

Sacramento Book Review



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Hitler's Private Library

By Timothy Ryback

Knopf, \$25.95, 278 pages

Timothy Ryback's *Hitler's Private Library* is a new, landmark study in the evolution of The Third Reich. Focusing on the little-known, personal side of Hitler, rather than the more commonly known version, Ryback explores Hitler before he became Hitler, or at least the Hitler we're familiar with. The book traces the literary and intellectual development of the Fuhrer, and details the various influences that shaped him, particularly during the 1920's, when he had failed as a painter and before he ascended to the highest position in Germany.

Among the many surprises: Hitler loved Shakespeare's plays and Cervante's *Don Quixote*. In fact, Hitler ranked Shakespeare higher than Goethe—a real surprise, since Goethe represented the epitome of high German culture. Of great interest is the evolution

of the hate-mongering, radically Anti-Semitic attitude that is synonymous with Hitler's name. This attitude happened gradually, over the course of many years, and was fostered by certain key people in his life. In fact, Hitler was influenced greatly by others (though many were obscure), and we learn that Hitler didn't suddenly become the Antichrist, a sort of preformed Spawn of

Satan, with no signs of what he was to later become.

This great Book Burner was a voracious reader, a great assimilator of information; in fact, he greatly valued books. His personal book collection shows volumes of Shakespeare's plays with his initials "A.H." embossed in gold along the spine. We learn that, while he was an insatiable reader, he didn't read with great depth and lacked a certain critical faculty; here, the absence of a formal education seems a liability. He seemed more interested in using books purely as a tool to bolster his views of the world.

All this is fine and well, yet it still doesn't answer the central question: How exactly does a man go from loving Shakespeare and Cervantes to becoming, well, Adolph Hitler, the most monstrous figure of the twentieth century? This book confirms the idea that a little learning can be a dangerous thing, especially in the wrong hands. After all, a man can read and read and be a monster.

Reviewed by Aaron Stypes

