Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- Not Good at What They Do

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Today we hear all the time that the bets selectors place on the books they choose for their collections are way too often throwaways. That there’s hardly any collections money left anyhow. That patrons — meaning anyone, really — would do a better job with the money that is left. We heard, when you get down to it, that selectors are not good at what they do.

Of course nobody ever comes out and actually says it that plainly, but when it comes to selectors, that’s the message these days. In fact I don’t remember a group of librarians who have received the public “beating,” as one of the San Diego speakers put it, that selectors have taken in recent years. The closest parallel I can think of is catalogers, who used to get knocked regularly for being reclusive social misfits, who turned out a miniscule number of cataloging records per week, records that didn’t matter much anyway, with their manuals of codified rules and procedures that only they understood or cared about. But catalogers fought back like tigers. They discovered metadata, and ran with it. They invented acronyms that sounded more interesting than AACR2 ever did, such as FRBR and RDA. People began paying attention to catalogers.

But selectors have taken it all lying down so far. They have not fought back. Maybe they are too busy promoting information literacy. Maybe they are occupied all the time with faculty liaison duties. Maybe they are too busy managing the institutional repository. Or too busy setting up arrangements for their patrons to select the books. Or maybe they really don’t have an answer to the negative performance reviews they now receive so regularly and so publicly for the job they do in carrying out what used to be considered, and not at all that long ago, the most prestigious, most important job in the library, book selection.

That’s nothing like the selectors I remember. Having visited libraries across North America for some twenty-five years on behalf of companies who offer approval plans, I’ve probably had more meetings with more academic library selectors than anyone in history, one-on-one meetings in their offices, small group meetings in conference rooms, meetings with a dozen or more selectors at once in wood-paneled, trophy-room, showpiece spaces with portraits of university dignitaries of the past hung on the walls, in between shelves of old books captive behind grilles in cases that were never unlocked.

The selectors I remember always had an answer. When I started out in the mid-1980s, selectors ruled the roost. Everyone catered to them. I remember early on visiting a big library in the Midwest where there was a selector who wanted to meet with me to discuss problems he’d had with our approval plan. I had heard stories about this selector, who from most accounts was quite aggressive staff members alive and had the same taste for vendor representatives. His office was deep in the lower levels of a library building that, to a non-native, was nearly un-navigable. As I descended through warrens of stacks, in and out of surprising dead-end turns, and across unmapped annexes of the building, I thought of Kurtz and Heart of Darkness. I wondered how long it would take me to find my way out.

Kurtz was pleasant that day. I heard later that sometimes he was. And of course that sometimes he wasn’t. In any case, “he built some great collections,” one of the other librarians told me. No doubt he did, from his office fastness crammed with books, catalog, national bibliographies, and, since he was the European history selector, paper bibliographic slips, white ones from the Library of Congress as well as piles of others in a spectrum of colors from the vendors who came from the respective countries and regions of the continent and UK.

Little did I know it, but I was witnessing the beginning of the end for bibliographers whose job was to “build great collections.” Whether or not a book circulated anytime soon was beside the point for them, then. Some were scholars. They often had languages. Sometimes they had good stories of travel abroad for their research or book-buying. Quite a few were Ph.D.s or almost-Ph.D.s, usually from History or English, who hadn’t gotten a teaching job and ended up as librarians, sometimes happily, sometimes with a measure of bitterness. My encounters were not always as pleasant as my
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appointment that day. Some could be arrogant, obtuse, dismissive. Some would have as little as possible to do with you, as the vendor rep. Others would launch impromptu lectures on some point of minutiae that would carry on and on and leave you, or leave an entire roomful, weary with boredom.

But more often these selectors were delightful, engaged with their subject, engaged with the library and the university, and engaged with you as the vendor making rounds. You could learn a lot from them, about subject areas, about publishers, about the book trade. They might wear their learning lightly or they might be bombastic about it, they might be businesslike or they might be witty and sarcastic, they might be charming or they might be peculiar, they might be organized or they might be in perpetual disarray, but they knew their stuff. These selectors were good at what they did.

Then book selection changed into a part-time job, for selectors who might have little or no background in their assigned areas and whose real focus at work was someplace other than collection development. Their job was not to build great collections, but to spend the book money they had — which was often a small amount — as wisely as they could manage to, while engaging more of themselves with the online world developing so quickly around them. The selectors who remained book-oriented began to seem out-of-step. When administrators began to look at how often books circulated, a page had certainly turned.

Today may libraries are focused on turning over some selection duties, at least, to their patrons. Occasionally in these earlier days members of the teaching faculty were involved closely enough in book selection that you encountered these patrons face-to-face. There was one fast-growing new state university where I went every year. It was not well known nationally, but even so was an up-and-coming institution, already a large one, with faculty who came from everywhere. At this school there was a member of the philosophy department who had the librarians more or less terrorized. I would meet with her alone, since everyone else would clear out when her session came around on the agenda.

Her Ph.D. was from an elite national university and her mission at this new institution seemed to be to do everything in her power to transform what she could at her sprawling new campus into a respectable home. The library was within her reach, and she was so controlling there that for several years, I had things set up so that we mailed weekly paper selection slips to her house in a nearby suburb.

One year the budget news looked grim, and the focus of my visit was to cut the size of the approval plan. She and I sat across from one another at one end of a long rectangular table in a conference room which of course we had to ourselves. At one point I suggested that books from a certain publisher, one which I knew was prestigious, were of consistent enough quality that they might remain in the approval plan without any change.

She stiffened, sat up, dropped whatever thought she’d had, and looked straight at me, more engaged with me at that moment in fact than I’d ever seen. “I’m one of the leading philosophers in the country,” she told me, “and I know which publishers are appropriate for this library.” Of course I backed off, but wondered to myself why it was, if she was one of the leading philosophers in the country, that she was spending her time to meet with me.

When I returned to the office — this was the pre-Web era — from curiosity I looked her up in the “Author” volumes of Books in Print. To my surprise, she had two or three books to her credit, including one from an Ivy League university press. If that meant anything at all, she was one of the leading philosophers in the country.

If it had been up to me to pick selectors, I’d have taken Kurtz any day.

Rumors
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Speaking of the Charleston Conference — the 31st is coming up. Can you believe it? I sure can’t! We have already gotten lots of emails and phone calls about the 2011 Charleston Conference “Something’s Gotta Give!” (November 2-5) and the Vendor Showcase (November 2). The whole Charleston Conference team (at least most of them) are meeting this very weekend in Charleston at Katina’s house on the Citadel campus. And some will be calling in on Skype and others will be using cell phones but we will be assembled to work out several of the issues with registration and a new Website among other details. http://www.mcfarlandpub.com/notes.html

Oh! And the Charleston Conference Call for Papers is up and we have already gotten submissions. Was reading that TRLN (the Triangle Libraries Network) has received a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to develop business models and licensing terms for the cooperative acquisition of eBooks and TRLN plans to present some of their findings at the 2011 Charleston Conference. Ho ha! For more information, see the entire press release at http://www.against-the-grain.com/2011/03/trln-to-investigate-e-book-models-with-mellon-foundation-grant/ www.katina.info/conferece

Well, they have squeezed me out of space in this issue so I have to sign off. Rumors will be continued in June and on the ATG NewsChannel. I have a lot more to say! Have you visited? www.against-the-grain.com/