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Publisher Interview/ Jeffrey Kittay

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Publisher Interview - Jeffrey Kittay

Lingua Franca — that's the name of a new journal. And this new "Review of Academic Life" has just won the prestigious National Magazine Award for general excellence. *Lingua Franca* has been mentioned in the same breath as *Newsweek*, *Vanity Fair*, and the *New Yorker*. What is *Lingua Franca*? And who or what is the force behind it? Enter Jeffrey Kittay, its founder and publisher. We spoke to Mr. Kittay just after he had won the National Magazine Award.

Q: Just what are the National Magazine Awards and what is it like to win one?

A: The National Magazine Awards are given by the American Society of Magazine Editors every April. They are like the Pulitzers for magazines, but the awards ceremony has resemblances more to the Oscars: 1300 people from the world of magazines packed into the ballroom of the Waldorf Astoria, multimedia presentations of each nominated magazine, spotlights on your table when you're announced as a winner, the handing over of a statue at the podium, the acceptance speech: It's quite a big deal.

The award was for general excellence in a publication with a circulation below 100,000. The winners in the other circulation categories were *American Photo*, *The Atlantic*, and *Newsweek*.

For us to win something like that shows that if writing about academic subjects is done with a sense of style, people are fascinated. There is a hunger for this kind of material if the writing is journalistically enticing.

Q: At the College of Charleston we ask professors to suggest journal adds and cancellations once a year. This past year, *Lingua Franca* was at the top of one of our lists. Bill Katz also picked *LF* as one of the top ten magazines of 1992 in *Library Journal*. What exactly is "the stuff" that *Lingua Franca* is made of?

A: It's "shoptalk" and reportage

about the professional world of scholars and professors. After teaching French literature at Yale for six years, I had a sense that academic "shoptalk" was very rich and that a lot of people wished that they were more in touch with it. This included people outside academia as well as those within it. Like law and medicine, academia is a priesthood and all priesthoods are fascinating.

Q: You have mentioned elsewhere that *The American Lawyer* was a model for you?

A: In the law profession, there are loads of periodicals of "official lawyerese," but simultaneously there is a juicy conversation going on: how much money you make, how you deal with a large firm, how you're judged by the business you bring in, what the conflicts are when you come up through the ranks, who is a shameless self-promoter — that kind of thing.

About 14 years ago, a fellow named Steve Brill decided to cover the pro

photo: Leo Touchet

fession in the way that lawyers talk about it among themselves. The magazine created a sensation — law firms were initially appalled. It is now a fixture. It has succeeded in becoming the insider magazine of an elite profession.

One big difference between his magazine and mine, however: the law is a wealthy business: there is plenty of money flowing around, and that in itself creates stories as well as attracting advertisers. By contrast, the academic profession is quite modest. I have to design a more modest,

downscale product.

Q: Where did the name *Lingua Franca* come from?

A: I figured we needed an esoteric name since academics are an esoteric group. I was working on a book called *The Emergence of Prose* (U of Minnesota Press, 1987) and a lot of it deals with the written and the spoken, the learned language and the vernacular in the European Middle Ages. I was intrigued by that fact that in a society broken into different language groups, people usually improvise (say, around the marketplace) a "lingua franca" — a common language, a set of gestures, a mixed jargon, an argot — in which they can still communicate with each other. I wanted to create a publication that would be the way people from different disciplines and technical backgrounds talk to each other in a common language. *Lingua Franca* is a snooty way of saying an unsnooty thing.

Q: So — when was the first issue of *LF* published? Where did you get the money to do it all? Did you have a business plan?

A: I started developing the idea in 1988, trying out the concept and the writers, dealing with the design, and talking to hundreds of people. It took a long time until I was satisfied that we could put out a first issue and see what it would be, in reality and not just in my head. The first issue was published in June of 1990, exactly 3 years ago. I started it with my own money and with money from my family and friends — the kind of people who wouldn't come after me with an axe if there was a problem. I didn't have a business plan I believed in because I continually ran up against more and more variables I couldn't predict. So I just took the plunge.

Q: How many employees does *LF* have? What is your "work set up" like?

A: We have four full-time employees besides myself. Of those, two are senior editors who do assigning of stories and the third does fact checking

and research. The fourth full-time employee is the general manager who manages the office and runs "Jobtracks," which is the only available reference directory — included in each issue of the magazine — of who has been hired and tenured in the humanities and social sciences. I have a half-time advertising manager as well.

"Permalancers" — permanent free lancers — do the copyediting, art direction, layout, proofreading. And a lawyer reads for libel.

Q: Were you nervous when you published the first issue?

A: Of course. But after the first issue came out, I got a postcard from a friend who is a philosophy professor. She said: "Now I understand. We do all the work and you have all the fun."

I think that academe is a much sexier, wittier, more sophisticated profession than people give it credit for. I want to write about where the bodies are buried and who are the pioneers. It's not so dry and dusty as it appears. I want to give the profession a good name.

Q: Speaking of buried bodies, tell us about your own personal family history. Were your father or mother professors?

A: You should be careful of looking for origins as explanations. I am from New York City. There are no buried professors in my background. My father was an immigrant who never finished high school. My wife, however, is a philosophy professor. She probably was worried, as *Lingua Franca* took shape, that it might end up as an enormous embarrassment, but she says she's not going to divorce me right now.

Q: Who are your subscribers? How many are there?

A: Right now there are about 14,000. Simmons Marketing Research just completed a survey of 1000 of them, so I happen to be loaded with statistics for you. Eighty-two percent of our subscribers are affiliated with a college or university. Sixty-seven percent of our subscribers are professors and 52% of them are tenured. You might think *LF* would attract a younger crowd, but the average num-

ber of years our professors have taught is 14. Subscribers are mostly in the humanities and social sciences.

And they're amazingly active as readers and writers. They buy 55 books a year and are right now in the middle

photo: Leo Touchet

of reading eight books. And in the past two years the professors gave 3.2 speeches, wrote 2.4 articles or chapters in a multi-authored book, and wrote 2/3 of a book.

Q: Where do you get writers for *Lingua Franca*? Are they professors?

A: I get journalists to write largely because academics don't write journalistically. I wanted a professional, journalistic product that someone will read because it is well-written and it satisfies their curiosity. You need a good lead in, a good angle, a stylistic edge, something thrilling

By trial and error, you find journalists who have an interest in the subject. There are a lot of good journalists out there who are underused. They are working for fashion magazines or business magazines, but their interests

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are wider than that: a lot of them at least BEGAN grad school. Some journalists like to work for *LF* because they get to work on something that satisfies their intellectual curiosity.

Because we provide them with an academic audience, they can get into some detail and some complexity, they can take on resistant material and still

have some fun with it. They don't have to simplify their writing or make it pat.

Q: *LF* was a finalist in two categories at the awards: the other one was for reportage: "The Killing of Professor Culiano." How did you come by that story?

A: There was an article in the *Chicago Tribune Sunday Magazine* about the local murder of a Romanian professor who was an expert in magic and mysticism. We learned that the writer of that article, an English professor at DePaul named Ted Anton, was still unearthing new material about an apparent political conspiracy, and we asked him to keep following the story for us, and particularly to explore the connection of the murder with this professor's scholarly work. That side of the affair he couldn't have delved into for the newspaper. The judges called it a 'magical' story.

When he subsequently visited Romania to continue his investigation, Anton found that people there had read the article in *LF*. Amazing.

Q: The sky's the limit. So, what's next?

A: It's plenty of work just to keep up the quality. I want to grow to a circulation of 25,000 to 30,000. And show advertisers (publishers, office equipment, direct mail catalogs) what a great, avid audience I have.

Q: How about the electronic environment? Do you have plans to go electronic?

A: We may eventually have some online hookup, but I think people enjoy having it as an object. It's great bathroom reading. Look, my readers are people who ENJOY carrying around books and magazines. The survey shows that they overwhelmingly enjoy browsing in bookstores and can't stand not having something at hand to read.

LF is not just information. It's meant to be pleasurable. The image of the world of scholars is generally ascetic. It is true that they are abstract thinkers, and much action is cerebral, but the fun is when that aspect of their lives mixes with flesh and blood, love and

continued on page 45

Book Review

Column Editor: **Barry Fast** (Academic Book Center)

Contributions to this column are welcome!

Importers Manual, USA: The Single Source Reference Encyclopedia for Importing to the United States.

Edited by Edward G. Hinkelman. 1993 ed. San Rafael, CA: World Trade Press, 1992. \$87.
ISBN: 0-9631864-1-8.

Reviewed by **Tom Gilson**
(Head, Reference Services,
College of Charleston Libs.)

The *Importers Manual, USA* is an impressive compendium of useful information dealing with the many facets of the import business. Edited by Edward G. Hinkelman, a businessman with 18 years experience, the book contains over 900 pages of text divided into seven major sections.

The first section called Infolists, is a series of "helpful hints" on things like passports/visas, buying trips, negotiating health and immunization, dealing with suppliers, working with U.S. Customs and what to expect in terms of costs. The next two sections are practical guides to international law and international banking. The international law

section highlights various legal issues of concern to importers as well as referring to specific codes and regulations. This section also deals with drafting contracts and contract resolution as well as discussing problems encountered in working within other legal systems, i.e., Islamic Law. The international banking section offers an overview of the international banking system and specifically covers the use of documentary credit and collections as well as foreign exchange and monetary systems. Section four covers the intricacies of U.S. Customs entry and clearance while the fifth section deals with transport, particularly, container packing and specifications, and marine insurance. The regulatory requirements covering the importation of 135 different commodities are provided in section six. The last section provides an overview of the one hundred top exporting nations that trade with the United States. Included is information on their economies, trading potential, banking systems, travel and entry requirements and the addresses and telephone numbers of useful contacts. The volume ends with a general index providing access to all seven sections.

The value of this reference source is that it collects a great deal of relevant information in one easy-to-use volume. Much of the information is advice and

basic background which will be useful to both students of and newcomers to the import field. Experienced importers could also benefit from the information offered, i.e., the addresses, telephone numbers and, in some cases, fax numbers of government agencies, banks, etc., as well as the many references to specific laws and regulations.

The text is well illustrated with photographs, diagrams, tables, maps, and sample forms. However the binding does not seem strong enough to withstand extensive use and if it becomes a popular item, this volume may need rebinding. If a second edition is planned an improved index with more cross referencing would be helpful. A search for "Contracts" revealed no entries or cross references. An entry was eventually found subdivided under "Law, International — Contracts. A more direct indexing arrangement is needed.

These caveats aside, the *Importers Manual, USA*, would be a valuable addition to any collection with a need for information on importing. Given the amount of information provided and the state of today's book market, the price is reasonable and worth the investment. ☛

Kittay

continued from page 35

greed and envy, life and death. There is a sensuousness to the life of the mind that I don't think can be communicated that well over an electronic bulletin board.

Electronic newsletters, like one I read — Marcia Tuttle's newsletter about serials pricing issues — are great. But they don't provide as many editorial possibilities to play with as I have in *LF* or you in *Against the Grain*.

Q: Speaking of which — how do libraries and librarians fit into *Lingua Franca*?

A: We once did an article (inspired by a letter a librarian wrote me) about how librarians' lives are changing and how they are becoming more like "information directors." I am always interested in the conflicts and contradictions of people who work in the academic environment: administrators, publishers, librarians, curators. They should let me know about anything in their professional life that they feel could use some sharp journalistic scrutiny. I'll be at the ALA in New Orleans at a display called "Publishers Book Exhibit," and there'll be plenty of sample copies. Drop by!

By the way, our last issue has a piece on how both Sterling Library at

Yale and Johns Hopkins are doing a retrospective card catalog "conversion" by employing, as data entry processors, . . . monks! As one brother says, when people are surprised that monks do such work: "Working with data, albeit differently considered, has long been a part of our tradition."

From Yr. Ed. — Well that's it! Here's how to get hold of Mr. Kittay — *Lingua Franca*, *The Review of Academic Life*. Jeffrey Kittay, Publisher; 172 East Boston Post Road; Mamaroneck, New York 10543; phone (914) 698-9427; fax (914) 698-9488. Internet: 76200.414@compuserve.com.☛