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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

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

If you have a title to review or one to submit for review, please send it to — Book Review Editor, *Against the Grain*, 11 Orlando Avenue, Ardsley, NY 10502. Thanks. — BF

Nicholas A. Basbanes. *A Gentle Madness: Bibliophiles, Bibliomanes, and the Eternal Passion for Books*.

Henry Holt and Co., NY, 1995. xvi, 638 pp.; 0805036539; \$35.00.

Reviewed by **Ellen Finnie Duranceau**,
MIT Libraries <efinnie@MIT.EDU>

Nicholas Basbanes' *A Gentle Madness* is a booklover's book. He takes his title from a characterization of book collector Isaiah Thomas as "touched early by the gentlest of infirmities, bibliomania," and his goal is to demonstrate that "however bizarre and zealous collectors have been through the ages, so much of what we know about history, literature, and culture would be lost forever if not for the passion and dedication of these driven souls." He proves his point, many times over, in this extremely well-written, entertaining history of book collecting.

Roughly half of his narrative is devoted to the history of book collecting, including anecdotes about the very earliest collectors and the very earliest books. One of my favorite tales from this section is the story Basbanes tells about the executive librarian at the Bodleian Library at Oxford, who, after losing a magnificent copy of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* to a Spanish collector at auction, commented "our copy isn't in as fine a condition as the one sold at the Garden sale, but at least we got ours when it was issued." It turns out that the Bodleian copy was obtained by an agent sent to Spain when *Don Quixote* was first published in two volumes (1605 and 1610). It is impossible to read such tales without admiring the long history of librarianship, libraries, books, and even of the good-natured (or possibly not so good-natured?) competition among book-folk. In reading such anecdotes, it seems incredible that the book, an artifact so important to us for so long could really be on the verge of replacement by hypertext and the frenzy of the windowed screen. This is the kind of reassurance booklovers need from time to time, and Basbanes provides it simply by compiling this history and in so doing demonstrating how important books are to our cultural history.

One other anecdote from the first half of the book may serve to represent the flavor of the work: the story of **Dante Gabriel Rossetti's** unpublished manuscript of poems, which he had buried along with his young wife in a romantic gesture whose "touching homage," Basbanes reports, "seemed sincere enough at the time." Seven years later practi-

cality apparently upstaged romance, and Rossetti hired a fellow to exhume his wife's coffin and remove the manuscript. The manuscript was indeed retrieved "found quite perfect," "bound in rough grey calf," and, after being dried by a "medical man" the volume, called *Poems*, was published in 1870. To top it all off, Basbanes reports that this very volume, which spent seven years underground at the side of Rossetti's dead wife, is now on the shelves of **Harvard's Houghton Library**. Now that book has an unusual provenance. I recount this particular anecdote not just to give a sense of the kind of story Basbanes unearths, but also to indicate the peculiar fascination evoked (at least in this reader) by tales that marry such amazing chapters in the history of the book with such amazing chapters in the history of book people — people who cared about, tended, collected, wrote, and pursued books as a passion.

The second half of *A Gentle Madness* deals with contemporary collectors and here, too, we are treated to elaborate and fascinating tales, made privy to careful research, and are exposed to many characters that make one's own compulsive book purchases, no matter how damaging to one's budget, seem comparatively tame. We learn, for example, of **Michael Davis**, an heir to a huge family fortune who entrusted his entire multi-million-dollar inheritance to an astute collector to purchase rare books for him. Unfortunately, this agent turned out to be a complete phony, claiming, among other things, to have three Ph.D.'s, when in fact he had never attended college.

Basbanes devotes a long section to the infamous case of bibliokleptomaniac **Stephen C. Blumberg**, who, although independently wealthy, spent his adult life culling rare books from the nation's greatest libraries and storing them in a house in Iowa. For a librarian, one of the most appalling elements of this tale is the realization that the thefts went almost entirely undetected for years, despite the fact that when

he was finally apprehended, Blumberg had accumulated 23,600 volumes of rare Americana from 268 libraries in 45 states, including rare copies of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and rare early imprints such as Captain John Smith's 1624 *Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles*. In some ways I felt the Blumberg section was an odd departure from Basbanes' theme of revealing how collectors have "been responsible for the preservation of knowledge," since the books stolen by Blumberg were already being preserved in libraries. As compelling as it is, this chapter stands apart from the rest of the book and doesn't seem, entirely, to fit. Yet Basbanes' discussion of Blumberg's perversion of bibliophilia does shed some light on what drives the majority of more sane and moral book collectors, for Blumberg was in many ways a true collector — he was not stealing at random or for resale and profit.

Other entertaining stories from the latter half of the book include the creation of the **University of Texas at Austin's Humanities Research Center**, (in a chapter called "Instant Ivy,") a magnificent collection of important and rare books bankrolled by Texas and amassed by **Henry Hunt Ransom**, provost of UT, and inspiring tales of major collections created by amateurs such as **Ruth Baldwin's** 100,000-volume collection of children's literature, now housed at **Univ. of Florida, Gainesville**, created at least in part out of an intense drive to out-do her doctor father. There is also a revealing portrait of **Aaron Lansky**, founder of the **National Yiddish Book Center**, who almost single-handedly saved published literature in Yiddish and made Yiddish studies possible at many major universities.

There are many, many such tales of noble endeavors on behalf of books in this charming and educational volume. Its richness and depth is difficult to capture in a review, but Basbanes' tales should make compelling reading for anyone who cares about books. Each anecdote

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stands on its own, but together they create something larger than the sum of their parts: a true survey of what collectors have meant to the preservation of cultural history. Basbanes touches upon important issues, such as whether essential historical documents (e.g. the original hand-written copy of the constitution of the ill-fated Confederate States of America) belong in the hands of individual collectors, and what motivates collectors to present their collections to institutions or, on the other hand, to disperse them to individual buyers. This is a thought-provoking and wonderfully interesting book. Buy it, own it, read it, keep it!

Svengalis, Kendall F. *Legal Information Buyer's Guide and Reference Manual*. Barrington, R.I.: Rhode Island Law Press, 1996. 096510320X; 580 pages; \$79.95.

Reviewed by **Jack G. Montgomery**
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University of Missouri-Columbia)
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Many of us in law library acquisitions and collection development have often found ourselves wishing for a single sourcebook to answer our questions and assist us in our decision-making regarding the purchase of legal materials. How wonderful it would be to find

reliable, yet critical reviews of titles written by a well-known trustworthy source within the field. Also, in our early years as acquisitions librarians, wouldn't it have been great to get practical advice on dealing with publishers and vendors? How could we find out about how vendors and publishers operate as companies and what strategies could we employ to secure the resources our institutions require in the most cost-effective manner possible? Although, with considerable searching, involvement in professional organizations, attending national meetings and educational programs, librarians could educate themselves and develop a certain educated awareness the librarian often felt that if there was a single source you could check, how much time and energy could be saved. In a recent conversation with a colleague from a general academic library, she echoed the same sentiments, expressing an additional frustration and bewilderment with legal publications in general.

The long-standing problems with the acquisition of legal materials mentioned above only heighten the pleasure in announcing the publication of *Legal Information Buyer's*

Guide and Reference Manual by Kendall F. Svengalis, State Law Librarian at the **Rhode Island State Law Library** in Providence. Mr. Svengalis has been in law libraries for 20 years and has been a leading advocate in the ongoing struggle for equitable pricing and vendor/publisher accountability and fair business practices. He has published several articles on various aspects of law-related acquisitions and for six years served as the editor for *The CRIV Sheet*, the newsletter insert of the Committee for Relations with Information Vendors, published three times a year in the newsletter of the **American Association of Law Libraries**. Mr. Svengalis is nationally recognized as an expert on price evaluation and cost containment with regard to legal materials.

He begins his treatise with a concise history of legal publishing from its fifteenth century beginnings through the American colo-

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nial period to the development of the major U.S. legal publishing houses of the late nineteenth century. The historical section concludes with an explanation of the pricing trends over the last twenty years. Although Mr. Svengalis could not have covered the most recent takeover of **West Publishing** company by the Canadian mega-publisher, **The Thomson Company**, he has written an article on that event elsewhere (see *Rumors*, page 10). After providing the historical background to legal publishing, Mr. Svengalis introduces the voluntary **Federal Trade Commission Guides** for the law book industry finalized in 1976 in order to promote better communication between librarians and publishers of legal materials. The guides, as Mr. Svengalis indicates "have helped eliminate most of the nuisance violations in legal publishing." (p.15) and provided librarians with a basis for enlightened self-advocacy. Common problems such as unsolicited shipments have largely disappeared as a result of the **Guides** and the work of advocacy groups such as the Committee for Relations with Information Vendors, American Association of Law Libraries. Mr. Svengalis's concept of "write-for-order" program, has solved the problem of costly, frequent and in some cases unnecessary supplementation and has literally changed many of the business practices of many legal publishers.

Mr. Svengalis begins the next section with the topic of a what materials constitute a core law collection and the problems and strategies surrounding the budgeting for annual supplementation, business practices of legal publishers, alternate strategies such the buying of used book and multi-volume reporter series. At this point, the focus of the text shifts to an examination of the different types of legal materials from statutes to regulatory materials to legal treatises. It must be noted that almost all of the entries could be classified as "practitioner-oriented" being designed for use in the actual work environment rather than in an academic educational environment. With each entry, Mr. Svengalis describes the publication, gives information on frequency of supplementation, and the breakdown of the supplementation over a several year period to allow for budgeting and cost analysis. This resource would be especially valuable to the attorney who functions without a librarian for whom selecting legal materials are not a primary responsibility. Svengalis also adds descriptive

information and cost-saving tips such as what titles may be substituted should the budget allow for the purchase of only one title. He also analyzes the cost effectiveness of CD-ROM and CALR (**Computer Assisted Legal Research**) resources such as **Lexis** and **Westlaw**.

The appendices include background information on major publishers and distributors describing major product lines along with historical background information on the companies' business practices. In addition, Svengalis gives a thorough listing of company addresses and telephone numbers, a selective listing of major looseleaf services by publisher and an extensive bibliography for further reading.

I recently encountered a comment on a listserv commenting that while some of the information in this book is available in other sources, no other title has offered a single resource for the information in one location. I might add that I personally have not encountered the type of cost-conscious analysis in any other publication of this type. So it is without reservation that I would recommend the **Legal Information and Buyer's Guide** to any professional working in collection development and/or acquisitions who selects and/or purchases legal materials. I would also recommend this book to anyone who simply wishes to become better informed with regard to legal bibliography.

To order this title contact your regular vendor or write to the following address:

Rhode Island LawPress; 17 Mosher Drive; Barrington, RI 02806. FAX orders may be sent to: (401) 247-2163.

The American Forecaster Almanac,
by **Kim Long**, American Forecaster,
1459 Ogden St., Denver, CO 80218.
Softcover, 244 pages, indexed.
ISBN: 0-9644540-2-5. \$18.95.

Must order direct or through the **Tattered Cover Bookstore** WWW order service, Denver, CO. Also available on disc in ASCII or Adobe Acrobat formats.
World Wide Web site: <<http://www.ReadersNdex.com/americanforecaster>>

Review by **Linda F. Crismond**
(Professional Media Service)

What a find! I was able to read **Kim Long's American Forecaster Almanac** like a book, from cover to cover. You will discover the latest trend, the most popular, the best public opinion, the state-of-art, etc., in this annual

publication. The goal is "to provide information about changes in society without criticism or favoritism." The forward acknowledges the help of librarians, publishers, and professional/trade associations.

There is something for everyone in the almanac, including eclectic topics like dog sports, the latest in hair styling, garden trends, and auto technology. Several sections are right up librarians' and publishers' alleys. **Internet trends** predicts that businesses will provide the greatest opportunity for Internet growth in 1997. **Online books** contends that like most things digital, the promise of online resources so far is greater than reality. The English-speaking consumers outside the U.S. will use book databases as they have little access to American books through their local booksellers.

According to **Mailing Trends**, in 1994, about 60% of the Postal Service mail stream was barcoded. The goal for 1997, is to have the technology fully implemented, with an estimated 80 percent usage rate. In the **Digital Documents** section, an estimate from Xplor, the trade association for the electronics documents industry, holds that information in the business community may be 30 percent paper and 70 percent electronic by the year 2004. In 1995, the ratio is 90 percent paper, 10 percent electronic. The problem remains: the percentage of paper may be shrinking, but the amount that is generated continues to grow so fast that shifts to electronic formats don't seem to shrink the pile.

The **Almanac** can be used for fast facts and speech quotes. Each section has a "resources" list which points the reader to market research organizations, reference works, WWW pages, trade, consumer, and professional associations, product manufacturers, governmental agencies, and reference publications. An appendix supplements these lists with books and journals in general subjects and the major demographic and statistical resources in the 50 states. Finally, a detailed index leads you to more esoteric facts. Why not look up some of these topics: stir fry, check-clearing, help desks, HDTV, and information overload.

They also began publishing in 1996 the **American Forecaster Newsletter** which contains regular features such as "Frequently Questioned Answers", new phrases and words, short items of interest, recently issued patents, and significant anniversaries. To keep up with publishers, consult <http://www.ReadersNdex.com/americanforecaster> or e-mail <klong@netway.net>.

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alphabetically but has a general index and is cross-referenced. The entries do not contain bibliographies but there is a "suggested read-

ings" list at the end of the volume.

It seems obvious from this short list that subject encyclopedias are alive and well in the world of reference publishing. They serve the purpose of providing thorough information about specific subjects, and usually at reason-

able cost. In many cases, new electronic formats create profound changes in the way we provide information. But as a total replacement for printed sources like subject encyclopedias the evidence suggests that print still has a significant role to play.