September 1991

Book Review

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Recommended Citation

Gleason, Paul (1991) "Book Review," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 3: Iss. 4, Article 10.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.1201>

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Controversy is the Spice of Life

This issue, Controversy becomes more traditional in the form of a Book Review of an interesting book about—publishers. Sounds like good bedtime reading!

Publisher's Lunch

by Ernest Callenbach

Reviewed by Paul Gleason (International Monetary Fund)

This short novel, which is described on its title page as "a dialogue concerning the secrets of how publishers think and what authors can do about it," is surprisingly successful at both entertaining the reader and conveying basic information about the business realities of U.S. trade publishing.

The book consists almost entirely of dialogue between Jim, 44, a professor of literature and philosophy who has recently gotten divorced, and Michelle, 34, an experienced acquisitions editor with a small, independent trade publishing house. The reader learns that 12 years earlier, Michelle had been a favorite undergraduate student of Jim's. They had had a brief, passionate affair and then never see each other again. A chance phone call from Jim, a twice-published author looking to publish an unconventional work of non-fiction, to Michelle's employer, Terra Press, has been directed to Michelle, who is unmarried, and the two have agreed to meet for lunch to discuss his book and old times.

The story opens as Jim and Michelle meet at a fashionable Italian restaurant. They chat and, not incidentally, discover they are still attracted to one another. Michelle answers Jim's many questions about

publishing and agrees to read his manuscript. He explains to her what his concerns are as an author and why he is sorely tempted to self-publish his book, which has already been rejected by half a dozen New York trade houses. They agree to meet for another publisher's lunch. The book proceeds to reproduce their conversations at this and four later meetings, at which both publishing issues and their feelings for each other are explored in some depth. My description of the book's

The book's appendix, which contains a very limited list of sources of further information on various topics, was clearly an afterthought; and the index—which contains such entries as "Cash cows," "Daring publishers," and "Thievery, accusations of"—has been prepared partly for laughs. In the opinion of this reviewer, these are not serious flaws in a book of this kind.

The author, who currently works as a sponsoring editor (in film and natural history) at the University of Cali-

fornia Press, has previously worked as an editor, publisher, self-publisher, and author. His clear understanding of the principal problems faced by each of these participants in the publishing process—particularly as it is carried out in small, independ-

ent firms—has enabled him to convey many valuable insights to readers of this short book. It should interest both would-be authors and already published authors who wish to get published more satisfactorily the next time around. Publishing people, librarians, and general readers interested in publishing are also likely to find it rewarding.

Paul Gleason is an assistant editor with the International Monetary Fund (Washington D.C.). The views expressed in this review are those of the author and do not reflect those of the IMF.

"The story opens as Jim and Michelle meet at a fashionable Italian restaurant. They chat and, not incidentally, discover they are still attracted to one another."

plot will end here, since to say more might spoil some of the fun for the reader.

Surprisingly, the book works as both a contemporary love story and a vehicle for publishing education. The reader may, indeed, have to read a few pages before suspending disbelief. Nonetheless, Callenbach's skillfully constructed dialogue quickly draws the reader into the store, and the blossoming romance between Jim and Michelle helps to sustain the reader's interest when their conversations turn to technical aspects of publishing.