

James Branch Cabell [Digest urth.v024.n019]

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 23 Mar 1999

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John Bishop — 23 Mar 1999, 09:42

Oddly enough, I recently re-read Jurgen.

I agree with Roy Lackey, and spell out one implication: fiction that makes references to other literature (or to people or events) can be clear to some readers (and thus popular) when it is first published, but often becomes completely obscure to later readers -- who then respond by not reading it.

The recent Shakespear and Austen revivals show the difficulties involved -- the world we live in is so different and the backgrounds of the readers so changed that you need footnotes or a lengthy introduction to catch the fine points. (They also show that a good story or good ideas can survive such handicaps.)

Another factor to consider is the change in the border of a taboo. For example, Jurgen is full of what at the time were slightly rude but clever references to sex. A woman will remark "I see you brought your sword", and later will complement him on his swordmanship, and so on. Today these remarks seem coy and mannered rather than funny, as the line between the publishable and the forbidden has moved a long way.

-John Bishop