June 2003

People Profile: Narda Tafuri

Editor

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Recommended Citation

Editor (2003) 'People Profile: Narda Tafuri,' Against the Grain: Vol. 15: Iss. 3, Article 19.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4118

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A Good Book is Not that Hard to Find: Librarians and the New Out-of-Print Marketplace

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I was using one of the out-of-print (OP) metasearch engines (AddAll http://www.addall.com used or Bookfinder http://www.bookfinder.com) to locate an out-of-print book that had been requested by a faculty member. After a quick online search, I located what I thought was the volume I needed. This was a difficult request as the book I needed was part of a two-volume set. I had been successful in getting volume two, but volume one eluded me.

The online description of the book gave very little information—the condition was listed as “very good,” publisher and year was given, and the book had no “dj” (dust jacket). There was no clue at all as to whether it was volume one or two though the publication year seemed to indicate that it was volume one. I sent an e-mail message to the OP bookseller asking if the book was the volume I was looking for and awaited a response. A short, to the point, message came back: “Yes. Book is available.”

So, I had our Treasurer’s Office send off a check for $11.00 ($8.00 to cover the cost of the book and $3.00 for shipping and handling) and waited for the book to arrive. This was the pre-credit card days and we had no other way to pay for an item. Some out-of-print booksellers would take a purchase order; others demanded “cash upfront.” When the book finally arrived, it was in the condition stated in the online description, but it was not the volume I needed. I asked my acquisitions clerk to follow-up and contact the OP bookseller, explain our situation and return the book for a refund.

A letter was written and the book returned. Some time went by, but we received no response from the OP bookseller. After enough time had elapsed that the book should have been received and a refund issued, I suggested that she might try calling the OP bookseller. She called a couple of times and left messages but still no answer. Finally, she tried again and got an elderly gentleman on the phone. She explained the problem with the book, the fact that we had returned it, and that we had not received a refund. She told the OP bookseller that we wanted the cost of the book refunded as it did not meet our needs. The OP bookseller, who happened to be based in Long Island, NY, told my acquisitions clerk that he would have to check with Vito and get back with her—he further informed her that Vito was his dog.

A long while passed after this conversation. Needless to say the $8.00 check did not appear in the mail. A question I asked myself at this point was, for $8.00 should I just chalk this up to experience? Not all online booksellers are created equal and this could just be another online scam. I decided to give it another shot. After all, anyone with a dog can’t be bad—I have a dog and two cats—and perhaps I could reason with a fellow New Yorker. So I dialed the number and got the OP bookseller on the phone. I started slowly and explained my situation.

The “New Out of Print Marketplace” from page 1

The Online Books Page located at the University of Pennsylvania and now providing links to over 18,000 English language titles. John continues his investigation of digitization projects with a description of the ongoing efforts of the National Yiddish Book Center which is helping to preserve and revitalize out-of-print books that were once thought lost.

Lest you think that books are the only items to fall out of general distribution, Gary Handman at UC Berkeley takes us on a tour of the out-of-distribution (OD) video marketplace to help us locate that long lost copy of “Babes on Broadway.”

Finally, to get an inside track on book bar-