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International Dateline — Quiet and Fairly Confident

A Report From the 53rd Frankfurt Book Fair

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This is my third report on the Book Fair for ATG and I realise that there is less big news, thrills or spills, than before. Admittedly my own knowledge is in scholarly publishing, but careful reading of the special issues of the trade mags given away at the venue do not suggest that there was anything very exciting going on among fiction publishers or vendors of erotica. What has happened to the disruptive impact of the Internet? When will the Big Deal fall over? The Elsevier Science people on the old Harcourt booth were coming out of the convenient little offices hiding away behind the books and the people. They were weby-faced to a man (yes, they were all men), but it was not because they realised what SPARC had done for them. They were just reworking the budget.

Presumably for librarians, the big question is about the progress of the digital revolution. The answer is that it is going slow. The big thrill for the book sector was said to be Print on Demand (POD). It is difficult to argue that POD is really cutting edge. Indeed, there are those who see it as a way of hanging on to print rather than as part of a digital repertoire. It certainly does not overturn existing relationships in the information chain. Other big dotcom ideas from the past (last year) seemed to have lost body. There was no booth for either NetLibrary or Ebrary, though personnel were spotted in the aisles. Everyone was waiting for a new model to emerge for the former (from the strategists of OCLC) and for a model to emerge for the latter. As for the journal hosts, Ingenta had the best stand party I went to (real wine), but their business model was not visible either to other than the eye of faith. Extenza (the publishing solutions business owned by Swets) had a mediocre lunch, which conflicted with a divine lunch next door, but they gave the best present in a Fair almost devoid of freebies. Both promised a lot in their different styles. The heavy tread of MetaPress (the EOSCO presence) could be heard — they are said to have a lot of money to spend. They were not noisy. As for the technology, after a lot of action a few years ago, the software people have folded up their large exhibits and crept away. Companies like MicroSoft are present, but the literature is mostly in German. The action is now located at International Online early in December in London.

The main talking point over the snatched cups of coffee at breaks in the schedule (one euro deposit) and in the bars of the evening, was not about e-matters. The conversational starter was produced the first day of the Fair, which saw a substantial item in the Financial Times. “Books for boffins beat publishing blues” read the headline. Actually it was about journals: these money men do not know the difference. It correctly predicted the sale price of Kluwer Academic. In following day’s issue of The Bookseller (the UK equivalent of Publishers Weekly) the British valuation expert Christopher Gasson wrote in purple prose about publishing mergers in general. He did not pull his punches and some long quotations for purposes of comment and criticism seem in order.

“To an outsider, acquisitions in the publishing industry look like a stupendous Dali-esque banquet in which the big groups are continuously consuming each other, as well as any independent publishers who happen to pass their way...Every year we expect to arrive to discover that the familiar aisles of publishers’ booths have been replaced by a single stand occupying an entire hall. Instead we discover it is much the same as last year, with even the grandest corporate stands — those with multi-story office complexes, coffee bars, mini-gyms and lidos — dwarfed by the sheer scale of the Buchmesse.”

This is a slight exaggeration, but McGraw Hill did have two floors. Gasson however is hopeful about the future. The smaller company, the niche player, is not dead. He continues: “It is the stupidity and brutality of the big publishing groups that are the best guarantees of diversity in publishing...There may be some short term accountancy benefits, but after that most acquirers seem to find it very difficult to harness and drive the vitality of the businesses they have bought. Somehow it slips away and appears again next year at the booth next door.”

Frankfurt does indeed illustrate the diversity of the business. In hall 8 there was a man with a rabbit. He was advertising a book about the rabbit. Some animal lovers did not like this, but the rabbit looked in peak form. A newspaper item mentioned that a German firm is printing novels on toilet paper. There is one chapter per roll. I did not see this new venture but the owner claimed to be inundated with orders. The British distributor Turnaround, which specialises in erotica, gay and lesbian literature and the black experience has an unusual design on the inside cover of its catalogue. This image came from the much talked about A New Kind of Science by Stephen Wolfram, the very independent owner and developer of Mathematica. I went to see the booth. The Wolfram book, which is big, made a formidable presence on the shelves, just above a different style of book, shrink-wrapped to avoid browsers, entitled Huge 2. Religious publishing was noticeably represented. Within a stone’s throw of the Taylor & Francis booth was the presence of a company new to me. This is Summit University Press — not an AAUP member. Their lead title for 2003 reveals the lives of the ascended masters and their cities of light in the spirit world. There is indeed something for everyone.

Readers of ATG may like to know that the Americans are back in Frankfurt. Many US publishers have always grumbled about Frankfurt, its cost and the problems of getting a cab or anywhere reasonable to eat in the evenings. The aftermath of 9/1 in 2001 left many empty sites where booths had been due to go up. This year everyone came back. A leading New York publisher wrote in one preview that “there is nothing like pressing the flesh.” There is a lot of that going on.

What has the Fair got for librarians? The short answer is that there is little laid on for them. I did not meet a single librarian throughout the Fair, although a reliable informant tells me that there were about twenty over from North America. There is a revamped International Centre for Information and Content Management. ICOCOM (not an easy acronym to get the tongue round) ran a scientific programme, but I spotted on the list of speakers only two from English speaking countries — Abby Smith from CLIR and Michael Olson from Harvard. There was also a centre with some booths. Some Casalini were there and a few others known to the library world across the Atlantic, but business seemed far from brisk when I visited. This is a great pity. Publishing is laid open to the view in all its rawness. Publishers are talking to each other and selling to each other and cheating each other. It is all very entrepreneurial and librarians would be advised to find out what sort of content is heading their way. Someone should set up a package tour.

Eldred v. AOL Goliath
by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

In the tiny town of Derry, NH, retired computer administrator Eric Eldred runs a tiny press devoted to great works of literature. Wanting to republish Sherwood Anderson’s Horses and Men, he found himself thwarted by the 1998 copyright extension, which inspired him to file Eldred v. Ashcroft along with Jonathan Zittrain, Lawrence Lessig and Charles Nesson.

And soon the Supremes will pronounce.