Fact and Fiction: Pain and Pleasure
By Paul L. Maier

[On September 24, 1997, a special meeting of the Friends of the University Libraries featured a presentation by Professor Paul Maier of the WMU History Department. The subtitle of his remarks is “A Literary Odyssey, and Gatherings is pleased to include the following epitome.”]

My writing both non-fiction and fiction has carried with it a certain hazard. What if the reader should suspect fiction in my historical research, or interpret my novels as history? While stoutly affirming that, quite obviously, there is no fiction in my historical works, I do plead guilty to trying to bring enough realism into my novels that readers will assume they deal with actual events, past or present.

In my years at Western Michigan University, where I have spent all my professional life thus far, I seem to have tried most literary genres (with the exception of poetry, but for doggerel on computer greeting cards!). My inaugural effort was a theological dissertation that never made any best-seller lists. Published in Holland about the time that I joined the WMU faculty in 1959, it sold all of 300 copies in 38 years—one suspects that half of them were purchased by relatives!

Then came my initial foray into the world of biography. The obvious choice was my well-known father, whose ministry and widely-heard Lutheran Hour radio series brought instant name recognition across the faithful world. Even as a son, it was essential to be objective—even critical where necessary—and the result, A Man Spoke, a World Listened (McGraw-Hill, 1963) sold rather well despite the fact that radio personality and Old Testament professor Walter A. Maier had died thirteen years earlier.

Through the years, as a historian, I had also seen my research published in various scholarly journals, and it was in this connection that I developed a growing resentment against so-called “historical novels.” As a younger reader, they delighted me, until I discovered—to my horror—that nearly all of them were short on fact and long on imagination. Most authors offered a quick salute to history, but then rode off into the wild vagaries of their own myths, fantasies, and fables that offered torque instead of truth about the past. Fictional characters intersected with authentic personalities, while the latter were given false portraits amid hopelessly garbled settings.

In 1968, I launched a one-man crusade to change all that (!) by devising a new literary genre that I called “the documentary novel.” Three essential rules defined this ambitious format. First, all persons named in the book were known historical characters with their authentic names. No proper name was invented; if it were not known, it was not given. Second, no detail of any kind was to contradict historical fact. Third, only where all evidence was lacking was fictional “mortal,” based on probabilities, be used to hold the bricks of fact together. Moreover, these "highly likely creations" would be identified for the reader at the close of the book. In this way, the reader could assume that all major and minor events in the novel truly took place, while the rest could well have happened.

I was intrigued by the Roman involvement in the trial of Jesus of Nazareth, so I introduced the documentary novel vehicle with Pontius Pilate (Doubleday, 1968), which unveiled the true story of the politics behind Jesus’ crucifixion. The information that had previously appeared in factual fabric through articles in scholarly journals was now recreated in the framework of a novel. Pilate worked: it sold across the world and has remained in print over the past three decades through numerous editions and translations.

During the ’70s came requests from press syndicates that I look at several key episodes in the development of Christianity from a historian’s viewpoint. The articles I wrote were widely published in newspapers across the country. When I gave them further detail, they became a book series from Harper & Row: First Christmas (1971), First Easter (1973), and First Christians (1976). This trilogy, revised and expanded, was ultimately published in one volume, In the Fullness of Time (Harper Collins, 1991).

Although the documentary novel had proved to be a demanding genre, I tried it again for The Flames of Rome (Doubleday, 1981), which dealt with how Christianity reached Rome, and why Nero persecuted the church so horribly after the great fire of A.D. 64. Although both Pilate and Flames were critical successes and sold very well indeed, the fact that this genre has not become widely accepted may be indicated by the fact that in the history of English literature, only two novels have ever appeared in this restrictive genre—both named above.

Editing and translating consumed a larger share of my time than was anticipated. One project, an anthology of my father’s writings, was inevitable. The Best of Walter A. Maier was published in 1980 on the thirtieth anniversary of his death. Since I was also making frequent references in various addresses to one of my prime sources, Flavius Josephus, new interest was developing in this first-century Jewish historian. But, I was at an impasse: Josephus wrote his valuable information in so verbose and prolix a fashion that he must have had a plaque over his desk in Rome that read, "Why use one word, when twenty will do?" His works, the equivalent of twelve volumes, were also locked into one major translation in archaic English by Isaac Newton’s successor at Cambridge, William Whiston. Accordingly, I translated from the Greek Josephus’ two most important writings: Jewish Antiquities and The Jewish War. These cover a span of time from the Creation to the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. After condensing some sections into readability, the result was Josephus—The Essential Works (Kregel, 1995). My next book, which will appear in 1998, will also be a translation and commentary on the “father of Christian history” who picked up where Josephus left off: Eusebius—The Church History.

Meanwhile, I even tried local history. Dr. C. Allen Alexander, Kalamazoo’s first black surgeon, who was given an honorary doctorate by WMU in 1994, pursued an ambitious oral history project prior to his death in 1995. For this, he had interviewed a wide cross-section of people in this area, as well as colleagues in the medical profession. The result was a

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three years ago, in my first communication to the Friends of the Libraries, and all the others who read Gatherings, I said, “There has never been a great university without a great library.” Never has that declaration been truer than it is today. The library’s capacity to provide more and more resources—print, electronic, media—to support the goals of the academic community has grown in ways that astound and confound even those who work with them on a daily basis. But, one important factor has wrought havoc with every library’s ability to serve its public: the budgets of our nation’s libraries cannot keep up with the cost of these myriad sources. Inflation and the sheer number of potential acquisitions mandate selectivity—or the library is bankrupt.

The results of this dilemma are clear, and the trend is disturbing—especially in academic research libraries. More and more of our acquisitions budgets go to journals. The reasons are obvious. First, librarians are loath to stop a subscription for a journal that was carefully selected and justified years earlier. Also, faculty demand periodicals, both for their own research and student assignments, rather than monographs or books that, by their very nature, are considered dated. Furthermore, in this age of computers, electronic resources have come to dominate many areas of journal publication, and they, despite the advantages of accessibility, are often more expensive than the print editions. A pecking order has emerged with electronic resources as the top priority followed by print journals and, finally, books. What this really means is that print material budgets are regularly reduced in order to fund electronic databases. The result is a disturbing homogenization of book collections in which the acquisition of specialized monographs is left to “others,” presumably the major research libraries. Or, equally unfortunate, publishers are declining to publish those monographs that are perceived to be of so little marketability that they do not give a “payback” for their production.

Academic libraries and publishers alike must commit to both print and electronic formats because we really do not know the future. We predict that there will be continuing demand by students and faculty, and that many journals may never be available electronically or with backruns. However, even if we were able to predict development/production/publication and new resource needs, the ability and inclination of our strongest institutions to provide for that future is uncertain. As evidence, one needs only to check on the number of colleges and universities who have amortization funds to deal with computer hardware and facility obsolescence—the number is shockingly low.

And so the paradox of collection building emerges. On the one hand, a deliciously rich array of choices; on the other hand, an inability to discern precisely what the University Libraries should hold or have accessible as the new millennium dawns. And, somewhere in between, impacting all planning, is the reality of the budget. There is, however, no substitute for funds. In an environment of limited resources, libraries will always compete with other areas of the academic community. We must also be accountable to our users and tax payers, and provide the right information needed by users at the right place, at the right price. One solution is to work collectively with other libraries to maximize our considerable purchasing power in the marketplace while also ensuring that our collections are sufficiently diverse to support this University’s distinctive programs. Currently, the ACCESSMichigan project offers hope that libraries of all types can cooperate for our mutual benefit.

But I would be remiss if I did not point out that cooperative collection development is only a partial solution. There is also no substitute for local funding. Under the leadership of President Diether Haenicke, the University Libraries has received extraordinary support.

• WMU’s percentage of State appropriated funds which are earmarked for libraries ranks #1 in the State. This priority funding has occurred every year since 1990.

• Funding specifically allocated for library collections has averaged 11.4% since 1990. This average is also the highest in the State. In addition, the library has received $700,000 one-time funds for collections.

Finally, in addition to the excellent support provided by this University’s administration, the University Libraries takes pride in making no distinction between undergraduate and graduate students, on campus or off, with regard to access to its collections—whether they are costly, specialized databases or rare books and manuscripts. The underlying commitment is to the broad community of scholars associated with the University—and to the community at large.

Western Michigan University has built and is building a great library for a great university. As we resolve the complex problems of a unique age of information access, our commitment cannot, will not waiver. Within our unbounded walls lies the life and mind of our society and civilization.

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trilogy that I edited with two colleagues in the Department of History. The three volumes are entitled: C. Allen Alexander—An Autobiography (WMU, 1995); Social Changes in Western Michigan, 1930 to 1990 (WMU, 1997); and Progress in the Practice of Medicine, 1930 to 1990 (WMU, 1996).

Finally, or at least at this moment in history, I tried my hand at total fiction with a contemporary novel, A Skeleton in God’s Closet (Thomas Nelson, 1994), which surprised me by becoming a No. 1 national best-seller in religious fiction soon after publication. All told, my books have now appeared in a dozen languages and several million copies, which has prompted numerous media appearances.

Perhaps, one day I’ll settle down and concentrate on a single genre. Meanwhile, this traveller has journeyed through fact and fiction with both pain and pleasure, and only one certainty. Nothing would have been accomplished without the special world of Western Michigan University, its research ambience, if you will. In particular, Waldo Library has played a very significant role, and I salute the strong “Friends” of this most important core at our University.