of eyes peering at me rather mischievously. The irony of the situation is not lost on me. Here is a California University futurist announcing the death of the book just when this large group of antiquarian booksellers is setting out on a tour of antiquarian libraries in heartland Renaissance.

This is the region of Emilia-Romagna in the north of Italy that covers the provinces of Parma, Modena, Ravenna, Cesena and Ferrara with its capital in Bologna. This is the cultural heartland of the country, the wellspring of Renaissance between the 14th and 17th century. It was through the highways of this region that the silk and spices of the east were carried throughout Europe, eastwards to Portugal and Spain, north to France, Germany and England and even further up to Norway and Sweden, and in the West to Vienna. Traders from all over Europe thronged the markets of border towns of France and Italian city states on monthly and annual fair days to change money and buy merchandise. No wonder that Bologna still continues to be the trade fair town of not only Italy but of all Europe too.

I am here for a fair too: the antiquarian book fair organised during the last week of September this year on the occasion of the 39th Congress of the International League of Antiquarian Booksellers (ILAB). This is a highly esteemed apex global organisation of antiquarian booksellers of the world. ILAB does not enroll booksellers directly as members but admits only their national associations as affiliates. It is a global body but the fact is that all but five of its 27 member associations are from Europe and North America.

Two other countries—Australia and New Zealand—also are from the same cultural cluster. Only three countries—China, Japan and South Korea—are from outside that circle. India is not a member. India hardly has any antiquarian book dealer or book collector. I cannot boast to be the only one around but I am certainly the only Indian at the biennial ILAB congress convened to elect its new president for two years.

I am, however, an outsider at the congress, the first from India to have been allowed at its deliberations and the different events, banquets and tours organised for the occasion. That is thanks to Adrian Harrington of London, UK, the outgoing ILAB president, and Umberto Pregliasco, the president of the host association of Italy. They agreed to make an exception in my case as a book collector. There is one other non-bookseller at the Congress like me, Bruce Littman, a collector of fine first editions from Switzerland. During the course of the next six days we will be visiting some of the most beautiful mediaeval libraries of the world, renowned not only for their large number of exquisite books and bindings that are each a piece of most coveted jewellery but also for their grand architecture, paintings and frescos. The university and commune library of Bologna itself is a place book lovers come to visit from far off places, for the university here from 11th century is the oldest in Europe, the first to be called a university, actually. Then there is the Biblioteca Classense in Ravenna, the Biblio Malatestiana in Cesena, Biblio Estense in Modena, and Biblioteca Gastronomica at Academia Barilla in Parma.

There is also the Bibliofilm festival specially organised for the ILAB Congress where over two dozen films in different languages and from different parts of the world are shown. Every one of the films at the festival has a book, a bookseller, a book lover or a library at the centre of its story. What an idea! Who could have known that so many successful feature films have been made around books and libraries. No wonder package library tours are attracting book lovers, academicians and scholars in ever larger numbers to this part of Italy in recent years.

On the penultimate day, Umberto Eco, perhaps the most widely known and acclaimed contemporary Italian author, addresses a gala gathering of the world's foremost booksellers and booklovers. The author of *The Name of the Rose* speaks with an authoritative voice, for he is himself is an antiquarian book collector. Later, at a dinner at a four-storeyed bookshop-cum-restaurant someone reads a paper saying that though the contemporary book is truly destined to die, the same is not true of antiquarian books for which demand will keep on growing with years. What a relief for booksellers and collectors! ■

