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Letter from Oklahoma

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Letter from Oklahoma

Serendipity With Publishers' Catalogs

by Tom Leonhardt (University of Oklahoma) <tom@libadm.lib.uoknor.edu>

A friend at American University was asking me if I had seen the latest catalog of the American University Press. I had not so she offered to send me a copy, noting with disappointment that it was to be the final catalog. The new president had decided that a press was not necessary. I do not know who the president is and I won't presume to question the motives, which are undoubtedly good. I once recommended, successfully, that a scholarly quarterly journal be discontinued for lack of funding. Those who lost that particular fight were most unhappy and did not understand why someone could not see the need and find the money. The question was not necessarily of quality but of finances.

When I received my catalog and read the "Introduction," I was sure that the press had not lost money. "The American University Press is pleased to present this complete and final catalog of all titles published since 1991 when its first book, *The Rise of Radical Egalitarianism*, by the late Aaron Wildavsky, was issued. Included in this list are new and forthcoming titles.

"The American University Press will publish no new titles after April 1996 when all books listed in this catalog are available. The University Press of America and its National Book Network division serving bookstores and other public outlets will continue marketing and sales efforts for the titles in this catalog, unless otherwise noted." *Richard C. Rowson* Founding Director and Publishing Consultant

I was surprised to see Rowson's name associated with a press that was going out of business because I associate his name with success. I heard Rowson speak once when I was at Duke and he was director of the Duke University Press. I remember him telling us that he had learned the publishing business from the late Frederick Praeger and that one important thing he had learned was that a university press that wanted to publish books that might not make money (read, in the humanities) would have to publish policy studies that would make enough for the whole to be successful.

"What a joy it was when I entered the field of university press publishing in 1981 as Director at Duke to be in a position to challenge the validity of that assumption." This is Rowson's statement in "A Formula

for Successful Scholarly Publishing: Policy-Oriented Research and the Humanities," in *Editors as Gatekeepers: Getting Published in the Social Sciences*, edited by Rita J. Simon and James J. Fyfe (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994). Good luck, Mr. Rowson, in your next endeavor.

I next turned to the Rutgers University Press Catalog Spring/Summer 1995. Who is that playboy sea captain on the cover?

He looks familiar. When I look inside I am reminded that he is a character who appeared from time to time in *Esquire* magazine but the catalog does not tell me his name or who drew him. *Esqy: The Early Years at Esquire* by Hugh Merrill was due

"And remember, reading is a subversive activity."

in June, 1995. It looks interesting. Did you know, for example, that *Esquire* began in 1933 as a pamphlet on men's tailoring? Merrill claims, says the catalog, that *Esquire* influenced America's "attitudes about sex, men's needs, pop and 'high' culture, and the exploitation of an unexplored mass market — men's wear." I didn't know that.

On the page facing *Esqy* is the announcement of *The True Story of the Novel* by Margaret Anne Doody. As shocking as it may be to you, I must relay the main point of her book to you, "One of the most successful literary lies is the English claim to have invented the novel. One of the best-kept literary secrets is the existence of novels in antiquity." In fact, as Doody goes on to demonstrate, the novel of the Roman Empire is a joint product of Africa, western Asia, and Europe. It is with this argument that *The True Story of the Novel* "devastates and reconfigures the history of the novel as we know it."

That was enough of Rutgers for me so I picked up a catalog with interesting art work on its covers (Front cover: Kurt Seligmann: "Untitled or Beautiful Disturbers of the Night," 1940. Dallas Museum of Art, gift of Bernard J. Reis. Sawin, *Surrealism in*

Exile and the Beginning of the New York School, p.3. Back cover: Perry Hoberman, frame grab from "Bar Code Hotel", 1994. Moser, *Immersed in Technology*, p.6).

Turning to page 3 I find a review of Martica Sawin's book. "No one has told the story of those years [I guess they are the years of exile] in any way that gives a sense of what they were really like." So says Robert Motherwell in a conversation with Sawin in

1983. This book is 496 pages with 250 photographs of people, places, and artworks. In this catalog there is a photograph, sepia and arty looking, of fourteen men and women sitting and standing in front of a fireplace. They are all dressed nicely and some of the

men (they are all artists, presumably) look as if they were modeling for *Esquire*. The back row (boy, girl, boy, boy, boy) is standing and looking to the left. The

middle row (boy, bow tie, boy, boy, girl) is sitting on chairs and looking to the right except for the woman who is looking to the left. The front row (boy, girl, boy, boy) is sitting on the floor. The man on the left is looking straight ahead as is the man on the right. The woman on the middle left is looking to the right and the man on the middle right is looking to the left. Remember that Johnny Cash song about the folksingers? — the one on the left was the one on the right and the one on the right was the one on the left and the one in the middle sang bass. Or something like that. Do you think surrealists 1) dress like *Esquire* models; 2) listen to Johnny Cash records; or 3) dream in black and red? If you chose 3 then abstract expressionism may be the only "ism" for you.

Well, what a coincidence. On page 110 of the Farrar Straus Giroux catalog for September 1995 to February 1996 there is a book called *Man Ray's Man Rays*. This is, we are told, "A diverse sampling of work from the personal collection of one of the twentieth century's most innovative and influential artists." My heart belongs to Dada. The book is in paper and costs only \$19.95

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with 35 black and white photographs and 6 four-color illustrations and 76 pages in all. The publisher is **Aperture** and I have put it on my list for Santa Claus.

In December, **Beacon** will publish *God's Phallus: And Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (as if we didn't have enough problems already). The **University of Chicago Press** just published *God's Plagiarist: Being an Account of the Fabulous Industry and Irregular Commerce of the Abbé Migné*. The Abbé Jacques-Paul Migné built a controversial religious publishing empire between 1824 and 1833. One reviewer calls the Abbé "austere and somewhat crazed." The publisher as mad gatekeeper.

For pretty color photography, I refer you to **Browntrout Publishers: Books 1995**. I don't know where their editorial offices are but the mailing address is a San Francisco post office box. They offer a book on petroglyphs and pictographs (I'll bet you don't know the difference.), a book of photographs by **David and Marc Muench**, and *The Literate Cat: A Photographic Celebration*. Lest you think it is just another cute cat coffee table book, it features — now get this — quotations from famous literary cat lovers including **Lewis Carroll**, **Edgar Allan Poe** (I thought he was for the birds, ravens

and the like?), **William Shakespeare** (sure, pick on Will, dead these many years and unable to sue you), **Samuel Johnson**, **Herodotus**, and **Aristotle**. The blurb actually shows some pictures of cats and quotes from **Montaigne**, **Pliny**, and **Baudelaire**. Enough. Scat! **Browntrout** also offers two enchiridions (books of wisdom) by **Dr. N.K. Oo** — *The Book of Leo: An Enchiridion* and *The Book of Scorpio: An Enchiridion*. Dr. Oo is an astrologer. The other ten signs will follow. You have been warned.

"For every book, its reader."

The **Yale Fall Books 1995** may be worth keeping for its photographs. On the inside cover, for example, there is a photo of the original Nathan's hot dog stand when frankfurters, roast beef, and hamburgers were 5 cents, milk shakes were 6 cents and potato chips and ice cream sodas were a dime each. **Nathan**, the **Brooklyn Dodgers**, **Bella Abzug**, **Big Tim Sullivan**, and others are entries in *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, due in October and only \$60 through January 31, 1996. For that you get 1,376 pages and 688 illustrations. It is co-published with **Yale** by the **New York Historical Society**.

The preacher was right; there is no end.

No doubt there are other good books to highlight (I have a box full of publishers' catalogs not yet looked at.) but someone felt these were worth writing and publishing and the least we can do is read about them in a catalog or an essay and if we don't buy them hot off the press we can at least be aware of them and if we are lucky we can find one or two on a table of remainders. Remainders are merely bargains and should not be burdened with value judgments. For every book, its reader.

To those who say the book is going to be replaced by a CD-ROM player, I say, where is the evidence and why are you so gleeful in your nasty predictions? Don't you read? Don't you ever leave your cathode ray tube and crippling mouse and enjoy life? Don't you understand that you are not the world and that most of us want to expand our horizons and some of us even want to expand our vocabulary — literally and figuratively. The mind is too precious to be wasted, even if we all end up reverting to dust. While we are still malleable pieces of fashioned clay, we have an obligation to those we will leave behind. And remember, reading is a subversive activity. No wonder some would like to see books disappear and authors, editors, publishers, and readers (not to mention libraries) with them. Read on, brave readers, read on. 🐭

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