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ATG Interviews Matthew J. Bruccoli

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ATG Interview: Matthew J. Bruccoli
Publisher, Scholar, Bibliographer, Biographer

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ATG: Where to begin? You are such an accomplished scholar and publisher, both a bibliographer and biographer. Your work on F. Scott Fitzgerald and the DLB is well known. Tell us about yourself. How did you begin your professional career?

MJB: My professional career began in 1954 when I walked into the Alderman Library at UVA and asked John Cook Wylie, the Curator of Rare Books, for a job. He couldn’t pay me, but he let me work with him without salary: The best deal I ever made. Mr. Wylie was the most complete bookman I’ve ever known. He made me a bookman and trained me as a bibliographer. I later worked with the great Fredson Bowers, but I owe my professional life to Mr. Wylie.


ATG: Tell us about Bruccoli Clark Layman. How did you get your own imprint at a big publishing house?

MJB: Bruccoli Clark Layman — later Bruccoli Clark Layman — resulted from my friendship and subsequent partnership with C. E. Fraze Clark, Jr. We met in 1962 when I was running the Centenary Edition of Nathaniel Hawthorne at OSU. Fraze was in the early stages of building his monumental Hawthorne Collection. He was a brilliant collector, and we shared the same book-related ambitions. Fraze was a marketing consultant — not an academic — who loved books and made himself a superb Hawthorne scholar. We created the Bruccoli Clark imprint in 1969 to publish limited editions of material from our collections, books about book-collecting, and bibliographies.

Fraze lived in Detroit and was involved in friends-of-libraries activities there with Frederick Ruffner, the founder of Gale Research to whom we owe great debts. Fred began using us as consultants on bibliographical projects. When we produced books for Fred, Bruccoli Clark became a Gale imprint. Fraze was my luck; I could not have accomplished what I have done without him.

We were able to start the Bruccoli Clark imprint because Fraze and I had friends in the book world and the publishing world who advised and encouraged us. Contacts are always essential. Vernon Sternberg of SIU Press — the best publisher-editor I’ve ever worked with — and Pat O’Connor — the king of paperback editors — and William Jovanovich of HBJ — were generous with their help. You are as good as your friends make you.

We were willing to gamble our own money on publishing ventures. I borrowed on my insurance policies, and Fraze invented new kinds of arithmetic.

Luck is mandatory. In addition to my luck in finding Fraze, I was lucky in knowing writers who let us publish their work — starting with James Dickey.

ATG: You are a first-rate scholar and have devoted much of your time to reference and bibliography. Some academic departments look down on this type of endeavor. Could you comment on this?

MJB: It is true that some academic departments look down on bibliographical-editorial-textual scholarship. Some English Departments are dominated by book-dopes (people who do not understand the use of books). So are some libraries. The hell with them. You establish your values and do your work because you trust your instincts. You build research collections for libraries in the certain knowledge that the books will be used after the library administrators are gone.

ATG: Tell us why you became a reference book “junkie” and publisher.

MJB: I became a reference-book publisher because I got much of my education from them and therefore believe in their utility. At P. S. 83 I began reading or browsing reference books and pseudo-reference books because my teachers there taught me almost nothing; and I needed to determine the fields of my ignorance. I learned nothing about literature and literary history at the Bronx High School Science, and I continued to rely on reference books to fill the holes. At Yale I needed literary reference books to catch up with my better-trained classmates.

Accordingly, it was natural for me to produce reference books that would function as teaching tools. The BCL facsimiles of great manuscripts (The Great Gatsby, The Red Badge of Courage, The Sun Also Rises) allow bright students and able teachers to reconstruct the creative process for those masterpieces.

ATG: The DLB is a classic. Tell us about how you got started doing this.

MJB: The DLB began in November 1977 when Frederick Ruffner summoned Fraze and me to Ft. Lauderdale to attend a meeting on authorial biography. The other consultants discouraged Fred. Fraze and I ad-libbed a proposal for a multi-volume work and made out a budget on the back of an envelope. After Fraze secured Fred’s approval to develop the project, I wrote sample entries, and we convened planning sessions. Vern Sternberg was the key advisor. He came up with the idea of publishing the DLB as stand-alone volumes: volumes to be used separately and sold separately.

Fred authorized us to produce three vols. then six, and then ten. DLB Volume 1, The American Renaissance in New England, was published in 1978. At our peak we produced 20 volumes per year, which has been reduced to allow libraries to keep up. The DLB is the most comprehensive literary reference series ever published. As of September 2005 BCL has produced and Gale has published 307 regular DLB volumes, 45 DLB Documentary volumes, and 23 DLB Yearbooks: 13,500 author entries totaling 84 million words. The Yearbooks have been terminated in response to librarian complaints that they didn’t know where to shelve them. No printable comment seems possible.

ATG: Tell us about the Documentary Volumes.

MJB: The Documentary are our pets. There is nothing else like them. They combine the functions of reference books and portable archives. They provide access to research documents in the great libraries of the world and private collections. They expand and democratize learning and teaching. I regard them as irreplaceable. The circumstance that 19 Documentary volumes were published with their own numbering, while 27 Documentaries were published with DLB numbering, has caused confusion.

ATG: Will the DLB ever be finished?

MJB: The DLB will never be finished. Continued on page 51
Writers keep writing. New writers keep emerging. New literatures keep developing. But another 50 regular DLB volumes should make it substantially complete. We particularly want to maintain the DLB documentary volumes and to make them selectively available in trade paperback format after publication in the DLB. Six documentary volumes have been reprinted as paperbacks.

I am disappointed by the meager advice that I have received from reference librarians. I want to know how the DLB can be modified to make it more useful for their parishioners. Books are the most valuable and enduring products of a people. It follows that the lives of writers are of permanent interest to serious readers.

**ATG: Tell us more about Brucoli Clark Layman.**

**MJB:** Richard Layman, my former graduate student, was the first Brucoli Clark employee. He is now the vice-president of BCL. We have 45 employees in Columbia, most of whom are responsible for editing, vetting, checking, and proofing DLB entries. BCL invests considerable time and money in getting it right.

**Brucoli Clark Layman’s work is not limited to DLB volumes.** Series produced for Gale by BCL and its Manly, Inc. imprint include American Decades, World Eras, History in Dispute, and the Gale Study Guides. We also produce reference works for other publishers, including Facts on File, ProQuest, and Omni.

**ATG: What comments do you have about on-demand publishing and eBooks?**

**MJB:** I welcome demand publishing as a way to reissue books and to publish unprofitable books. But I regard online reference tools as “virtual libraries” with suspicion. Most of the online reference sources that I have consulted are untrustworthy. The online products that originated as online projects are crap-shoots. Many are peppered with factual errors because they do not seem to have been vetted or even checked. Nonetheless, librarians seem to prefer online reference tools. The great advantages of online publishing are ease of access and instant correction. The obvious solution is that major reference works should be available in print and online — as is the DLB.

**ATG:** What has been the impact of consolidation in publishing?

**MJB:** The consolidation and conglomeratization of publishers and publishing worries the hell out of me because American publishing is now controlled by accountants and business-school types: not by book-people. The executives in charge don’t value authors except as money-makers. They are competing for the next mercenarian blockbuster. Mary Lee Settle has observed that “a whole industry depends on us and treats us like ______” Random House, which was started by Bennett Cerf and Donald Klopfer in 1925 because they loved being publishers, was known as an authors’ house. It is now a cartel owned by Bertelsmann that requires two pages of LMP to list its divisions and sub-divisions. Mr. Cerf and Mr. Klopfer would not be able to get into the building now. And there is the sad decline of Charles Scribner’s Sons — the house of Maxwell Perkins, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Wolfe — now an imprint of Simon & Schuster, which is a division of Viacom.

**ATG:** We understand that you and your wife are big antique collectors. How do you spend your spare time? What do you like to read? Have you donated some of your collections to libraries?

**MJB:** My wife and I are not antique collectors, but she has a magnificent dollhouse furnished with 19th-century furniture and miniature books. We spend our “spare time” — which is not spare time — in book shops.