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Book Pricing Update

Trends in Book Pricing by Subject Area — June 30, 2002

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Each year, Blackwell’s reports on pricing trends in academic monograph publishing. We derive this data from the books that were treated on our academic Approval Program during the previous year. In the year ending last June, we treated 4,944 academic monograph titles with an average list price of $60.49. Excluding 1,742 reprints, the average list price of the 38,815 remaining new titles was $61.79. This represents a 1% increase in the average price of an approval book from the previous year.

Trends in Pricing in the Humanities

Within the universe of approval books, 13,329 Humanities and Fine Arts books increased 2% in price, from $46.27 to $46.99. Art books rose just 1% (the same as the overall rate) from an average price of $50.92 to $51.37. Books on Architecture increased 3%, from $52.86 to $54.48, and Performing Arts books, including Music, increased 6%, from $46.95 to $49.63. Humanities titles (excluding the Fine and Performing Arts) rose in sync with the price of an average approval title — again, just 1%. But within Humanities there were also some significant decreases: the price of an average History title fell 4%, from $50.61 to $48.35 and Folklore and Mythology books fell 1%, from $45.12 to $39.98. The price of the average Literary text fell 1%, from $25.73 to $25.39, but the price of a volume of Literary Criticism rose 4%, from $53.58 to $55.88. Offsetting the fall in History and Literature, Religion titles rose 4%, from $48.73 to $50.52 and Philosophy titles rose 7%, from $59.56 to $63.58.

Trends in Pricing in the Social Sciences

The average price of 13,055 books in the Social Sciences (including Law) rose 2%, from $56.05 to $57.17. Again, within the broader category there were several significant variations: Law and Sociology titles both rose 7% — from $80.14 to $86.04 for Law and from $54.31 to $57.96 for Sociology. Books in Environmental Studies rose 6%, from $60.03 to $63.84, as did books in Military Science, from $46.53 to $49.33. International Relations titles were up 10%, from $52.31 to $57.70. And Sports and Recreation titles were up 12%, from $34.14 to $38.27. Psychology titles rose 4%, from $58.48 to $60.92. Finally, Anthropology titles were up a stunning 13%, from $55.46 to $62.40. Disciplines within the Social Sciences experiencing declines included Political Science (down 2%, from $54.27 to $53.12), and Business Administration, also down 2% (from $56.13 to $55.97). Education titles were down 4%, from $50.61 to $48.51. Library and Information Science titles fell 7%, from $38.56 to $34.27 and Management titles declined 9%, from $55.68 to $54.55.

Trends in Pricing in the Sciences & Technology

Even though the rate of monographic price increases has been modest over the past several years, this year we actually saw a decrease of -1% in the price of books in the Sciences and Technology. Most purchasers of books in these subject areas know that they tend to be among the highest priced, and I am sure that any relief in pricing pressure on library budgets will be welcomed. The average price of a book in the Sciences and Technology went from $83.56 to $82.82. At the bargain end of Sci-Tech books, Nursing titles rose 1%, from $43.99 to $44.29. Biology and Zoology titles rose 2%, from continued on page 79
A Child Called Enron

With over two years on the bestseller lists, A Child Called It and its sequel, The Lost Boy, continue to provide big bucks for author Dave Pelzer. Because of his horrific childhood (which his own brother terms fictitious), Pelzer is a money machine, speaking to rapt audiences 270 days a year, sometimes several times a day. According to his wife, 25% of the crowd buys his books at these events. The New York Times reports that by his own accounting, Pelzer is selling between 40,000 and 400,000 copies of his books a year. This is quite a spread, even in our post-Enron world. To make matters more confusing, his publisher reports he sells only 1000 copies a year from them. So where is Pelzer purchasing the vast quantities of books he sells to his audiences? From book stores? From online book stores? Could these purchases trigger the impression that millions of people are buying his books from stores, keeping him firmly in the upper reaches of bestsellerdom? The Times wonders “how much is he healing and how much is he swindling...” Oh well, it’s a Wordclerk world, where numbers mean different things to different people, and now even the bestseller lists can’t be trusted.

Teeny Books Yield Giant Sales

Despite a difficult book market this year, mini-books are prospering and morphing. Now there are mini-books in other formats, like hanging trinkets of little CDs, along with the traditional pages usually filled with handy, quotable aphorisms. Next time you’re checking out of a Borders or Barnes & Noble, notice all those tiny titles arranged near the cash registers, just begging for an impulse purchase. Two maxi mini-book publishers are pumping out millions of copies, such as Running Press with 40 million in 13 years, and Peter Pauper a close second. The LA Times says we even have a minibook on the moon, courtesy of Apollo 11. One more reason to go back.

Turned On by Wall Street,
Turned Off in Texas

Earlier this year, when a new edition of a Houghton-Mifflin history textbook was discovered asserting that on the frontier “there were perhaps 50,000 prostitutes west of the Mississippi,” the Texas State School Board insisted the words be excised in order for high schools to adopt the book in the Lone Star State. One has to wonder whether the Board would have reacted similarly to a lower number, say 20,000. Perhaps a recount is in order. Wielding its mighty sword of decency, the Board is now insisting that the cover photo on a business textbook must be changed. The photo shows the façade of the New York Stock Exchange, including the building’s nude statues. No wonder the market is down this year. Those Wall Street money men are too distracted to take care of business.

“His Eye Dwelt with Insatiable Avidity Upon the Beauteous Orb”

Compelling prose, as quoted above, and an introduction by Stephen King, grace the Oxford University Press reprint of The Monk by Matthew Lewis, first published in 1796. This early Gothic shocker features lurid descriptions of rape and murder by a Catholic priest. According to King, it is also a satire on organized religion. Although the book was a best seller when originally published, and over the centuries has been adapted into plays and movies, few people outside academe have read it in the last 200 years.

Lewis was influenced by the excesses of the French Revolution when he wrote the novel, and his instant success propelled him into the glamorous world of the European literati. He hobnobbed with the Shelleys and Goethe, but Lord Byron found him a bore. Like Margaret Mitchell and Harper Lee, he authored only one book in his lifetime, but it was enough to impress the Marquis de Sade, who loved the book and celebrated it as an example of the excesses that riddled the comfortable world of Europe’s entrenched aristocracy, both civil and religious. Eventually, however, Lewis was ordered by a court to recall all copies of his book and issue a new expurgated version, with all words such as “lust,” “incest,” and “enjoyment” removed. A Dublin library did its part for decency as well, underlining all the dirty words so the reader could enjoy the book while avoiding the highlighted bad stuff.

Only a cynic would theorize that Oxford is riding the current Church scandals by reprinting a book that the contemporary book buyers will find largely unreadable, except of course for Stephen King’s introduction, wherein he appoints Mathew Lewis the “Johnny Rotten” of the Gothic novel genre. Twenty bucks gets you over 400 pages of very dense, very flowery, very 18th century prose. Or you can try to find the Dublin library edition on the OP market.

It’s a Jungle Out There

With five marriages under her belt, Valerie Gibson is an expert on failed relationships. She is also a self-described “Cougar,” her term for older women who date younger men. (“Pumas” are younger women dating older men—really, I’m not making this up). “It’s all about being confident, sexy, and absolutely interested in commitment or children,” says the New York Post, describing Gibson’s new book: Cougar: A Guide for Older Women Dating Younger Men. The book contains such invaluable advice as carry condoms in your purse, try not to have more than three martinis on a first date, think short term, and dress sexy. For older women who have managed to date for years without this information, Cougar is a must-read.

Lighten Up: She Still Has To Pay For The Booze From The Mini-bar

It appears that British author Fay Weldon is at it again. Last year the publication of her novel The Bulgar Connection elicited a storm of criticism. Bulgari paid Weldon an undisclosed sum to feature its brand in the title of her book. Outraged, a group of twenty authors mailed a letter to eighty five book reviewers, urging them to treat the novel as a promotional event instead of a literary work: “The Bulgar Connection is like a Kodak Moment or a Budweiser Wassup. It’s advertising...” “That her (advertising) copy promotes a high class jewelry store does not, somehow, lift it into the realm of literary art.” Undeterred by this harsh criticism, Weldon has now moved into London’s posh Savoy Hotel for three months as a “writer in residence” to finish her current novel. Her room, ordinarily priced at 350 pounds per night, is free, and she even gets a breakfast as part of the deal. “I don’t think (the Savoy) are expecting me to mention them in my book,” she said coyly on the BBC, “but it wouldn’t be too wicked to change Claridges to the Savoy just this once.” We’ll see about that.

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$93.75 to $96.08 and from $80.92 to $82.63, respectively. They were joined in the 2% increase by titles in Agriculture, which rose from $87.76 to $89.13. Books in both Physics and Medicine rose 4%, from $101.40 to $105.62 for Physics and from $80.44 to $83.31 for Medicine. Astronomy, Forestry and Human Biology rose 6%: Astronomy from $77.39 to $82.18, Forestry from $90.06 to $95.47, and Human Biology from $87.37 to $92.98. Interestingly, while the price of 2,805 Computer Science titles declined 2% (from $57.03 to $55.85), 1,092 of those titles in Personal Computing rose 3%, from $37.96 to $38.93. Chemistry titles, perennially some of the most expensive, rose 12%, from $124.25 to $138.71. And Veterinary Medicine titles rose 14%, from $68.39 to $78.16.

The price of the average Mathematics monograph fell nearly 1%, from $83.98 to $83.45. 2,045 titles in Technology (encompassing all of the Engineering disciplines) fell an average 3%, from $108.48 to $105.52, while Pharmacy titles fell 4%, from $121.04 to $116.65. The largest percentage declines in SMT publishing were registered in Animal Husbandry, which fell 13% (from $72.98 to $63.58) and in Denistry down 18% (or from $87.86 to $72.06).

The next Trends in Book Pricing column will be a half-yearly update of pricing in scholarly publishing.

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