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Letter from Oklahoma

Tom Leonhardt

University of Oklahoma

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Letter from Oklahoma

After Christmas Serendipity
by Tom Leonhardt (University of Oklahoma)

Well, this contribution reached our mailbox and was irresistible (boy is that a hard word to spell). It should be called Publishers’ Catalogs and all that, but it isn’t. We couldn’t bring ourselves to change the title either. The sometimes eclectic Tom marches on!

Serendipity - The art of finding things you are not looking for. Horace Walpole coined the term Serendip, a corrupted form of Sinhaladipa (Ceylon, now Sri Lanka). In a certain fairy tale, there were three princes who were serendipitous. This bit of serendipity I learned from none other than Norbert Wiener (1894-1964) in his Invention: The Care and Feeding of Ideas (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993, p. 21).

“An infant prodigy, Wiener suffered in his youth from excessively intensive instruction. He took his doctorate at the age of 19 with an (unpublished) comparison between mathematical logic as developed by Bertrand Russell, and algebraic logic in the tradition of the German mathematician Schroeder.” (If you are curious, see Twentieth-Century Culture: A Biographical Companion. edited by Alan Bullock and R.B. Woodings, New York: Harper & Row, 1983.)

Wiener, best known for his Cybernetics (NY, 1948), is a lively and erudite writer. I don’t follow everything in Invention, but I find enough in the book to make me feel as if I were learning and, at the half-century mark, it is important to feel that way. Trust me.

Serendipity is something that librarians generally associate with browsing in the stacks. Book collectors associate serendipity with browsing in used book stores and finding something that was unexpected and usually underpriced.

The catalogs of publishers are a great source of serendipitous knowledge. You can’t possibly read all of the books that you want, much less dent the tremendous output of publishers in this country alone. Reading the catalogs may not be a substitute for reading the actual books but as a substitute they are not bad. As an alternative to not reading the books at all, catalogs are a source of general knowledge and entertainment on occasion.

There is one catalog in particular that I would like to tell you about. It is the Boise State University 1992-1993 Publications Catalog. For overall content, design, and value as a publication in its own right, it is without equal. If a reader knows of one as good or better, please let me know so that I can acquire one.

The Catalog folds out so that the front and back covers plus the fold show a panoramic view of the Snake River (cover panorama: Glenn Oakley). Inside, beginning on the fold and continuing on the front and back covers is “Desert of the Snake,” by Todd Shallat from Snake: The Plain and Its People, a publication of the Hemingway Western Studies Series and fully described on page 19 of this attractive catalog. The book can be yours for $34.95 hardcover or $24.95 softcover, a reasonable differentiation between the two (check out some of the university press book differentials for some gaps as wide as the Snake River Gorge. Even Evel Knievel wouldn’t try to jump some of those). To better understand what this catalog is about, let me quote from its introduction titled “Not A University Press.”

“Ahsahta Press, cold-drill Magazine and books, The Hemingway Western Studies Series, and the Western Writers Series are publishing fiefdoms founded between 1970 and 1985 at Boise State University. Collectively, these fiefs function much as a university press. For instance, all are underfunded and understaffed. A number suffer from or are enhanced by being cults of personality — not coincidentally, the personalities of their directors and editors who are, also not coincidentally, their founders. At the same time, these series have earned honors and distinctions awarded “real” university presses: American Institute of Graphic Arts medals, the Spirit That Moves Us Press Editor’s Choice III anthology, Pushcart prize “Best of the Small Presses” and Writer’s Choice awards, National Endowment for the Arts exhibits at Frankfurt- unto-Beijing, Columbia Scholastic Press Gold Medals, etc. Like university press publications, BSU titles have been noted by reviewers in university press publications, BSU titles have been noted by reviewers in local, regional, national and international periodicals, from Choice to the Chronicle of Higher Education to the COSMELP Newsletter. In essence, then, these publishing principalities combat as does a university press: they burn little money, they shed much light — especially on Western American culture.

“So why not say ‘What’s in a name?’ and call our loosely integrated publishing confederation a university press? Primarily, the answer is because aspirations and pretensions do not a university press make. For instance, a university press in more than name only at BSU would require an annual investment four to five times the current annual publications budget.

“So our publishing situation does not disturb us — much. After all, we are spared the enviable burden of university press status. We can continue to publish works one might expect from a university press, such as Snake: The Plain and Its People or the scholarly booklets in the Western Writers Series, while we also publish items one might not expect: a compact disk of folk songs, a computer disk adventure game set in Idaho, or videotapes of long-thought lost films by a rediscovered silent film actor, writer, director and producer.”

This catalog is a gold mine and if you don’t have one, didn’t get one, got it and threw it away before you read it, write to The Bookstore, Boise State University, 1910 University Drive, Boise, ID 83725, Attn: Nancy Money or call 1-800-992-
TEXT. When you get your catalog you will be able to read the excerpt from Snake and two (count them) poems from the Ahsahta (it is Mandan for Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep) Press: "Kudzu," by Katherine Coles and "The Divide" (about Bozeman) by Sandra Altocasser. There is much more, too. Serendipity to be sure.

My favorite cover, for sentimental reasons, is from the University of California Press catalog for Fall 1993: "Valley Fruit Box Labels, California State Library," from The Great Central Valley. Some of those fruit pickers are returning to Oklahoma. Inside, there are tidbits of trivia or knowledge, depending on the context and company, that grace all such catalogs. I learned, for example, that Nicholas Ray directed Rebel Without a Cause and Johnny Guitar (I prefer the latter — it did not star James Dean), that Ray's wife, Susan was also his collaborator, and that Ray, who died in 1979, wrote a book called I Was Interrupted.

now available from the UC press for $25.00 cloth.

Short Notes on other Fall 1993 Catalogs

- Fodor's has a book called Walt Disney World For Adults. It has been promoted in Parade, Bride's, Mature Outlook, and Travel Holiday and makes me glad that I am not an adult but older than 21 and thus ineligible to visit any of the Disney communities.

- Be warned. Villard has yet another Robert Fulghum book coming out but it they are also making the antidote available: Lewis Grizzard's new book called Pushin' Fifty Is Exercise Enough.

- Elster Verlag has a series called Reisefuehrer fuer Frauen or Guidebooks For Women. I don't know when they began but in one brochure Elster mentions that the Thaiand Tourist Bureau proclaimed 1992 the Year of the Woman Traveler (literally "female tourist" from the German Touristinnen. The German word is just fine but it needs softening when translated into English.)

There are guidebooks for Athens (brutally modern but still the cradle of Western culture), Bangkok (skyscrapers as in New York, bargains as in Milan or Hong Kong, restaurants as in Paris, and anarchic traffic as in Rome), Barcelona (art & culture, luxury & fashion, food & drink, bars & discos), Frankfurt, Florence, Hamburg (auction houses, harbor restaurants, and English gardens), London (shopping & sightseeing), Madrid, Munich, Paris, Prague, Rome, Vienna, and Zurich. Elster also has a series of Kriminalromane (Krimis) that they cast as either dark (schwarz) or sunny (sonnig). Might we do the same? For you Krimi Leser (mystery readers, auf Englisch) can you suggest those that are dark and those that are sunny? Bill Crider, Sara Paretsky, Amanda Cross, Simon Brett and Sue Grafton are sunny? And the dark ones are Elmore Leonard, Jonathan Gash, Robert B. Parker? Send me your lists and I will combine and summarize.

Publishers' catalogs can be sources of amusement, learning, style, and pure information. Before you toss that next catalog, take a look inside and you might be glad you did. €

Plus
Ça Change
The Library Book Club
Column Editor: Karen Schmidt (U. of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)

Long before approval plans, blanket orders or cooperative collection development were part of the mainstream of modern libraries, the concept of the library book club was widely discussed. In 1938, the Wilson Library Bulletin suggested that libraries unite their purchasing power to form a consumers' buying unit, a library book club, that would canalize the buying wealth of our libraries and convert it into power. Publishers would be asked to submit books, before their publication, to a committee of librarians for review and approval. Once published, the books would come immediately to the libraries, in library bindings, and fully catalogued. The plan envisaged a discount of 25% on trade and 10% on texts, with a possible further distribution of any profits. Libraries could subscribe to different levels of service, so that larger libraries would receive more books. One of the first results the Bulletin suggested, would be to insure the publication of valuable works of a serious or scholarly nature that are now regarded as publishers' risks and too unprofitable to print.

Not surprisingly, negative commentary on this idea was received through an editorial in Publishers Weekly and from the American Booksellers Association. Among the many faults found with this plan — from the publishers' standpoint, at least — was the notion that there could be extra discounts or profits to be had for the libraries, that publishers could easily handle single large purchases without adding any extra staff (and thus, overhead), and that most of a library's budget could be spent on trade publications.

Still, maybe this will spark one of our more entrepreneurial readers to consider a library consumer union, perhaps with serials included. Does anyone know where Ralph Nader is working these days? €

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from page 14
is formed with a supplier who specializes in AV.

A library should expect that the jobber would perform the bibliographic verification and supply not only for the readily available and widely reviewed titles, but also for the more specialized materials such as educational and curriculum-related videos, laser discs, and import labels. Automated systems that allow electronic transmission of orders should be a requirement. The availability of full MARC or enhanced cataloging records for all items purchased and the processing of all materials ordered are highly desired options. The reward will be timely delivery and a high fill rate that keeps the faculty and general public happy. €