

WAREHOUSE 23

Liber Athenaeum

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It often requires more courage to read some books than it does to fight a battle.
- - Sutton Elbert Griggs (1872-1930)

The *Liber Athenaeum* (Latin for "book of libraries") is either a work of powerful magic or sufficiently advanced technology, depending upon the campaign world. Different groups and cultures refer to it as *The Last Book*, *The First Book*, and *The Final Reference*. The book is a repository of great knowledge, as it has the ability to recreate within its covers the text of any written material about which the user has heard. The volume responds to the spoken or unspoken wishes of the user, with near-telepathic precision. Whether the tome is psionic or simply a near-AI expert system, the *Athenaeum* never fails to surprise a first-time user with the breadth and scope of knowledge about the exact topic that is foremost on the subject's mind.



A discerning GM may not want to unleash the full *Athenaeum* in his game world, so feel free to limit the scope of the text. A book with full knowledge of business information, perhaps, or a text with clear and accurate information on personal relationships, would serve many of the same purposes as the full work, without unbalancing the game universe. These limited texts only have access to data which is immediately pertinent to the subject. (Your players may try to fast-talk you into giving more information than you feel that they should have. Make a detailed list of what types of information the book holds, and stick to it.)

The literature replicated in the *Athenaeum* always appears in a format that reflects the capabilities of the user, including intelligence, native language, and reading level. Use of the tome requires a few days of attunement, during which time the new

user studies the existing text of the *Athenaeum*'s current topic. Attunement takes seven days, minus a number of days equal to the user's IQ divided by 40. (The village idiot, IQ 40, would take six days to find that he had a new picture-book, while a whiz kid, IQ 200, would have the *Athenaeum* figured out in two days.) Reading aloud from the book hastens the process, halving the attunement time.

After attuning to the book, a user simply has to hold the *Athenaeum* in his hands, and speak aloud the topic that he wishes to know more about. Without specific orders otherwise, the *Athenaeum* will simply reproduce an existing text which most closely mirrors the user's desires. The topic "cars," for example, will bring forth a simple overview of the auto industry, while "a repair manual for a '66 Ford Custom with a 352 big block" will be much more specific. The tome may also be commanded to synthesize a work based on multiple sources. A musical *Athenaeum*, for example, could be asked to produce "three concertos in the style of Mozart, based on all of his previous works, the development of his style during his life, and events of historical importance that would have influenced his work if he had lived to be fifty-five."

Any named book, treatise, article, play, or musical composition can be duplicated by the *Athenaeum*, including "lost" works, private publications, corporate records, grimoires, and electronic publications. General textbooks on any subject can be coaxed into being, based solely on the wishes of the user. Owners of the book have created survival manuals, alchemy texts, encyclopedias of poisons, manuals of football strategy, engineering tables, ship-recognition texts, heraldic armorials and songbooks. Documented examples of the text have used English, Arabic, Greek, and Cyrillic alphabets, hieroglyphics, cuneiform, simple pictograms, and Braille, with most exhibiting full-color illustrations appropriate to the work.

There are also indications that the *Athenaeum* contains information far in advance of any contemporary work. Seekers of the book tracked its location to the private safe of a NASA scientist - - said scientist had, after decades of lackluster work, applied for the patents for the first practical ion engines. Notes in the safe also indicated that the scientist was composing an article for a scientific journal; the main thrust of the article seemed to be the ease with which an inexpensive and safe FTL drive could be developed, using existing technology. Stories that the learned gentleman also had several working prototypes of a desktop fusion generator are, as yet, unconfirmed.

The information contained in the *Athenaeum* is not limited to purely technical or pragmatic concepts. Rumors about a well-known pop group hint that the main songwriter kept a "personal journal" where he composed his songs, three of which catapulted to the top of the charts in record time. The catchiest tune, "Trainscripting," remained in the Top One Hundred for an unprecedented 121 weeks. After a meteoric rise to become the cutting-edge musical talent of the decade, the writer inexplicably took his own life soon after an unknown person or persons broke into the band's tour bus. The intruders ignored large amounts of money, drugs, and electronic equipment, instead making off with the journal; investigators were forced to conclude that the worst crime committed was unlawful entry. Friends and band-mates claimed that the songwriter became extremely despondent at the loss of his notebook, and killed himself two days after the robbery.

The *Athenaeum* always appears as a nondescript volume, blending in well with any other literature in the immediate area. It has taken the form of a large leather-bound tome, a medium-sized hardback, a leather file folder, a music portfolio, and, in at

least one instance, a massive illuminated scroll. In any manifestation, the *Athenaeum* is always of the sturdiest construction, with no loose leaves (or equivalent). The book, through magical defenses or high-tech materials, is impervious to damage. Fire, electricity, cold, acid, microwave, gamma radiation, diamond-bit drills, cutting lasers, rock crushers, and a large axe have been utilized in various attempts to destroy the book, and all have failed.

The invulnerability of the work has been used to great advantage. The legends surrounding the Prophet Ghadi ibn'Tuek indicate that, before the Battle of Maydan-e Khan, the Prophet shunned armor and "wrapped himself in the Word of God" (*The Book of Dhay'ed*) to lead his followers into one of the bloodiest battlegrounds of the Ghorgaan Unification Wars. Though unhorsed and knocked down several times by the Khanate Immortals, ibn'Tuek "miraculously" escaped injury, and managed to defeat Caliph Bra'khal in single combat. The *Athenaeum*, revered as a holy relic, remained in the possession of ibn'Tuek's successors until its theft during the reign of the Ninth Prophet.

Some question the reasoning behind the multiple attempts to actively destroy this book, feeling that the wealth of knowledge that it represents is incalculable. Wiser heads realize that knowledge is power, and power in the wrong hands is a terrifying idea to many that have owned the *Athenaeum*. Religious leaders and zealots, when confronted with the power of this fabulous book, have either embraced it as a sign of God's grace and benevolence or reviled it as a work of the Adversary. Indeed, its inherent power could indicate either one.

Modern science suggests that the *Athenaeum* is an artifact of non-human origin, using room-temperature super-conduction, ultra-light polymers, memory plastics, neural-net processing with true holographic memory, and a sensor array that defies description. There is every indication that the book is actually a high-sentience artificial intelligence. If true, the *Athenaeum* could be best described as an immortal entity, capable of assuming any number of innocuous forms, with instant recall of millennia of human history, and able to communicate with any human being. The book has, at one time or another, been described as having a personality of sorts. Records are very sketchy, but paint a picture of a calm, self-assured, gentle entity, with a near-cosmic grasp of the failings of humanity. The *Athenaeum* seems to have no set agenda, preferring to act according to its user's wishes, then closely observing how the person chooses to deal with the information.

Adventure Seeds

These seeds assume the use of a "limited" text, as defined above. Strong caution: an unlimited *Liber Athenaeum* is a hugely unbalancing item in a typical campaign, and a great deal of thought should go into whether or not you will be able to remove it from the campaign should it become necessary, as well as how that end shall be achieved. An unwary GM may as well hand over all campaign materials to his players at the start of the session, as the judicious use of an omniscient artifact will have practically the same effect.

The Faustian Libram

This seed is suitable for any fantasy campaign, or any system incorporating supernatural special effects (ie. *In Nomine*, *Call of Cthulhu*, *Shadowrun*, etc.) The party's reoccurring enemy, a powerful NPC, makes a bargain with a Lord of Darkness. In return for his undying loyalty and service, the Dread Lord promised dark

knowledge. Listening to His minion's complaints about the party, the Dark One presented him with *The Book Of Enemies*. With this reference, the new servant of the Dark easily makes the player's lives miserable, as he seems intimately familiar with the contents of player spellbooks, scrolls, maps, and personal journals. The Bad Guy starts to act like he has some great advisors, no matter the situation at hand. He becomes, overnight, a master strategist, brilliant planner, Machiavellian plotter, and all-around pain in the neck. If the players a) manage to kill the Bad Guy, b) take the *Athenaeum*, and c) realize what they have (assuming there is any hint of the object in the legends or databases), they'll have their hands full keeping the book from its former owner. The Dread Lord will be quite exercised that some lowly mortals have offed his Chosen Representative. Be sure that He'll send some heavies to take care of the problem, one way or another.

Business As Usual, and Then Some

The *Athenaeum Reparo* ("library of business") is great for *Shadowrun*, *Cyberpunk*, or any other post-modern RPG. A major manufacturing company starts hitting the market with great products, always the Big New Thing, always in the right place at the right time, with near-prescient demographic information, pouring financial backing into all the small companies with cutting-edge pop-culture gizmos, games, and gadgets. New collectible card game? They always have *exactly* enough product to go around, and no warehouse overhead; they ship straight from the printers to the distributors, with exacting precision, and highly-profitable results. If the new hot thing is sub-dermal timepiece implants, GeneriTech had the patents last year, FDA and AMA approval last month, and surgeons standing by. The company never suffers setbacks from strikes, blockades, civil wars, fuel shortages, heat waves, global warming, or any other Modern Problems. They lead charmed lives, and have made some *powerful* enemies. Only the Board of Directors know that their position is due to their possession of *The Book of Modern Business*.

The mission, should the PCs choose to accept it, is to commit the ultimate in corporate espionage: a full burner search-and-destroy. The team has access to more and better support than they have ever imagined. Money is no object, as the home megacorp is liquidating all non-essential assets to deal with the threat. Netrunners, soldiers, pet sorcerers, second-story men, military and black-market hardware, software, wetware, netware, spellware, artifacts, relics, whatever. Let 'em take the kitchen sink, if they think it'll do any good. Their orders: get in, find out *how* they're doing it, steal the data if they can, destroy it if the guano hits the windmill. It's win-or-die time, slim, but no worries: any survivors get to split the bonus.

Make your players work for this one. GeneriTech knows what it has in the *Athenaeum*, and the Board of Directors will cut your crew's throats with steak knives from the cafeteria before giving it up. They have a lot money, a great deal of influence, and they have at least as much hardware as the party. For an additional level of difficulty, insinuate that the data they're looking for is in a small, potentially fragile container.

All's Fair In Love And War

In a seed featuring the *Athenaeum Affinitas* ("library of relationships"), a PC comes to the attention of a wealthy businessman/military genius/computer whiz. The VIP is instantly and obviously smitten, and spends a few moments speaking with the PC, exchanging little more than names and handshakes. The next day, the love-interest finds himself the object of an exceptionally subtle seduction. The entire written

history of the PC is literally an open book to the would-be lover. School records, vaccination records, hospital records, test scores, papers, mash notes, e-mail, subscription information, detailed credit card information; you name it. Access to anything relating directly to the PC is child's play for the intelligence of the Athenaeum. If the PC likes music, the lover is at the concert - in the adjacent seat. A coffee fan would see a familiar face at the Java Shack, and so on.

And what if the *Athenaeum* really likes its current owner? And wants him to be happy? The ultimate information source, linked to a godlike intelligence, with the benevolence and wisdom of a keen third-party observer of human nature, containing 20,000 years of accumulated data on the subject?and it wants the couple to be together.

Liber Athenaeum Cthulhu

This seed is based on a limited text with data concerning exact and specific summoning rituals. The *Athenaeum* presents the information in a format that is easy to follow, with a guide for those names and phrases that are hard to pronounce, like "Cthulhu fthagn," "Nyarlathotep," and/or some of the nastier demons from *In Nomine*.

The owner of a local bookstore has found an unremarkable hardback in a recent books-by-the-pound estate sale. It seems to be a reference text and how-to manual for the summoning of Creatures From Beyond The Veil. A staunch atheist, the bookseller stays amused by keeping up with the latest fashions in literary idiocy. He decided to read a few choice passages aloud (to the amusement of his wife) late one evening at home - how was he to know that the stars were right?

This version of events for the *Athenaeum* could be a *GURPS Black Ops* cover-up scenario, a *Call of Cthulhu* plot hook, or an *In Nomine* Marches campaign ("The Ethereals are coming! The Ethereals are coming!").

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