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Nat Bodian

Publisher's Marketing Consultant

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The Book Buyer's Guide

An Official Obituary and A Bit of Nostalgia for Frank Short
by Nat Bodian (Publisher's Marketing Consultant)

This coming January will mark the 25th anniversary of the death of an American publishing industry "institution" that provided vital information and book selection guidance to generations of booksellers and librarians, and the book readership that relied on them. It was called the *The Book Buyer's Guide*. Most booksellers and librarians, after long years of intimate association with it, referred to it simply as the *Guide*.

After continuous monthly publication starting in 1898, *The Book Buyer's Guide* ceased publication in January 1970. The final issue was identified as "vol.73 — no.896."

Despite the *Guide's* extensive involvement in and contributions to the evolution and growth of twentieth-century book publishing, and to retail bookselling and library acquisitions practices, it passed quietly out of existence. The final issue made no mention of the fact and included a subscription order form. No published obituary ever appeared in the trade or public press — only a brief listing under "Cessations" in the 1971-72 issue of *Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory*. This retrospective and reminiscence, nearing the 25th anniversary of its death, may also, then, be considered its official obituary.

How did it start?

The Book Buyer's Guide was started in 1898 by the **Baker & Taylor Company**, then a modest-sized New York City book publisher and book jobber with store-front premises at 5-7 East 17th Street, just off Fifth Avenue. In its early years, it was called the *Bookseller*. During its long and vibrant life as the herald of forthcoming popular books, and news of their authors and publishers, *The Book Buyer's Guide* was a valued and dependable companion and new book information source for untold thousands of retail booksellers and book renters. The *Guide* also served as the sole or primary book selection and ordering medium for libraries with small to modest book budgets all over the United States, who relied on its budget-targeted monthly "buy"

recommendations on forthcoming books for all or most of their book acquisitions.

In 1897, the year of its founding, the book publication's office, located on the Baker & Taylor premises on East 17th Street, was described in a trade periodical of that era as "a roomy and well-stocked store." The active operators of the Baker & Taylor book operation were two Connecticut natives, **James S. Baker** and **Nelson Taylor**, who were partners in the business. They had been operating in New York City for twelve years after relocating from Connecticut to that address in 1885. In the year of its founding, the *Guide* was essentially a catalog of popular novels and nonfiction books of the day, and of the various availabilities stocked by The Baker & Taylor Company. Its content incorporated and featured the bestselling books as they appeared in another New York City publication, the *Bookman*. Just two years prior to the start of the *Guide*, the *Bookman* had begun issuing the first "bestseller" lists to be published in America.

The first year of the *Guide* in 1897, the top-selling book was Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, which went on to sell three million copies over the next half century. Author **Stephen Crane** was a native of Newark, New Jersey. His bestseller had been published a year earlier when Crane was 24 years old. Other books by Crane that were highlighted in the *Guide* between its founding year and 1900 were: *The Open Road and Other Tales of Adventure* (1898), *The Monster and Other Stories* (1899), and *Wounds in the Rain* (1900). Crane died in a sanatorium in 1900 of tuberculosis at the age of 28.

Coverage and span of the Guide

Until its last issue in January of 1970, *The Book Buyer's Guide* was a lively publication which satisfied a wide variety of literary tastes. It served as the heartbeat of America's literary output, heralded the lives of the authors who created it, and tried to serve the best interests of the men and women in America's bookstores and

libraries who provided the vast outpouring of popular fiction and nonfiction to the reading public.

The average *Guide* included approximately 100 pages and about 20-30 ads. The largest single issue was September 1960 (v.63, no.784) which was 294 pages and included the advertising of more than one hundred book publishers. This large issue commemorated the 132nd anniversary of Baker & Taylor, its founding parent company, so it was full of information about one of the U.S. publishing industry's biggest events of 1960. **Nat Bodian** wrote the specially compiled company history which was included.

For many years, the front cover of *The Book Buyer's Guide* was sold to a publisher as a premium advertising page. However, beginning with the November 1959 issue, the *Guide* broke with tradition by announcing that advertising on the front cover would no longer be sold and that starting with that issue the space on the *Guide's* front covers would be devoted to multiple photographs of book authors. Said Editor **Francis Ludlow** of the change at the time: "We believe that it is better to let several publishers — or their authors — share this favored spot rather than to permit one publisher to dominate it and thus, in a sense, the magazine." For the first multiple author picture cover, editor Ludlow chose **Tereska Torres**, author of *The Golden Cage*, **Hal Holbrook**, author of *Mark Twain Tonight*, **Jay Richard Kennedy** (*Short Term World*) and **Gwynne Wimberly** (*One Touch of Ecstasy*). Interestingly, by contrast, the chief rival of *The Book Buyer's Guide* — *Publishers Weekly* — continues its policy of selling front cover advertising to publishers to the current day.

Frank Short — An Industry Legend

While the *Guide's* editorial content was capably handled for many years by **Francis Ludlow**, a native of Summit, New Jersey, it brought him little celebrity in the publishing industry. A model of organized efficiency, he seemed to work quietly, in the shadows so to speak, and preferred to let the *Guide's* departments speak for themselves to their various constituencies. Such was not the case, however, for the advertising department. This department, for the latter decades of its life, was in the hands of a publishing industry legend, **Frank J. Short**, a native of New York City. Frank Short's life span was not much longer than that of *The Book Buyer's Guide*, but virtually all of it had been spent in the employ of the *Guide's* publisher, Baker & Taylor.

Early in this century, in 1904, Baker & Taylor moved the *Guide's* publishing operations along with its business to 33-37 East 17th Street on the north side of Union Square in Manhattan (this after nine years at its earlier address at 5 and 7 East 17th Street). And it was here in 1908 that Frank Short started his career with Baker & Taylor. As he told me in the late 1950s, he was still in knee pants when he started with the publisher/book distributor at its storefront premises as a stock boy.

Baker & Taylor, in addition to publishing their own books, also carried the popular and steady-selling titles of "brother" publishers who were concentrated in the same area of New York City where they were located. New York City booksellers needing books would send their messengers to the Baker & Taylor storefront counter with handwritten order lists of books needed and such orders would be filled on demand. Frank recalled how, as a stock boy on roller skates, he would ride up and down the aisles of the Baker & Taylor establishment, pluck the needed book titles off the racks, and deliver them to the counter up front to be handed to the waiting messengers.

At the time Short started with B&T, a still popular non-fiction title (two years after its publication in 1906) was **Upton Sinclair's** *The Jungle*. It told in shockingly graphic terms the horrors that existed in the Chicago meatpacking industry and spurred President Theodore Roosevelt to push through passage of

The Book Buyer's Guide

b. 1898 — d. 1970.

Publisher: The Baker & Taylor Company.

What did the *Guide* cover?

- Flash news about books ahead
- Publishers' promotion plans
- Introducing next month's books
- Editor's choice of the month
- Bestsellers and best renters
- Recommended for library purchase
- Books just published
- How to say it (pronunciation of difficult names or titles in forthcoming books)
- Book club selections
- Changes in publication dates
- Obituaries
- Books from magazines
- Booksellers stock check list
- Spring and Fall announcements were included in the appropriate issues

How book rental libraries felt about **The Book Buyer's Guide** is evidenced by these excerpts from letters received by the *Guide* editor in the late 1950s:

"... the most useful and dependable tool of the book trade in America," said **John McNaughton** of the McNaughton Libraries.

"For the past 30 years, I've depended on this magazine for no end of help in buying books for sales and books for my rental library. You do a wonderful job in helping us bookshop folks. Thanks," wrote **Lile E. Chew** of St. Petersburg, Florida.

And the *Guide* was so much a part of life for many booksellers and librarians that they would often continue their subscriptions long after they had sold their businesses or entered retirement. Here is one letter, received in October 1959 from **Mrs. Elsie Carty** of Easton, PA:

"Kindly send me the 1 yr. subscription to *The Book Buyer's Guide*. I was with Lafayette Alleys Book Store for 40 years and retired now and miss the *Buyer's Guide*. It is really the best Book Guide I have ever read. Enclosed is a check [for \$5]."

the Pure Food and Drug Act of June 30, 1906. Other books popular at B&T in the year Short started were *The Circular Staircase* and *Anne of Green Gables*. The most controversial book that year was *Three Weeks*, a romantic novel by **Elinor Glyn** which was censored in Boston after a court suit against the publisher's agent by Boston's Watch and Ward Society.

The year after Short's employment with B&T began, in 1909, the company

copyrighted and subsequently published in the United States, a German work, *Bonzai*, an illustrated novel about an attack and invasion of the United States west coast by the Japanese fleet with the cooperation of a Japanese "fifth column" in this country. Baker & Taylor ceased activity as a book publisher in 1912 when it sold its book publishing department to **Frank Nelson Doubleday** of Doubleday, Page & Co., located diagonally across

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boost that Abel gave to their sales: the creation of the U.P. Approval Plan — a vehicle for an unprecedented increase in sales that is still employed by most of the major vendors of books to academic libraries.

I cannot deny that several university presses were not paid for all sales to the Abel Company. But it was a cheap lesson. They have forgotten what Abel taught them about distribution. Over the past nine years, I have spent a sum of money on college education for two sons that is greater than the "Abel loss" of any university press. The university presses learned a lot more from the Abel experience than they lost.

Furthermore, a knee-jerk reaction seized most presses after the Abel failure. Drastic discount changes were made, almost all of which affected the very same vendors which were and are still their main buyers. A dual-discount system was inaugurated by many presses whereby the retail book trade, which at best constitutes only a small percentage of their potential market, is given a much larger discount than library vendors, which constitute the largest purchasing segment of almost every university press. Although I am no longer connected with a general vendor to libraries, I am conscious as a parent of a college student, about ever-increasing costs and I realize that these short discounts are passed on to libraries and constitute just one reason that the costs of higher education are escalating much faster than the cost of living.

And this brings me to the subject which is really the worst of the "hate" factor — the fact that university press discounting is based on the "what the market will bear" theory. The presses know that the

library jobber must deal in their merchandise, so they shorten jobber discount. Worse is the policy of outlandishly boosting the list price (and often shortening the discount) on cloth bound editions because they know that most acquisitions people were advised in "Bookbuying 101" in library school that cloth binding outlasts and is to be preferred to paper binding. So the presses double, triple, quadruple the list price of their cloth bindings that cost no more than two or three dollars. Thus you see a university press recently offering a lead title at \$29.95 (long discount) paper. This same title cloth bound lists at \$125 (short discount) in spite of the fact that the cloth binding costs the publisher less than three dollars. Let it be said here that this lopsided discount structure and the over-pricing of cloth bound books constitutes a diablerie resorted to by practically no commercial publisher. Is it any wonder that university presses are not among library vendors' favorite characters?

Perhaps I have solved my dilemma. I will advise the ghost of Dean Laing (1859-1945) that I could have agreed with what he wrote when he wrote it because university presses had not yet, to my knowledge, sullied the reputations of their host institutions with duplicitous pricing schemes. The character of a university whose press is guilty of such practice should be measured by a different yardstick. If this is not possible, perhaps a name change for the press should be considered.

Let's be thankful that due to budget pressure some librarians are starting to look even more closely at pricing disparities. And many jobbers have responded to librarian pressure by adopting notification slips that list both cloth and paper prices

as well as instituting approval plans that take these disparities into account. Finally, my love/hate relationship might be resolved. If university presses would change these foolish ways, I would love them even more! ☛

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the Square at 34 Union Square East, to concentrate on book jobbing exclusively.

In the 1950s, 1960s, and 70s, all advertising was in Frank Short's capable hands. Having spent virtually his entire life in the book business, and in the employ of B&T, Short's knowledge of book publishing and booksellers and librarians, was virtually encyclopedic. I worked alongside him in 1959 and 1960, frequently lunched and traveled with him, and we sometimes shared a room while attending various publishing and library conventions. I found his memory of publishing names and dates, of publishing mergers, of the histories of both publishing companies and their ex-

ecutives a continuing source of amazement. Short could recite from memory and often in great detail the careers of many of the big names in publishing and their varied connections along the way up the ladder. He worked without assistance and was in contact with or personally called on all elements of the book publishing industry involved with popular fiction and nonfiction. He was widely known and respected by those with whom he worked throughout the industry. In his later years, when his age slowed him down, he did most of his calling and contacting by telephone. While the B&T offices remained in New Jersey, Short worked out of the offices of the owners of B&T's *Parents Magazine* Institute, then located at 52 Vanderbilt Avenue in The City, so that he

could be close to the center of American trade book publishing activity.

In late 1969, nearly nine years after I had severed my association with B&T, I was employed by a book publisher in the same New York City office tower where *Parents Magazine* was located and where Frank Short worked. I'd run into him from time to time in the building lobby or on the elevators. One day, Short phoned me and invited me to join him for lunch. Over lunch, he told me of the planned end of publication for *The Book Buyer's Guide*. There were tears in his eyes as he spoke of the upcoming event as the end of his career. I recall him saying something like: "If I leave it now, I'll have nothing to live for." I assured

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getting the hang of doing the round of the exhibits! Along with local publishers, a UK contingent in association with the **Publishers' Association** exhibited in a group stand sponsored by the **British Chamber of Commerce** and the **Department of Trade and Industries**. A large group of New Zealand publishers also attended and exhibited. Librarians were again a major group attending the trade days of the Fair; however a proposed Library Fair in conjunction with the Book Fair to build on this attendance ran into difficulties and was postponed until next year. The **ABA Library Suppliers (Vendors) Group** met during the Fair; however the meeting was poorly attended.

At the **Australian Book Industry Awards Dinner** following the Fair, **Penguin Books Australia** were awarded 1994 Publisher of the Year, **Dymocks Queen Street, Brisbane** were awarded Bookseller of the Year, and **Sara Henderson's From Strength to Strength** (Pan Macmillan) was named as the inaugural **Australian Booksellers Association Australian**

Book of the Year. **The National Book Council's** annual literary awards, the **Banjo Awards**, were also presented at the Dinner. **Elisabeth Jolley's The George's Wife** (Penguin) received the fiction award, **Hazel Rowley** won the non-fiction award for **Christina Stead** (Heinemann), while **Dorothy Hewett** was awarded the **Turnbull Fox Phillips Poetry prize** for her collection **Peninsula** (Fremantle Arts Centre Press).

Whilst on the subject of awards, the 1994 **Miles Franklin Literary Award** of A\$25,000 has been won by **Rodney Hall** for **The Grisly Wife**, the second volume of his trilogy. This year's award, however, has been notable due to the suggestion that three novels nominated for the award were commended by the judges as being outstanding but ineligible . . . on the grounds that all three are set, in varying degrees, overseas. The terms of Miles Franklin's will stipulate that eligible books are those which deal with Australian life in any of its phases. Legal action has been mooted. If it wasn't serious for the authors, it would be funny; could it happen anywhere else?

.....Europa!.....

by **Gilles de La Rochefoucauld** (Aux Amateurs de Livres)

VOLTAIRE TERCENTENARY CELEBRATIONS 1994 — The standing of Voltaire as a major figure in European literature and thought does not need to be emphasized. The celebrations of the tercentenary of his birth, from 26 September to 5 October, will therefore be a major event in 1994. Oxford (in Great Britain) will be at the center of the celebrations in more than one sense. The first reason is that the **Voltaire Foundation**, set up in the University thanks to the bequest of **Theodore Besterman**, is the place to which all specialists in the field gravitate. It is the Foundation which is carrying forward the mammoth task of publishing the **Complete Works of Voltaire**, as well as the important and distinguished series of **Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century**. In addition, it acts as the secretariat for the **International Society for Eighteenth Century Studies**.

The second reason is that, because of its crucial position in this area, the **Voltaire Foundation** is responsible for the

organisation of the **Voltaire celebrations** in 1994. It is perhaps a natural consequence that the commemorative events will start off in Oxford (28-30 September) before transferring to Paris on 1 October to begin a series of sessions there (2-5 October). It perhaps goes without saying that the main part of the celebrations will be a major congress, with the title **Voltaire et ses combats** (Voltaire and his fights). About 300 participants have registered and something on the order of 180 papers have been proposed. These communications will be published in two major volumes by the Foundation.

The importance and the prestige of the event is indicated by the support it has received. **President Françoise Mitterand** of France has written to give it his official patronage. Both the **British Academy** and the **Académie Française** have agreed to patronise the tercentenary (the British Academy backing its support with a significant contribution toward the cost). **The French Celebrations Nationales** is both giving financial support and participating actively in the organisation of the French end of the celebrations. ☞

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him that things were not always as bad as they seemed — that he was liked and respected throughout the publishing industry and that I felt sure something would turn up to keep him active in the world of books.

Later, I returned to my office where I related my lunch experience to my employer, **Ben Russak**, president and founder of the **American Elsevier Publishing Company**. Russak was an old-time gentleman bookman whose life was also a total involvement with books and publishing. Russak had known Short for many years and held him in the same high regard as I did. When I quoted Short's tearful lament, Russak directed me to advise Short not to worry — that he would have a job at American Elsevier as long as he lived. I got back to Short almost immediately and gave him the good news . . . More

tears and a "God bless you; I'll never forget what you've done for me," are in my own memory.

I never spoke with Short again. I had left the building to work with a publisher in New Jersey when the *Guide* ceased publication. I understand that Short passed away a short time after. Neither *The New York Times* nor *Publishers Weekly* carried an obituary on Frank Short, so his passing went without publicity. However, Short's lifelong contributions to the book industry were not completely forgotten by many of us. For myself, I dedicated the first volume of *The Book Marketing Handbook* (Bowker, 1980) as follows:

"Dedicated to the memory of Frank Short, bookman, who gave more than fifty years of devoted service to the book industry." ☞