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Publishing's World/ Algonquin Books

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Publishing's World

Column Editor, **Sandy Paul** (President, SKP Associates)

*With this issue, we begin a new feature column on some of the leading lights in our world of publishing. Contributors are selected by **Sandy Paul**, the maven of a famous publishing course at New York University in her other (non-standards) life.*

Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill by **Rona Marquette**

Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill was founded a decade ago, almost by accident. Since then, the unique Southern house has built a reputation as a showcase for new fiction with an unrivaled commitment to discovering and nurturing young novelists.

Louis D. Rubin, Jr., Emeritus Professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, was in New York in late December of 1981 for the annual Modern Language Association meeting. He was taking part in a panel discussion on the literary situation in the South. The consensus was that, despite the South's extraordinarily rich tradition for fiction in the 20th Century, it was becoming increasingly difficult to get published. This was especially true for untried regional writers who, without New York publishing contacts or a literary agent, stood slim chance in the literary marketplace. Another disadvantage facing young writers was the "Gotham mentality" of New York publishers and editors about what Southern writing should be like.

As Rubin states, *"The publishing industry in the Big Apple tended, as always, to have very definite ideas about what fiction set in the South ought to be like, and about. Southern writers and black writers in particular had for generations labored under the handicap that the publishers on whose tastes their hopes of publication resided were likely to view them as exotics, whether of the quaint or the scandalous variety. All in all, for a young Southern writer without connections and hoping to get a first novel accepted and published, matters were in a parlous way."*

On the way back to North Carolina on the train, Rubin continued to mull

over the situation, taking into consideration that he had spent his career encouraging young people, mostly Southerners, to write, and now there seemed to be only shrinking outlets for their talents. Among Rubin's prized pupils were **John Barth**, **Lee Smith**, and **Annie Dillard**, but despite even their considerable talents, Rubin says, *"It had always been difficult for them to get a hearing. When Barth wrote his first novel (not the one that got published), it had been roundly rejected, and probably rightly so. But there should have been an editor somewhere able to recognize the enormous promise inherent in its pages and willing to offer him an advance against a future book and work with him. But there wasn't — because he didn't know anybody who would vouch for him and neither did I."*

Rubin decided then to found a publishing house in North Carolina that would devote its efforts to recognizing and rewarding promising new writers. In **Shannon Ravenel**, a former student and Houghton Mifflin editor then working as annual editor of *The Best American Short Stories*, Rubin found that rare editor capable of discovering and nurturing new literary talents. Ravenel was also ideal because of her access to fresh voices through the multitude of literary magazines and journals she read in editing the annual *Best American Short Stories*.

Rubin and Ravenel decided that they didn't want merely to "print" books by promising young authors, but "to launch those writers upon the literary scene." Therefore, they would need to establish an actual national trade publishing house, complete with an advertising and promotions department and the cash to pay author advances, no matter how minuscule to start with. A small sum of money was raised, and Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill was born, in a shed behind Louis Rubin's garage. Shannon Ravenel, senior editor, worked from her home in St. Louis.

Algonquin's first list, consisting of five titles, was published in the fall of 1983. Of the five original titles, only one was fiction. But, as Rubin and

Ravenel soon realized, what they knew about was fiction, and Algonquin's list soon began a shift toward the fiction it is now famous for. Also apparent early was that in order to sell paperback rights, Algonquin would need an agent in New York. A New York representative was contracted, and one of Rubin's most amusing and revealing anecdotes revolves around this incident. In 1984, Algonquin ("the backwoods amateurs") sent the manuscript of a novel by an unknown North Carolina author to its savvy New York agent. The response, Rubin tells, hangs to this day "in the john next to my office." It reads: *"Our opinion is that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to sell this novel to a paperback fiction house given today's fiction market. Paperback editors are becoming more choosy... even though they are paying less than ever."* Beneath this response hangs a copyright page from **Clyde Edgerton's** acclaimed *Raney*, 13th Printing, Ballantine Books, November 1989.

Although Algonquin established itself in the mid to late 1980's as an imprint with impressive new fiction, the financial constraints on an independent small publisher made staying afloat in a tight economy difficult for the tiny house. Because printers require payment on delivery, print runs were dictated by available cash flow. Per unit costs for a small print run are substantially higher for a small run than for a large one. This meant that Algonquin's print runs were always small, and if a title was selling well, it had to be reprinted, (thus incurring pre-press costs again). For example, the original Algonquin cloth version of *Raney* sold 19,000 copies, but that was over a course of five separate printings. In addition, the book was often out of stock due to time lapses between rave reviews, reprint orders, and actual bookstore deliveries.

Success for Algonquin proved a mixed blessing. For, once a hardcover title sold well and the popularity of its author grew and the book brought in a large paperback rights sum, the need for a larger advance for the author's next book also grew. This led to even

further financial difficulties for the fledgling house. Eventually, Algonquin ran out of money altogether. In 1986, Taylor Publishing of Texas stepped in to provide marketing and distribution services to Algonquin for a percentage of the profits. However, since Taylor did not invest any capital, Algonquin's financial straits remained dire, and the house had to be sold outright, at a loss.

Louis Rubin and Shannon Ravenel, Algonquin's co-founders, initially considered selling to Random House, until an unexpected offer came along from **Peter Workman at Workman Publishing**. Rubin felt that Workman would be the parent company most likely to respect Algonquin's editorial independence while providing sales and marketing expertise equal to the quality of Algonquin's writing.

To some in the book publishing world, the Algonquin-Workman combination is a strange union. Workman is a quirky New York house with a decidedly colorful commercial image; a producer of calendars and toys in addition to nonfiction paperbacks. Algonquin, as its name suggests, was founded and functions in a manner evocative of another era. It is a literary house of rare integrity, where authors are treated with the greatest care and their books are looked upon as hand-wrought creations, worthy of painstaking attention unheard-of in the contemporary publishing climate.

The post-Workman Algonquin shows evidence of Workman's influences yet also manages to retain a sense of identity and integrity, distinctly Southern and literary in flavor. A new emphasis on Algonquin's impressive backlist has been made possible by Workman's available funds and includes works by **Jill McCorkle, Kaye Gibbons, Larry Brown, Robert Love Taylor, Clyde Edgerton** and **Eric Larson**, in addition to non-fiction selections. One notable deletion from the list is the phasing-out of the *Major Campaigns and Battles Series* in military history which was one of Rubin's projects.

Departures from Algonquin's usual fare include a "gift" category — a first for Algonquin, with two titles to date — *Gardener's Latin: A Lexicon* and *Out on the Porch: An Evocation in Words and Pictures*. Another interesting item is *The Algonquin Literary Quiz Book*, compiled by Rubin. Algonquin is also

doing that quintessential Workman item, a calendar. The first, "*The Vanishing South*," combines paintings by a Tennessee artist and commentary by William Styron. 1991 saw the inauguration of Front Porch Paperbacks — a new fiction imprint which may eventually be expanded to include non-fiction, says Workman-appointed publisher **Elisabeth Scharlatt**. Front Porch Paperbacks have been well received because of their reasonable price (the average book sells for \$8.95) and because it is always easier to sell paper fiction than cloth, especially the works of new novelists.

A feature of Algonquin's list is always the short fiction anthology, *New Stories from the South: The Year's Best*. The 1992 edition, edited by Shannon Ravenel, who has returned to Chapel Hill and serves as Algonquin's editorial director, has been expanded to include a list of editorial addresses of all publications considered in the search for new material. The Fall 1992 list features the fifth novel by acclaimed North Carolina author **Clyde Edgerton**, *In Memory of Junior* and four first novels: **Luke Whisnant's** *Watching TV with the Red Chinese*, **Carol Dawson's** *The Waking Spell*, **John Russell's** *Favorite Sons* and **Cindy Bonner's** *Lily*. The non-fiction feature is **Kevin Horrigan's** *The Right Kind of Heroes* about high school football coach Bob Shannon and his famed East St. Louis Flyers. So, while the contests of the list seems inspired by Workman, the character of even Algonquin's new undertakings remains true to its Southern literary roots and traditions.

Algonquin's 1993 list will include another Workman classic, but in the Southern tradition — a cookbook from the Junior League of Charleston, SC. The addition of gift books, a cookbook, and an emphasis on the backlist all reflect Workman's marketing expertise. It also suggests that Algonquin's list is being rounded out with new Workmanesque projects just as Workman's holdings are rounded out by the addition of Algonquin's fiction.

But despite all the apparent changes, Algonquin's Chapel Hill editorial offices seem to be proceeding unhindered. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. announced his retirement earlier this year (3 years prior to the originally agreed-upon date), but he still goes to the office every day, according to Elisabeth Scharlatt. But in

the words of a gentleman and a scholar, Rubin reiterated that what makes Algonquin distinctive remains:

"We edit our books. We work with our authors, almost all of whom have stood by us... for just as long as it takes to make a manuscript into as good a book as it can possibly be. We read every manuscript submitted to us, keeping a special eye out for gifted young hitherto-unpublished authors who don't yet have agents. ... We find them because we look for good fiction. ... Sometimes we see that the talent is there but they're writing the wrong book, or telling the story wrong, or burying it under a great deal of impedimenta. When that happens we do our best to help them discover the book they should be writing, tell the story as it should be told, cut away the dross to get at the gem. We believe that's what the true function of a fiction editor should be. A publishing house that depends upon what literary agents send them will get good books, saleable books, well-wrought books, books by authors whose names automatically guarantee readership and sales, but they'll miss out on the jewels in the rough, gifted and talented young authors who because they're not treading along conventional paths have to learn to tell the stories they want to tell."

The final "Gotham" irony is that these same authors wanted to tell their stories to New York publishers, but those publishers didn't want to listen; most of Algonquin's most highly acclaimed early works were first submitted, and turned down, in New York.

Algonquin's Fall 1992 catalog states "It has been our privilege to introduce distinctive and memorable new writers to you over the years; we expect to keep right on doing it." Today, when the theory that in a few short decades there will only be seven publishers is bandied about a bit too frequently for some tastes, it is both remarkable and reassuring to witness the emergence and

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