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Publishing's World/ Robert de Graff and the Mass-Market Paperback

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Publishing's World

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

*With this issue, we continue 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. Comments on this new column are appreciated.*

Robert de Graff and the Advent of the Mass-Market Paperback

by **Scott Stacy**

Robert Fair de Graff founded Pocket Books in 1939 with financial help from Simon & Schuster and, for his many achievements, he is credited with initiating the mass-market distribution of the pocket-size paperback book. Pocket Books owes its creation, renown, and financial success to its founding father and first president, Robert de Graff.

De Graff was a publishing entrepreneur who became convinced that in farmers, mechanics, waitresses, and sales clerks there was an untapped market of book buyers who could afford to spend a quarter on books at Woolworth's but not a dollar in a bookstore. Beginning in 1925, de Graff experimented with the concept of paperbound reprints while functioning as the director of hardcover reprints at Garden City Publishing. In 1938 he quit his job to plan out his own venture into the softcover reprint market by studying the practices of Charles Boni Paper Books, founded in 1929 as a book club providing small-size paperback reprints to subscribers for an annual fee of five dollars. De Graff also analyzed the role of the American News Company in developing early softbound distribution programs.

Both Boni's company and American News faltered at the hands of the Depression, leaving the door open for de Graff's later success. During the last few months of 1938, Robert de Graff presented his plan to, and bargained intensely with, Richard Simon, Max Schuster, and Leon Shimkin. Simon especially had become inter-

ested in investing in paperback reprints after touring London, where sales of these volumes were thriving in Woolworth chains and in other retail outlets.

Pocket Books was created with de Graff owning fifty-one percent of the business and Simon & Schuster forty-nine percent. From this point on, until his retirement in 1957, Robert de Graff succeeded in building the most dominant paperback publishing house of the time by utilizing test runs and questionnaires to let readers have a say in title selection, developing innovative sales ventures and ways to convince hardcover publishers to sell him subsidiary rights, and by acting upon his own keen editorial sense.

Before Pocket Books issued its first ten titles, de Graff wanted to learn exactly what the mass audience would read and purchase at what price and in what format. To this end, he mailed out questionnaires to almost 49,000 people, and based on the results, then sent out 2,000 test copies of *The Good Earth* by Pearl Buck, mailed with follow-up surveys and advance order forms for the coming list.

The first ten titles were officially released on June 19, 1939. All of the books were reprints of successful hardcover releases. The list was a mixture of genres — adventure, gothic fiction, classics, children's literature, and self-help. Five out of these first ten titles went on to become major Hollywood films, including *Bambi*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Topper*. This is conclusive evidence that these were, in fact, the titles people really wanted to read. The astounding initial sales success of the list also makes that clear. About 10,000 copies of each book were distributed to drugstores, department stores, and newsstands in the New York metropolitan area. Days later, re-orders flowed in from Macy's, Gimbel's, and Liggett drugstores, all very large retail outlets. Within a few weeks, Pocket Books responded to the overwhelming demand for their titles by making the books available nationwide. By 1941, Pocket Books had established a net-

work of 700 independent distributors to service over 80,000 outlets across the United States and Canada.

De Graff's Pocket Books achieved strong financial standing in 1940 as a result of revenue gained from the sale of Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, first published as a hardcover edition in 1937. The key to this success was the fact that de Graff convinced Simon & Schuster to allow him reprint rights while the book was still selling well in hardbound editions. By setting up a test run in Texas, he proved that providing a softbound edition would not cause hardcover sales to suffer. Two distinct markets were realized as a result of this test. In attempts to persuade other publishers to sell reprint rights to Pocket Books, de Graff vowed to include back page notes asking the reader if he liked the book and offering a twenty-five cent credit toward the purchase of the hardcover edition if the Pocket Book was returned. Not many customers ever took advantage of this opportunity, but the concept illustrates Robert de Graff's innovative nature.

This characteristic of de Graff, in addition to his editorial sense and creative approach to sales, contributed directly to the overall success of Pocket Books under his command. During World War II, de Graff played key roles in the Council on Books in Wartime and in the distribution plans for Armed Services Editions. His connections with these efforts afforded Pocket Books many beneficial government contracts. Forty percent of Pocket Books' wartime production was sold to the Armed Forces and returns of unsold copies never exceeded four to five percent compared to the usual thirty-five to sixty percent absorbed by mass-market publishers today. Robert de Graff saw the opening of a new wartime market and took advantage of the opportunity in a way that benefited American soldiers around the

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world and solidified Pocket Books as the leader in paperback publishing.

Chicago newspaper giant Marshall Field III bought Simon & Schuster and Pocket Books in 1944. Mr. Field's infusion of funds allowed Pocket Books to expand tremendously under the watchful eyes of Robert de Graff. The publisher subsequently had more leeway in establishing new products and increasing the number of titles printed in accordance with the wishes of the mass audience. In 1946, for example, de Graff learned by coincidence that the best selling government publication was a manual on raising children, so he enlisted Dr. Benjamin Spock to prepare a manuscript of this nature. Showing his editorial sense and fervor for sales, de Graff quickly adapted the book into the paperback format. The Pocket edition of *Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care* has sold over twenty-five million copies making it the best selling book by a single author in American publishing history.

To help lend further credence to the importance of paperback publishing to the book industry as a whole, Pocket Books released *Franklin Delano Roosevelt: A Memorial* just six days after his death in 1945. This event constituted the creation of the first instant paperback and proved that book publishers had the ability to respond to sudden news events rapidly and comprehensively.

Pocket Books under Robert de Graff never failed to respond to the needs and wants of its large body of readers. The twenty-five cent price and 4 1/4" by 6 1/2" size characterizing "pocket books" were both arrived at initially as a result of reader surveys. Throughout the early years, Pocket Books selected titles according to favorable test run results and reader responses. For example, mystery titles made up a large percentage of Pocket Books' lists. It is apparent that reader interest has always been high in this category because between 1941 and 1975, nineteen Perry Mason titles have gained best seller status with each book selling two million copies. As of 1979, thirty-six Agatha Christie novels had graced the Pocket Books lists making her the

best-selling woman author in the world. Pocket Books has always attempted to appeal to the widest range of interests and tastes of the mass audience. Popular Western, humor, and self-help titles have filled out the backbone of Pocket lists throughout the years along with important reference materials like *The New Merriam-Webster Pocket Dictionary* and *Roget's Pocket Thesaurus*. Robert de Graff's ability to identify and seize the opportunities presented by these vast markets was another key to the success of his company.

Pocket Books is still considered one of the most remarkable financial successes in publishing history. The venture was started with \$30,000 of capital. In 1944, Marshall Field paid \$3 million for Pocket Books and Simon & Schuster, and in 1957, following de Graff's retirement, Leon Shimkin bought only Pocket Books back for \$5 million. In 1961, it went public at \$72 million. But far beyond any monetary gain, Robert de Graff's Pocket Books achieved the development of a

distribution program for mass-marketed, paperbound, pocket-size books and succeeded in dominating their industry for decades. Robert de Graff's innovative nature, determination, vision and business and editorial senses provided the basis for his leadership role at his company from 1939 to 1957, the formative years of the mass-market paperback industry.

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ATG: Would you comment on CD-ROM and computer technologies and the roles that these other technologies might play in the future development of Chadwyck-Healey?

Sir Charles: We were primarily microform publishers until three years ago. Now we are almost entirely publishers of electronic information on CD-ROM and magnetic tape and are, in fact, the largest CD-ROM publisher

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Sir Charles: We do have CD-ROM products for smaller "poorer" libraries — for example, in the UK almost one thousand schools buy CD-ROMs of British newspapers such as *The Guardian* and the last UK Census. We will continue to publish large, and thereby expensive, high quality research projects. We believe that there is a continuing demand for these amongst the world's research libraries.☞