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Academic Book Trends— Literature and Literary Criticism = What (and who) do academic libraries buy?

by **Celia Scher Wagner** (Academic Book Center) <celiaw@acbc.com>

Recent **Academic Book Trends** columns have explored broad purchasing patterns in the academic library market. This column will focus specifically on Literature and Literary Criticism, particularly English and American literature (the Library of Congress PR and PS classes).*

Selecting literature and literary criticism poses many challenges to academic libraries, the major one being a disjunct between supply and demand. Published plays, for instance, are in short supply, and often buying all of them won't expend the budget.

Novels, on the other hand, abound, though they span a wide range of literary "worthiness." Some academic libraries solve the fiction-glut problem by abjuring novels altogether, directing patrons to the public library for recreational reading. Others try a variety of winnowing methods, in the hopes of getting the most important novels into the collection, but avoiding the rest. Some libraries order titles based on reviews in favorite sources (the *New York Times Book Review*, the *New Yorker*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, etc.). Some establish author lists, and collect only works by or about the authors on their list. Some authorize approval vendors to use their own judgment in identifying the most important literary works. And some libraries make patron requests their collection development "policy."

Regardless of their selection methods, what do academic libraries buy in Literature and Literary Criticism? And how does what they buy compare with what is published?

Over the past three years, Academic Book Center announced over 12,000 new titles in English and American literature: over 5,000 in English literature (PR), and almost 7,000 in American literature (PS). About thirty percent of PR and PS titles were not purchased by even one library.

Of the seventy percent that libraries did purchase, criticism was preferred to actual literary works. English literary criticism (PR) sold best of all, even though titles in this category averaged the highest list prices: \$44.30 apiece. Most critical works in PR were author-specific, and the author whose work topped the list, with over one hundred new critical studies, was **Shakespeare**. **James Joyce**, **Charles Dickens**, **William Butler Yeats**, **Virginia Woolf**, **Jane Austen**, **Oscar**

Wilde and **D.H. Lawrence** followed, but well behind. Literary studies of particular eras were also prevalent, with Victorian literature enjoying the lead, followed by Renaissance and Medieval literature.

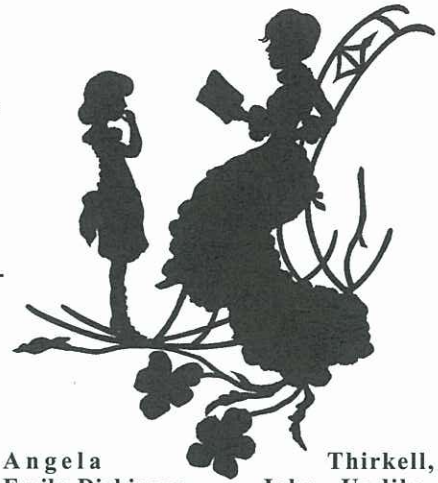
Popular critical themes involved feminist criticism and gender studies. And many titles combined eras, themes, and writers, e.g., *Enacting gender on the English Renaissance stage*, or *Vessels of meaning: women's bodies, gender norms and class bias from Richardson to Laurence*.

Critical works in American Literature (PS) averaged \$34.38, and sold nearly as well as those in English literature. Bestselling subject areas included ethnic literary studies—works on Chicana writers, African-American writers, Native American writers, and others. Feminist criticism and gender studies were also popular here, with some eye-catching titles like: *Are girls necessary? lesbian writing and modern histories*. (Necessity itself was a recurrent theme, in works like *Necessary madness*, *Some necessary angels*, and two works on *Necessary fictions*.)

Critical works about specific authors were less prevalent than in English literature, but the authors whose work drew the most attention were: **Mark Twain**, **Herman Melville**, **William Faulkner**, **Emily Dickinson**, **F. Scott Fitzgerald**, **Robert Frost**, **Eudora Welty**, **Tennessee Williams**, **Sam Shepard**, **Ernest Hemingway**, **Zora Neale Hurston**, **Wallace Stevens**, and **Wallace Stegner**. (I particularly admired Lynn Cook's candid title: *Why I can't read Wallace Stegner*.)

In actual literary works (as opposed to criticism), American novels, poetry and plays averaged \$20.92. English literary works averaged \$21.89. In the market served by Academic Book Center, American literature was purchased far more often than English literature. The majority of our customer base is in the U.S., so this does not represent worldwide buying patterns. Still, it is interesting to note that American academic libraries evidently like books about English authors best of all, and books by English authors least of all.

In both PR and PS, the best-selling author of the past three years was (drum roll...) **Mark Twain**. Following on Mr. Twain's heels were a grand assortment of writers, proof the literary cannon is not stagnant. The most popular authors were **Joyce Carol Oates**,



Angela Thirkell, **Emily Dickinson**, **John Updike**, **Alicia Ostriker**, **Denise Levertov**, **James Laughlin**, **A.R. Ammons**, **John Edgar Wideman**, **W.S. Merwin**, **Seamus Heaney**, **Andrew Greeley**, **Charlotte Perkins Gilman**, and **Margaret Atwood**. (The **Angela Thirkell** fan club, a friend reports, has the wonderfully lispng moniker, "The Thirkell Circle.")

Researching buying patterns in literature and literary criticism offered me the entertainment of seeing some wonderful titles. Among my favorites: *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe*, by **Daniel Hoffman**; *Lack of the Irish*, by **Ralph McInerney**; *The Butter did it: a gastronomic tale of love and murder*, by **Phyllis Richman**; *A Peacock in the Land of Penguins Elemenopy*, by **Michael Coffey**.

(Think how useful this portmanteau would have been to **Sue Grafton**, who has worked her way from *A is for Alibi* down to *N is for Noose*. Speaking of Ms. Grafton, Natalie Kaufman has written the inevitable critical volume on her work, *G is for Grafton: the world of Kinsey Milhone*.)

"Fatal" enjoyed a heyday, in such titles as *Fatal elixir*, *Fatal convictions*, *Fatal autonomy*, *The Fatal hero*, *The Fatal frontier*, (no doubt filled with Fatal terrain), and **Louisa May Alcott's** steamy (for her day), *A Long, fatal love chase*. (As an Alcott fan, I looked forward to reading this one, but will just offer the observation that while "long" is a relative concept, it's more than apt, here.)

Colored clothing titles were also in vogue, primarily for poetry: *Blue pajamas*, *Black shawl*, *The Green tuxedo*, *Tale of a sky blue dress*, *Earl in the yellow shirt*, and *Pink slip*. (Okay, okay.)

At the end of all my wanderings, I was delighted to stumble upon **Bruce Duffy's** novel, a fitting finale. Mr. Duffy, a man of certainty, unblinkingly answers one of life's big questions: *Last comes the egg*.

*Traditionally, *Library of Congress classification PR is called "English literature," and I will call it that here, although, in fact, Scottish, Irish, Canadian, and other British and Commonwealth authors are classed in this category as well.* 🍀