November 1992

Interview/ Richard Abel/ Part 3

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Recommended Citation

Biblarz, Dora (1992) "Interview/ Richard Abel/ Part 3," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 4: Iss. 5, Article 17.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.1290>

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Against the Grain Interview

RICHARD ABEL — Part 3

The Company Goes International, Turnkey Libraries, and Conclusion
Interview by **Dora Biblarz** (Arizona State University)

Here we have part three (of three parts) from the perspective of the founder of one of the most influential companies in the history of library bookselling, acquisitions and collection development in North America.

ATG: We were talking about the expansion of Richard Abel & Company and about how you created consistency in approval plan profiling as you grew. What were some of the other problems expansion caused?

RA: We had also taken on the task of solving the problem of coeditions. A number of European libraries, particularly the big national libraries, were looking at the approval program as a way to deal with their problems of acquisitions. So along some time in the mid-sixties or so, we were asked to supply complete English language approval plans, which were really blanket order plans in the case of many libraries which wanted everything published in the English language. This was before they met the kind of economic stringencies that they now face. So, for example, we were reviewing all the books from England, all the books from the United States, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, as well as the stuff coming off the continent in the English language for a number of national libraries including the British Library, the Bibliotheque Nationale in France, the National Libraries of Sweden, Denmark, etc. In addition, we had a lot of approval plans going with academic libraries on the continent and England.

So now we were really, really having to face the whole issue of how to resolve the coedition problems. We opted very early on for the idea of one edition for the world. The Australian National Library had a blanket approval plan with us, as did the one in New Zealand, the British Library, etc. So wherever the book appeared first, that edition went into the approval plan for all libraries which had an English language plan — by this time we'd changed the nomenclature to English language ap-

proval plan, to deal with all these kinds of problems. So if the English edition was the first to appear, that was the one we'd send. If the American was first to appear, that's what we'd send. If the Australian was first, that's what we'd send.

ATG: From the librarian's perspective, trying to figure out which came first is a difficult problem.

RA: Yes, but you see we had the advantage that we had people on the spot. We had offices in London, Amsterdam, Berne, Sydney and Toronto, among others. Furthermore, because we were the principal customer — 25%-50% of their total sales -- of most of the world's scholarly and scientific publishers, we had superb information from them. We were very important to publishers. We received galley proofs from virtually all publishers and worked from them for our systems. As you know, galley proofs can be anything from two months to something like six months in advance of the appearance of the book.

One of the great losses when the Abel company went down the tubes, in my judgment, was that the English language world's libraries were thrown back on their own resources to try to figure out which was the first edition, and they often wouldn't receive the first edition, you see. They bought a coedition that came out nine months later, or two years later or something. And they were and

still are paying inflated prices, because typically the first edition is the cheapest.

So, without boasting, I think that at the time, back in the seventies, it could be said that we knew more about what was happening in the international book world than anybody, because we had all these on the spot sources of information and we had the systems to sort these things out. I know that we were saving libraries, and I don't care whether it was the University of Arizona or whether it was the British Library, or the National Library of Australia, or Sydney University, we were saving them money because we were getting the cheapest edition in and we were improving their service because we were getting the first edition in.

ATG: So, even more than the fact that you were saving the libraries so much money, there's this essential, underlying assumption that you were bringing the service to the libraries that can't be done today.

RA: That's right. And, here again, I'd like at this point to say that in that interview you did with Fred [Gullette], Fred said, "Well, Abel shouldn't have gotten involved in all this international stuff. If I had any advice to give him today, I would have said, keep it domestic." The logic of what we were doing did not permit that. If you're going to play the string out to its logical end, which we had to do in terms of service to libraries, then we had to do these things.

What I'm really saying is that there is no library today that can get the kind of service that we could give them in, say 1973. Impossible, because there is nobody out there so positioned to do it. And I want to make a point of that.

ATG: Now that we're getting to the peak here, we're talking about some of the successful things that you did, and that may be a clue indicating that you couldn't maintain such success under the circumstances.

RA: No, I want to put that question to rest right now. We didn't die for lack of profitability. We didn't die for lack of sales. We died of cash flow problems. Our average accounts receivable, this was back in '73-'74, went up from 72 days to 105 days in less than 6 months' time. The libraries, well, not the libraries, the academic institutions were solving their cash flow problems in that very deep recession (remember that recession came on, "bam", right straight down?) by stretching out their vendors.

We were operating at the rate of \$50 million a year at that point. You can do the arithmetic yourself. That's about \$4 million a month. Now you take the difference between 72 days and 105 days, that's a little over a month. So we, in effect, had \$4 million taken out of the operation. That is where we died, we didn't die for any of the common reasons.

In addition, you may recall that interest rates were way up there; we were financing our accounts receivable, which we had done for years. The bank would finance them up to 90 days, one day over 90 days they wouldn't finance any more. So now, not only does the average receivable go up to 105 days, but at once your financing falls away. The financing remaining is at interest rates way up to 20%.

Some have said there were too many programmers, that we did too much with computers. Not at all, we were profitable, thanks very much. We could support that payroll. It was growing too fast — yes, in one sense it was growing too fast, because we were having to borrow so heavily. But we had been successfully doing that for years and years. The problem was simply a cash flow problem, so let's put that one to bed.

The other thing our failure led to was a diminution of service to libraries. Now we are back to supplying books. We had a large data base of books on the approval program, all classified by subject and so on, and we had a large data base of cataloging. Furthermore, we could move from one data base to the other. So we could say "This library got this book, therefore they're going to get this piece of cataloging," as the two were tied together.

Instead of cataloging we first started sending out decks of catalog cards, quite literally printed on the computer. We did so because no library was yet set up

to take a machine-readable record from us. They were only in a position to use sets of cards. For some, I can remember the Royal Danish Library, which is the national library of Denmark, we were sending in an average of 50 cards in a set. For libraries prepared to accept LC cataloging in full, including the Cutter number, we could also send spine labels and book pockets all set up, ready to go. All they had to do was paste them in — or we'd paste them in for the library.

Turnkey Libraries

These capabilities in turn led to furnishing what we called turnkey libraries. There was a need to build libraries for new institutions, where they might not have a librarian for the first year or two, until students arrived. We would, in effect, use a kind of an approval plan definition of what was to go in to such libraries. The president would tell us what departments there were going to be and what levels of instruction they were going to offer. Using the standard lists that we had developed for undergraduate libraries — we had a longer list of, I don't know 50,000 or 75,000 titles, that we'd worked out over a period of years, and had been really through the fire, examined and re-examined by numerous librarians and faculty — together with the historic approval plan data base, we could, in effect, run a retrospective approval plan. After the books came in, we'd do all the cataloging, so that's how we got this gigantic cataloging data base. We would then make the books shelf-ready with spine labels, etc.

Probably the biggest of these turnkey libraries we ever did was the University of Texas—San Antonio, where we put in a library of 250,000 volumes, give or take a few, and I can't remember how many backfiles of periodicals, but a larger number, all cataloged, all processed. We held them in a warehouse in Portland and every once in a while the president would come up and look at his books, to be sure that we weren't skimming them. He was an old Texas politician-type, who thought the worst of absolutely everybody. Then one day he called and said, "The library building is finished, now, ship the books."

Consolidated Freightways brought nine trucks and trailers out, which we loaded and they went down as a convoy to San Antonio, Texas. The president had lined up a bunch of students who

started shelving on a Monday morning, because we timed it so the trucks would all be on the campus sometime on Sunday. On Thursday afternoon he called to say, "All the books are on the shelves, in order." We also sent, I think it was, 45 copies of a microfiche catalog — there was not a card catalog, only a microfiche catalog, and we sent the tapes, of course, in MARC format, so he could have a machine-readable record as well as a microform record. He had the microfiche catalogs scattered around, not only in the library, but in classroom buildings and in the dormitories, and so on and so forth, so that the people could access the library collection from a remote location.

ATG: Another idea before its time.

RA: The ability to make a turnkey library was a kind of cumulation, the sign, the outward and visible sign of the inward, invisible work that we had been doing all these years. To be able to put together a collection of that size, to catalog it, to process it, to make it 100% usable, the day the books hit there, was always one of our guiding objectives.

ATG: You talk about the automation as though it was a natural outcome of everything that happened. Did you have special automation background?

RA: I knew nothing about computers, but it was perfectly clear to me, what we were really looking at when we looked into the future a ways, was the manipulation of absolutely gigantic databases. Now, I don't care if the database was of the libraries on approval plans, or the libraries that were subscribing to a particular series of books, or whether it was a database of undergraduate collections, or a database of approval books, or whether it was cataloging to go with them, or a particular catalog for a particular library — they all were, from a logical and systematic view, the same thing. A particular catalog for a particular library is, after all, only a subset, from a logical point of view, of a set of cataloging records. It was also perfectly clear to me that there was no way that we could find an efficient and cost effective way to handle such databases with people. We had to do it with computers, because we had to have the kind of mind-numbing willingness to just sit there for 24 or 48 hours and stupidly

keep doing the same thing over and over and over again. You couldn't hire staff to do that, but you could make the computer do it because it didn't care.

ATG: Starting with Flex-o-writers, then on to computers.

RA: That's right, but we could have done the job with the Flex-o-writer. We'd become very clever with how to run these machines, but they did not solve the problem of speed. When the computers came along, we stayed with them. We had the second IBM 360 in Portland; a utility company had bought one before we did, for billing purposes.

ATG: Did you have a special person in charge?

RA: We had some very, very competent people. The way that started was with the Boeing Company up in Seattle, because they were using computers for designing and building new airplanes and also for military work. They had assembled from around the country a quite remarkable bunch of computer types, systems analysts, programmers, really bright, hard-driving guys. Just about the time we started with computers, Boeing had some reductions, so we got a number of great people out of them. One of the libraries we served at Boeing was called Boeing Research and the guy who was the librarian there and I were working on some automation programs which brought me into contact with some of their computer types. So we got a fantastic bunch of people and they were really committed. You'd come in on a Sunday afternoon and find some of them working almost for the fun of it.

Anyway, we had an outstanding gang of 20-25 people doing the programming to bring up all these systems. I will claim some honor in this whole thing, because I was the guy who would fundamentally describe all the inputs, the outputs and the forms. The computer staff would worry about the black box in between. I don't know how to program, but I do know how to think through a system. Our problem was really a question of a systematic approach to the publishing world and to libraries. So from an operational point of view, you sat there and ground away, until you knew that you had every detail of the system right. And what you got

at the end of the day was the capacity of this big, dumb machine to manipulate large databases.

There still aren't all that many databases of the size today that we were running in those days. In 1975, when we went down the tubes, all of our 5 million catalog records were in MARC because of all the cataloging we'd done for undergraduate and turnkey libraries over the years. We were not only going back into the old Library of Congress NUCs and the BNB and putting them up, but there were 4 or 5 professional catalogers doing original cataloging and this also went into the database.

The People and the Services

Our profilers at the other end, a number of whom were library-trained people, were fundamentally cataloger-types. This is because we were trying to make an entry on the approval form that could be used for cataloging. You may remember that some libraries literally used part of our approval form as a temporary cataloging record, until they received the LC record.

All of this work was under the direction of Don Stave and Kent Hendrickson. Stave was the first of many librarians that we hired and he was the expert on the approval plans. But as we started to do more cataloging, we needed to draw together the cataloging program and the approval plan. Since not all the libraries who were on the approval plan were taking cataloging, we had to keep it a separate operation, and because not every library which was buying cataloging was on the approval plan, we had to keep that running separately as well. But we needed to coordinate their operations. Stave was fundamentally running the approval plan. Kent Hendrickson, to use library jargon, was in charge of technical processes. He worked with Stave while the people in cataloging worked with Kent, as well as the people who worked in what we called the processing division, for libraries that wanted us to send in the books shelf-ready.

ATG: And you also hired bookmen?

RA: Yes. And as I reflect, I think we came at an awfully lucky time. We had a bunch of librarians and book people who were really, thoroughly committed to the book, or fundamentally dedicated

to the book and willing to learn. Did you ever know Aaron Saady? You must have known Aaron when you were at Davis.

Aaron came from a trade book background, but he quickly learned the library game, because Aaron was a fast study and Aaron was curious.

ATG: How did you come upon Aaron?

RA: We got Aaron through Oliver Sitea. He had worked in Hollywood for Oliver. We hired Oliver when I could no longer keep up with the book buying because the company had grown so.

ATG: When I knew him, Oliver was running a bookstore in West Los Angeles.

RA: That's right, and Oliver was widely acknowledged as one of the best book buyers in the book trade. When I had to give up the buying, we hunted around until we found a guy who was really knowledgeable about books, and we found Oliver. Then Oliver told us about Aaron. Oliver was never much to get out to libraries, Oliver was an inside guy. Aaron, on the other hand, was outgoing. He hated the day in the office. He wanted to be out there, putting on a good show.

It seems to me that the reason I can say that that company had one of the finest collections of people that the book trade has ever, ever seen pulled together, is because all those people were dedicated. And it wasn't only the Oliver Siteas and the Aaron Saadys, the Kent Hendricksons, the Don Staves, etc. There were a whole gang of people whom most of the librarians never saw. A large number of them were women who had raised their families and had come back into the labor force. A lot of them had very little training beyond high school, but those people were so dedicated, they were the people who were doing the hands-on stuff to get the orders converted to books going back into the libraries. Many of the people who were getting new books into the approval plan, and so on, were a fantastic bunch of utterly dedicated people in their 50's and in their 60's. That shared dedication is what made that whole organization run.

ATG: I have here a note about some of the services that you originated. One

of them is marking individualized copies of *PW* and *BNB* for libraries, to tell them what they were going to be receiving. How did that come about?

RA: Yes, that's one of the things we added to the approval plan, after libraries started inquiring, "What is it that we can expect on our approval plan?" As you know, it's very costly for a library to issue a purchase order, due to all the checking that must be done before it is prepared. The last time I looked at these numbers it was something like \$20 or \$25 invested before that purchase order ever went out the door to acquire a book. The librarians did not wish to incur this cost if the book was going to come in automatically. Since some of the tools that librarians used for ordering were periodicals like *PW*, *The Bookseller*, and so on, we said "OK, we'll mark them up to tell you what's going to be coming. When you see these titles you don't have to do anything about them; you don't have to spend that \$20 or \$25 and issue an order; it's come or is coming in to you at no cost."

ATG: But you had the cost at your end, to have somebody go through each *Weekly Record* and so on.

RA: So much of what we were doing was, in fact, bringing about economies of scale to libraries. We were doing all kinds of things that every library had been doing for themselves, and could continue to do for themselves, but it was much cheaper for all those libraries if a centralized agency, like us, did it and passed it along. The result was that such services cost libraries pennies instead of dollars.

ATG: It seems to me that when I came into the field in 1971-72, the existence of the approval plan was very well accepted in most academic libraries. However, there were still holdouts who felt the approval plan was a threat. What did you tell those people?

RA: We only had approval plans. We have never told Dora Biblarz that there is one book that she had to buy, that she didn't feel she should buy. We have never once said that to any librarian.

ATG: But you have heard that before.

RA: We heard it, and we heard that we were trying to put librarians out of work. I think that we have, in fact done the opposite. Remember that back when we got started, most of the books that went into a library were selected by the faculty; the acquisitions division was largely a clerical operation that was converting a request from a faculty member into an order. When the approval program first came along, faculty committees were initially looking at the books and saying, "We're going to keep this one; we're going to send that one back." But as time went forward, the faculty did less and less of such decision-making while librarians in the acquisitions department, public services, circulation increasingly said, "We'll send that one and that one back, and we'll keep this one" We, in fact, put the librarian into a stronger selection role than they ever enjoyed before.

ATG: I think you're right. Because the notion of collection development is a relatively new one. When you look at libraries in other countries, there's still that faculty-expert, decision maker role in place.

RA: Yes, and I believe that the approval program had a hand, I won't say it's the only factor, but it had a big hand in this change of role. In fact, I watched it happen: fewer and fewer faculty committees came in to review the books, while more and more responsibility fell on librarians. And I believe that this change in role started to push librarians back into the tradition of the scholar/librarian. As things go forward, we are going to one day no longer find libraries set up the way they're set up now, with acquisitions divisions, cataloging, circulation divisions. Instead, we're going to see a whole bunch of scholar/librarians each one of whom has a responsibility for some subject area or field in which they are highly competent and in which they have been trained and in which they have done graduate work. They know the literature in that discipline, they keep current with what is happening, they could, in fact, teach that subject. They will catalog the books because they can do a better job of cataloging; they know what the subject matter is, for subject matter cataloging is going to become critical as part of user access, not the authority of the entry.

Conclusion

ATG: Before we close, I just want to make sure we have covered everything that you would like to.

RA: There are two things I would like to say here: When the company went down the tubes, the founder obviously had some real regrets. One of those regrets is what happened to the people within the organization. This was a magnificent gathering of people. I don't think it could ever be assembled again, and I feel very, very badly about that.

Yet they have gone on. Many of these people went on to found and operate library bookselling firms, like Academic Book Center, Blackwell's, Thomas Slatner Bookseller, and Bernard Starkman. They have gone on to do a great job, those people.

The other point I want to make, the other real regret I have, is that book people, I think, do not yet understand the enormous power of the approval plan in the rationalization of the book trade. It has been construed and conceived of only as a library tool. Yet, Lyman Newlin and I were doing the research work, scut work, footwork, to extend it to other points of the book trade. We had to quit as we tried to find money to keep the company alive. But Lyman and I, both before and after the failure, were working on trying to rationalize more of the book trade. We were, in simple words, looking at the person, A, who knows, and the person, B, who has a need to know and trying to chart the means to rationalize the movement of that knowledge.

Libraries represent only about 20%-25% of the scholarly book market; there's another 75%-80% out there, but it's very costly to reach, consequently publishers spend immense amounts of money on maintaining direct mail of one kind or another. If the old Abel Company could have kept going, we were about to start putting all of the buyers of scholarly books up on the approval plan, profiling them. Think of what that would have done to the marketing bill of publishers, for we could go directly to purchasers with a particular book. Think of what the approval plan did to keep the costs of acquisition down in libraries. The same could be done for publishers. Then think of what a reduction in cost of mailing would do to the price of books. Suddenly the price of books can be reduced because it doesn't cost as much to market them.

Then, think of the bookstores. Bookstores are today, by and large, only in the entertainment business. That is to say, they do not carry a good representation of the books that are important, from a cultural point of view. I don't really care about the sequel to *Gone with the Wind*, this obsession with such a book is a sick thing. It is making money, of course, but that does little about keeping the culture intact. Bookstores lost out in the thirties on the really serious books and they've never really caught back up.

So we were working on the prototype of an approval plan for bookstores. We planned to send profiled books on approval. If the books were sold, the bookstores would pay us for them. If not, they'd send them back, just as did libraries. But we were convinced that the booksellers would see the books put in place by their approval plan start to march out the door and new customers start to come in the door. We put the risk of handling serious books back to the publisher, where the risk should be. And we would see bookstores returned to the position of community cultural centers. The point I want to make is, that nobody - now, let's see how long the company's been dead, the company's been dead for

fifteen years — nobody in fifteen years has ever used that powerful tool to further rationalize the movement of knowledge from A to B. Only libraries have tried but they are only 20%-25% of the whole game. I just do not understand why nobody has picked up and used this powerful, powerful tool to do the kinds of things needed to further rationalize the book trade. If we could get the price of books down, we could sell more of them. Today, the average scholarly book is the equivalent to the cost of housing one person for one week, or feeding one person for one week. Now, that's a lot to ask of anybody, to, in effect, give up one week's food or a week's housing for a book. But, if we could bring the price down, we could get more books into more people's hands and therefore the cultural role that books play could be better done.

ATG: At this point do you see anybody who could be in that position, to make that analysis and continue this work?

RA: I don't, because the dominant figures I see in the trade today are the bean counters. Their principal concern

is the bottom line, and even that for its immediate contribution this quarter. If any activity makes little or no contribution to the bottom line, then we're not going to do it.

I am just very discouraged that nobody has picked up some of the concepts we pioneered. Instead, even the approval plan in libraries is not being used in the old way. None of them are going after the small publishers, the society publishers: "can't make money" is always the argument. One edition for the whole world — that whole notion has been discarded. I don't believe there is any economic justification for this falling back whatsoever. We were doing just fine, thank you, if we hadn't gotten into a cash-flow bind. We weren't paying big wages or big salaries, but we were profitable while doing all these things.

In short, I see several powerful concepts and tools being either underutilized or abandoned. Library booksellers are simply pedaling in place - not going forward. And the same is true of the trade. Until the problem of book distribution is solved, this culture and the central tool/artifact of culture, the book, will continue to be badly served. ☞

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