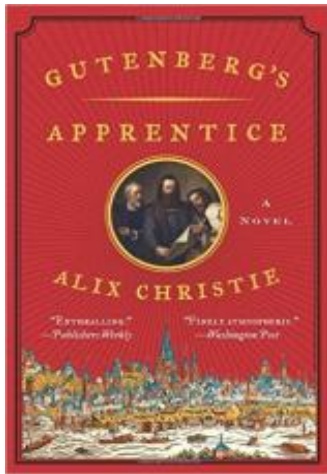


Gutenberg's Apprentice

by Alix Christie



About the Book

An enthralling literary debut that evokes one of the most momentous events in history, the birth of printing in medieval Germany --- a story of invention, intrigue and betrayal, rich in atmosphere and historical detail, told through the lives of the three men who made it possible.

Youthful, ambitious Peter Schoeffer is on the verge of professional success as a scribe in Paris when his foster father, wealthy merchant and bookseller Johann Fust, summons him home to corrupt, feud-plagued Mainz to meet "a most amazing man."

Johann Gutenberg, a driven and caustic inventor, has devised a revolutionary --- and to some, blasphemous --- method of bookmaking: a machine he calls a printing press. Fust is financing Gutenberg's workshop and he orders Peter, his adopted son, to become Gutenberg's apprentice. Resentful at having to abandon a prestigious career as a scribe, Peter begins his education in the "darkest art."

As his skill grows, so, too, does his admiration for Gutenberg and his dedication to their daring venture: copies of the Holy Bible. But mechanical difficulties and the crushing power of the Catholic Church threaten their work. As outside forces align against them, Peter finds himself torn between two father figures: the generous Fust, who saved him from poverty after his mother died; and the brilliant, mercurial Gutenberg, who inspires Peter to achieve his own mastery.

Caught between the genius and the merchant, the old ways and the new, Peter and the men he admires must work together to prevail against overwhelming obstacles --- a battle that will change history and irrevocably transform them.

Discussion Guide

1. The novel begins with Peter Schoeffer telling the story to a writer. In what ways are verbal and written storytelling

similar or different?

2. What does Peter retain and lose in his shift from artisan scribe to printmaking engineer?

3. Considering Peter's initial conflict between the scribe's art and the printing press, what's the relationship between art and technology?

4. A central issue in Mainz is the ancient one between homo faber --- the man who makes things --- and he who sells or trades what others make. What is the conflict here? How might it continue in contemporary culture? Examine the irony of craftsmen making by hand something that would replace the hand of man.

5. Peter admits late in his life that the printing press never brought the liberation that it promised by lifting man from bigotry and want and greed. How might it have done this? What forces kept it from happening?

6. In what ways does Peter's experience and identity as an orphan affect his life and relationships?

7. Hermann Rosenberg, a vicar, argues that the printing press could secure knowledge with a standardized text and avoid cultural disorder. In what parts of culture might such a lack of variation be problematic?

8. How do the many references to the biblical stories woven throughout add to the novel? Which seem the most powerful or poignant?

9. Peter thinks one of Gutenberg's brilliant abilities is to see a thing --- a person too --- in pieces. What might this mean? What are its costs?

10. Peter also describes Gutenberg as beholden to no group nor any other man. He stood outside, alone, a solitary soul. How did such disconnection serve or hinder him? To what degree might such behavior be a necessary precondition for brilliance or innovative thinking?

11. When Peter first sees the print from metal letters he carved, it all changed. What is the nature of such a spark?

12. Gutenberg makes harsh statements about the value of women, referring to Eve, Pandora, and Magdalene. Consider the two women in Peter's life, Grede and Anna Pinzler. How are they powerful, valuable women?

13. What constituted Peter's unexpected joy working with the various craftsmen in the secret workshop?

14. What qualities in Gutenberg caused him to risk the failure of the printing press itself? Were these qualities necessary and unavoidable for him?

15. As the workshop falls apart Peter realizes that the work there had a series of technical rites and rituals and prayer-like vocabulary that bound the workers together. How does this occur? What's the nature of rites and rituals that they can have this effect even in a secular activity?

16. In what ways is our contemporary shift from print to digital media similar to or different from the shift from hand-written to mechanically printed text?

Author Bio

Alix Christie is an author, journalist and letterpress printer. She learned the craft as an apprentice to two master California printers, and owns and operates a 1910 Chandler & Price letterpress. She holds a master of fine arts degree from Saint Mary's College of California and lives in London, where she reviews books and arts for *The Economist*. GUTENBERG'S APPRENTICE is her first novel.

Critical Praise

?I loved this novel! Alix Christie?s debut is intensely observed, so much so that I felt myself in the dark rooms of history with the people laboring over the metal and words to bring us print, but also laboring over their own lives and love and survival.?

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Publication Date: September 8, 2015

Genres: Fiction, Historical Fiction

Paperback: 432 pages

Publisher: Harper Perennial

ISBN-10: 0062336029

ISBN-13: 9780062336026