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Oregon Trails-Publisher Catalogs

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formation would influence my decision to purchase the title.

You make a good point that vendors offer many, many services. Librarians have historically wanted deep and detailed information and data. How much of that data is essential? Will the book vendor marketplace look like downtown small-town America, when **Wal-Mart** opens a store at the edge of town? Customers repeatedly abandon personalized service at a higher price for what they perceive as “value,” in convenience, pricing, and selection.

BN: You’ve identified, John, where we book vendors have done our poorest work, that is, persuading customers (and potential customers) that the overall package of service we offer is a value. No matter what the relative price for a biology book, sizing up **Amazon** against the vendors, that’s just a part of the picture.

In this case, we notified customers—you and others—about a book of likely interest. Some received paper slips, others electronic announcements, others the book itself. With **Amazon**, you would have had to find it on your own. We’ve developed a number of ways for a libraries to order the book, some of them electronic pathways which link to local ILS systems; we will invoice it with other books, according to local specifications, instead of all by itself on an orphan invoice; we will query customers who mistakenly place a duplicate order; we will accept a return without question; we will offer on-demand reports folding this transaction into overall library activity; and we will have a dedicated customer service representative on hand to look after whatever might go wrong along the way. All of that and, as you point out, we’ll sell you this particular biology book, anyway, for less than **Amazon** will.

And somehow we haven’t been convincing enough that the vendors offer a better value, saving libraries time at half-a-dozen steps along the way. We must really have done a sad job of it in sales and marketing!

Of course you’re right, **Amazon**—or **Wal-Mart** for that matter—may take a look at our market and decide to enter. I wonder what they’ll say the first time a library asks, “Here’s our fund map. Will you please apply it to the books you ship us?” Or, “Here are our cataloging, binding, and processing requirements. Please follow them.” Or calls up to say, “Please tell us why you shipped us this book, and how can we change the profile so that you don’t ship us any more like it?”


I imagine these companies would either say, “no,” the most likely answer; or would calculate their costs fairly exactly before say-

ing “yes,” then pass the costs on to libraries. Either way libraries will pay, perhaps by doing the work themselves, perhaps with cash; and would at some point need to convince administrators that the change was worth the bargain. Or, as you say, maybe libraries will need to abandon some of the particulars of local organizations, and become more like one another.

It’s true, vendors have a lot to learn from **Amazon** when it comes to attractive presentation of useful bibliographic information. But **Amazon** would have a few lessons in store too, and I wonder how willing they would be to learn them.

JA: Bob, what I envision is the creation of something like “Amazon-Academe,” not just overtures from the existing **Amazon** to come and buy from them. How might this be accomplished? To start *de novo* would certainly mean the venture would join the huge ash-heap of companies who attempted to enter the library market based on their prior experience selling widgets. The clearest way would be for a large Web-book vendor to buy the expertise they need in the current industry infrastructure. **Amazon** would be wise to buy up one of the remaining smaller book-vending/approval players. That expertise, coupled with **Amazon**’s vast IT power, would allow this entity to converse with libraries in the libraries’ language, bill *en masse* for books, create profiles, etc. Why would a large

Web-based book vendor wish to enter our market? Higher education is here to stay and for the next few decades will still be a growth industry. Scholarly monographs are not likely to go the way anytime soon of SPARC-like or Los Alamos’ Pre-print server initiatives. The higher education market has sophisticated users and a powerful established base of computing power hooked to T-1 lines. The academic community is largely amenable to novelty and change, and if anything, the **Amazons** are about novelty and change. There is plenty of money to be made in our market.

A reasonable question here would be one about vendor stability. Stock prices for **Amazon.com** and **Barnes & Nobles.com** are down dramatically, 80 and 90 percent over the last year. How long can such loss be sustained, or were those stocks dramatically overvalued and are they now finding their real value? Could these companies enter our market and bear the losses until they crush smaller vendors? Would librarians, a few still smarting from the fall of the **Richard Abel Company** and the mixed fortunes of some serials vendors, be willing to move to a speculative new player? The general conservatism of librarians is the ace held by current academic book vendors, to buy time in creating a new model, bringing their virtues to bear on the undeniable attractiveness of the **Amazons**. But the relationship between virtue and beauty is, of course, never as clear as one might like. 



Oregon Trails

by Thomas Leonhardt (Oregon Institute of Technology)

Publisher catalogs are among my favorite reading. They don’t take a lot of time or concentration but they can be infinitely entertaining and humbling, too. The sheer number of books being published, the minutiae of subjects covered, the years of labor contributed by the authors remind me, once again, of how little I have read, how little I know, how far I have to go. When the Preacher commented on the making of many books, he had no idea just how far away the end was or is. If I have my way, electronic books will have their day in the sun, will find a small niche somewhere in the shade, and traditional publishers will continue to allow writers of all kinds to have a voice and an audience and a future. Then, when my turn comes to say good-bye and leave my books to my children, I will not have had to deal with the ultimate defilement that seems less intent on serving humankind than with squeezing out unprofitable access to the written word (used book stores) in the name of capitalism. Let the writers be heard, let their books be free for lending, re-selling, providing pleasant, reassuring, and handsome fur-

nishings for homes and offices.

The most eloquent statement I have read about books as furniture and as part of one’s life appeared in the June 18, 2000 Sunday *New York Times* (p. 15 Op Ed Week in Review). The title of the piece is “Books Unbound, Life Unraveled,” and the author is **John Updike**, probably the most suitable of all American authors to speak out on behalf of the book. Actually, Updike has several subheadings for his essay: “*The book as furniture*. Shelves rows of books warm and brighten the starkest room, and scattered single volumes reveal mental processes in progress, books in the act of consumption, abandoned but readily resumable, tomorrow or next year...”

“*The book as sensual pleasure*. Smaller than a breadbox, bigger than a TV remote, the average book fits into the human hand with a seductive nestling, a kiss of texture, whether of cover cloth, glazed jacket or flexible paperback...”

“*The book as souvenir*. One’s collection comes to symbolize the contents of one’s mind...”

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"Books as ballast. As movers and the moved both know, books are heavy freight, the weight of refrigerators and sofas broken up into cardboard boxes."

Aren't those wonderful lead sentences? I urge you to find and read the whole essay and make a copy for yourself so that you can pull it out of a drawer or the flyleaf of a favorite book and remind yourself of not only the treasures of books that have been published over the years, but of authors such as John Updike who have enriched our lives and our culture in ways that are truly miraculous when you think about it.

But I digress. I have ten publisher catalogs in front of me, as inspiring to me as Schiller's desk drawer of rotting apples was to him.

I won't discuss them all and will begin with a theme of sorts, art and architecture, that is, if you consider photography an art. The most eye-catching cover belongs to **Aperture**, publisher of fine photography. It features one of the photographs from *Boystown: La Zona de Tolerancia*, essays by Dave Hickey, Keith Carter, and Cristina Pacheco. Aperture describes this book of 100 duotone images (136 pages) as compelling portraits from border-town brothels. Three more photos from this book are featured on page 2. The photographs themselves were collected by Bill Wittliff of the Wittliff Gallery of Southwestern & Mexican Photography at Southwest Texas State University. He went to Boystown and contacted several photographers who took these souvenir pictures. One wonders what became of the original prints designed to preserve the moment either for personal and private reminiscences or to share with fellow soldiers, marines, airmen, and sailors stationed near the border. Nevertheless, these photographs preserve and illustrate a part of a shared border history and glimpse into the mores of the American military that, in the years of the Selective Service Administration, was a part of the rites of passage for 1-A American males. Those who were far from the border towns had their own equivalents, for example, Combat Alley in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and this volume will stir some memories for them, too.

This particular Aperture catalog includes *Landscapes*, by **Ray K. Metzker**, featuring 115 duotone (black and white) photographs of landscapes hitherto only seen in black and white dreams.

Another book from Aperture worth mentioning is *Specimens & Marvels: The World of William Henry Fox Talbot*. "Published to mark the bicentenary of the birth of Britain's celebrated inventor of photography *Specimens and Marvels* illuminates the mid-nine-

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teenth-century cultural environment in which Talbot's vision of photography emerged – a vision that would permanently alter how human beings view themselves and the world."

This note on Talbot evokes Atget and sure enough, in the **Getty Trust Publications Autumn 2000 Catalog** with Complete Backlist, we find, on page 6, *In Focus: Eugene Atget: Photographs from the J. Paul Getty Museum*. "Eugene Atget (1857-1927) spent nearly thirty years photographing details of often-inconspicuous buildings, side streets, cul-de-sacs, and public sculptures in his beloved Paris." Once again, the photograph as a silent, non-verbal witness to life, preserving what word of mouth could only describe imperfectly with details left to the individual imagination.

This catalog also contains a new book in the *Texts & Documents* series, *Precis of the Lectures on Architecture with Graphic Portion of the Lectures on Architecture*, by Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand, Introduction by Antoine Picon, translation by David Britt.

Jean-Nicolas-Louis-Durand (1760-1834), as professor of architecture at the newly created Ecole Polytechnique in Palaiseau, proved to be monumental for the course of modern architectural theory. He capitalized on the reformative, revolutionary climate in France to propose far-reaching changes for the teaching of architecture."

The final catalog to mention is **Architectural Press 2000**. Its cover is taken from *Tony Hunt's Sketchbook*, a new companion volume to *Tony Hunt's Structure's*

Notebook. "The sketches which form this book [*Tony Hunt's Sketchbook*] are a selection from notebooks produced by Tony Hunt over the last 30 years or so. They relate directly to projects built and unbuilt in the field of structural engineering... This *Sketchbook* illustrates the connection between brain and hand in conceiving structural concepts and details as possible solutions to structures in architecture."

The editors, in their "Welcome to the 2000 Architectural Press catalogue," tell us "This year, we introduce new emphasis on Sustainability reflecting a general trend in the building/construction industry." Examples of sustainable design include *Sustainable Architecture: European Directives and Building Design*, Second Edition, by Brian Edwards, *Green Shift: Changing Attitudes in Architecture to the Natural World*, Second Edition, by John Farmer, edited by Kenneth Richardson, and *The Ecology of Building Materials*, by Bjorn Berge, translated by Filip Henley.

These are just a few examples of new books from only three publishers. Do we need them, the books and their publishers? To say no is to deny that we are part of the human race, that most curious assortment of animals, literally and figuratively. *Homo faber*, the human maker. It is what we do and to deny that is tantamount to saying that we must deny our nature and no longer care about anything. Sustainable thinking and creation, may we hope, is a sign that we are becoming more responsible even as we do what comes naturally. 🌱