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Choice

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Inside Booklist

by Irving E. Rockwood (Editor & Publisher, *Choice*) <irockwood@ala-choice.org>

As faithful readers of *Against the Grain* know, academic and public librarians tend to rely on different review sources. When asked which review journal they consult most frequently, academic librarians will generally say *Choice*. However, despite its importance to academic librarians, *Choice* is much less widely used in non-academic libraries. Instead, non-academic librarians tend to rely on a variety of other, more popular, sources such as *Publisher's Weekly*, *Library Journal*, *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, and the subject of this essay—*Booklist*. However, as we shall see, academic librarians too make use of *Booklist*, making it an appropriate topic for readers of *Against the Grain*.

Booklist is distinguished from its major competitors in a variety of ways. Unlike *PW*, *LJ*, or *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, which are subsidiaries of large commercial enterprises, *Booklist* is a nonprofit operation. Published by the American Library Association (ALA)—as is *Choice*—and based at ALA's home office in Chicago, *Booklist* might at first glance seem disadvantaged by its affiliation. The numbers, however, tell a different story. In the Book Review Media Statistics compiled annually by the staff of *The Bowker Annual*, one of the most prolific sources invariably turns out to be *Booklist*. In 1996, for example, *Booklist* published 7,189 reviews, a total exceeded only by *Publisher's Weekly's* 7,900 reviews. Next came *Choice* with 6,728 reviews followed by *Library Journal* (5,553 reviews), *Kirkus* (4,310 reviews), and *School Library Journal* (3,531 reviews). To put it another way, during 1996 *Booklist* published more reviews than appeared in all of the following sources combined—*New York Times Sunday Book Review* (2,085 reviews), *Washington Post Book World* (2,058 reviews), *Los Angeles Times* (1,870 reviews), *Chicago Tribune* (650 reviews), and *New York Review of Books* (408 reviews). Clearly *Booklist's* nonprofit status has not hampered its output.

Similarly, *Booklist's* current circulation—somewhere in the range of 28,000 paid subscriptions—makes it easily one of the most widely circulated library publications of any type. Interestingly, academic libraries account for approximately 1,600 of these subscriptions. Academic librarians may rely heavily on *Choice*, but they also make use of a variety of other review sources. One of these is *Booklist*.

Booklist Then and Now

Founded in 1905, *Booklist* has proven a durable feature of the publishing landscape. When the first issue of *Booklist* appeared in January 1905, Theodore Roosevelt was President, fewer than one in 1,000 Americans owned an automobile, and only 13 months had elapsed since the Wright brothers first flight at Kitty

Hawk. It was a time when public libraries across the land, many of them relatively new, were struggling to determine which books to add to their collections.

One characteristic which *Choice* and *Booklist* have in common is that both were launched with the aid of outside funding. *Choice* originated as the result of a 1961 grant from the Council on Library Resources. In *Booklist's* case, the funding source was a \$100,000 grant from the Carnegie Foundation. As set forth in the inaugural issue, *Booklist* was to be "a current buying list of recent books with brief notes designed to assist librarians in selection." While title selection continues to be one of *Booklist's* functions, its mission has evolved and expanded since 1905—as we shall see.

So too have its reviewing procedures. In the beginning, *Booklist's* major purpose was to help libraries identify the "best books." Only these, it was thought, were worthy of purchase. *Booklist's* task was to help identify the limited number of titles which could meet this very high if not terribly precisely defined standard. Given this, *Booklist's* early reviewing procedures emphasized accuracy over timeliness. In the beginning, all reviewing was outsourced. New titles were logged in by the *Booklist* staff and then routed seriatim to several librarians, each of whom was asked to indicate whether the book in question should be listed in the magazine. Since some titles were routed to as many as 6 librarians, and since the librarians involved were often located at some distance from one another, there was little danger of a rush to judgment. Reaching a final verdict could and did take as long as 6 months. Furthermore, the published reviews were very brief, often consisting of one to three sentences. What counted, in any case, was not the content of the review but getting on the "list." Hence the origins of the name, *Booklist*.

By comparison, *Booklist's* current reviewing procedures are clearly designed to ensure timeliness. In 1905, *Booklist* reviewed only published titles. Today, *Booklist* works almost exclusively from prepublication materials. Publishers are encouraged to submit titles as early as possible. Submission at least 15 weeks before publication is strongly recommended, and there is, in the words of Bill Ott, Editor & Publisher, "no such thing as too early." Titles submitted later than 15 weeks prior to publication will be considered provided they have not previously been submitted to other prepublication media—a stopper. However, the later a title is submitted, the lower its chances of "getting to the top of the pile."

Similarly, the nature of *Booklist's* reviewing pool has changed markedly since 1905. Today, *Booklist* reviews are written by a mix of staff members and paid freelancers. Staff members, most of whom have library training and

experience, generate about 35 percent of the reviews which appear in *Booklist*. The remainder are prepared by freelancers. The current *Booklist* reviewer pool consists of a carefully selected group of subject specialists. The proportion of librarians varies by subject with the highest proportion being found among those who review children's titles for *Booklist*, virtually all of whom have professional library training.

Regardless of professional background, *Booklist* reviewers are highly experienced, exceptionally well read, and unusually conscientious. Often called upon to complete their assignments in as little as two weeks, and seldom more than four, they do so with enthusiasm. In return, they receive only a modest honorarium and an opportunity to repeat the experience. Together they generate nearly 5,000 reviews annually, making them an indispensable part of the *Booklist* team.

The Academic Library Connection

How relevant is *Booklist* to academic libraries? Bill Ott, for one, suspects that most academic librarians perceive *Booklist* as "primarily designed for public libraries and not critical enough for academic libraries." Readily conceding that public libraries are *Booklist's* primary audience, he believes that *Booklist* is also valuable to academic libraries. In particular, he sees *Booklist* as indispensable to college libraries which are building collections with a popular slant or maintaining a periodical collection for personal reading—in which case

Booklist's Vital Statistics

Title: *Booklist*

Founded: 1905

Owner: American Library Association

Editor & Publisher: Bill Ott

Editorial Address: *Booklist*, 50 East Huron Street, Chicago, IL 60611

Editorial Phone: 1-312-280-5716

Editorial Fax: 1-312-337-6787

Frequency of Publication: twice monthly September through June and monthly in July and August (20 issues per year)

Circulation: Approximately 28,000

Subscription Cost: USA, \$69.50 per year; Canada, PUAS, and other countries, \$85 per year

Subscription Related Correspondence: 434 West Downer, Aurora, IL 60506 (630-892-7465)

Ad Sales: Art Beck, 265 Chaffinch Island Road, Guilford, CT 06437 (203-453-0607; fax 203-453-3021)

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he suggests placing *Booklist* in the reading room. In addition, he notes that *Booklist* provides valuable support for the teacher training curriculum and for writing programs generally. Finally, he notes that every issue of *Booklist* includes *Reference Books Bulletin*, a publication within a publication which makes extensive use of academic reviewers and reviews many reference sources which are suitable for academic libraries. In short, the *Booklist* Editor & Publisher believes a strong case can be made for *Booklist*'s value to academic libraries.

And many academic librarians clearly agree. While *Booklist*'s subscriber base in academic libraries has undoubtedly been affected by today's ubiquitous budgetary difficulties, the fact of the matter is that some 1,600 academic libraries currently subscribe to *Booklist*. Of these, roughly half are four-year institutions and half are two-year schools. While these numbers are below the corresponding figures for *Choice*, they do suggest that *Booklist* is a known and valued commodity within the academic library community.

The Booklist Review Process

Whatever the expectations of *Booklist*'s founders, it seems unlikely they could have anticipated *Booklist*'s current volume of sub-

missions. Today's staff must cope with 40,000 submissions a year, a virtual flood of new titles. To put it another way, *Booklist* currently receives approximately 160 new titles each and every working day, 800 each week, and over 3,000 per month. Of these, less than 20 percent — approximately 1 in 6 — will be selected for review.

Processing, evaluating, and selecting the 7,000-odd titles to be reviewed from among this torrent of submissions is the major challenge facing *Booklist*'s 28 person staff. The process by which they manage this formidable task involves a series of increasingly selective examinations or "sorts". At each stage of this process, the remaining titles are subjected to further scrutiny until all have finally been either selected for review or passed by.

While procedures vary a bit depending on the type of book, the first sort is the most crucial for many titles. Newly received titles are divided into two major groups — adult and children's titles — and then screened for relevance before routing to the editors. Approximately half of all titles received are eliminated at this stage. The most common reason for rejection is "out of scope." Out of scope titles are ones which fall into categories not ordinarily reviewed by *Booklist*. Examples include textbooks, ephemeral point-of-purchase joke books (but not cartoon books by established authors, e.g. Scott Adams), and books intended

primarily for an academic audience.

There are, of course, many nuances to *Booklist*'s selection rules. The prohibition on books intended primarily for an academic audience, for example, does not mean that *Booklist* never reviews titles from university presses. Indeed, it reviews a goodly number of these titles. Those selected, however, are ordinarily titles which are clearly intended for a broader audience, an audience which may include academia but extends beyond it. As the number of such titles published by university presses has increased in recent years, so has the university press presence in *Booklist*.

The next stop for the titles which remain after the first sort is the desk of the appropriate *Booklist* editor. A small but steady number of these go to Bill Ott, a voracious reader and gifted writer who continues — at his own insistence — to prepare 50 to 60 reviews each year while shouldering his weighty Editor & Publisher responsibilities. The remainder go to one of the other members of the *Booklist* editorial staff which currently includes four Adult Book editors, four Books for Youth editors, two Media editors, and the editor of *Reference Books Bulletin* — which has for some years been published as a section in *Booklist*.

The editors' major focus is title selection. Editors carefully examine each batch of incoming titles and select for review those which

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they believe are most appropriate for *Booklist's* audience. Each editor must then determine which of these titles he or she will review personally and assign the remainder to freelance reviewers.

The titles remaining after the editors have made their selections are known in-house as "books without homes." In a selection process which strives to "give every title its due," even the homeless have rights. Accordingly, all books without homes are routed to the appropriate department head for yet a third round of review. During this final stage, additional titles are selected for review. Titles which are not selected during this screening are, as a general rule, destined for *Booklist* oblivion and will receive no further scrutiny. So many books, so little time.

Once a title has been selected for review, it must, of course, actually be reviewed. However, the review schedule — and even the selection decision — is strongly influenced by the imminence of the title publication date. An average *Booklist* reviewing cycle is two weeks. The minimum feasible interval is approximately one week. Current *Booklist* policy calls for reviews to be published no later than the same month in which the title is published, and preferably at least one month earlier. With 20 production deadlines to meet a year, *Booklist* editors must constantly juggle reviewing schedules to match publication deadlines. What this means in practice is that late arriving titles will either be put on shorter reviewing cycles or, in some instances, simply be passed over.

The Evolution of *Booklist*

Always a "work in progress," *Booklist* has continuously evolved throughout its history. Indeed, *Booklist's* ability to adapt to changing circumstances is almost surely one of the keys to its durability. The 1960's in particular were a period of great change at *Booklist*. During this turbulent era, *Booklist* — like many other institutions — found itself engaged in a searching self-analysis which led to the adoption of a new operating philosophy. The long-standing notion that *Booklist's* basic mission was to help libraries identify and select the best books was examined and found wanting. As its critics noted, the best books philosophy allowed no room for input from the constituency which pays the bills for most public libraries — the taxpayer. This, they argued, was not only elitist and prescriptive. It was undemocratic. In their view, the time had come to give the public a role in determining the books which go into public library collections. It was a persuasive argument, and one which ultimately carried the day.

One result of this debate was a redefinition of *Booklist's* long-standing — and sometimes misunderstood — "recommended only" policy.

Often understood to mean simply that *Booklist* does not publish negative reviews, the recommended only policy is in fact a bit more subtle than this. In truth, *Booklist* does publish critical reviews — particularly in the children's area. What *Booklist* does not publish are reviews of titles which it does not recommend for library purchase. As Bill Ott noted in a recent interview, "We don't force them (librarians) to read 200 words, the bottom line of which is 'Don't buy this book'."

In short, *Booklist's* current philosophy recognizes at least two valid reasons for recommending purchase of a title. One is quality. Now as in years past, good books deserve to be added to a library collection. The other is demand. Books which it is clear people will want to read should also be in the collection. Best of all, of course, are those titles to which both criteria apply, but these are necessarily the scarcest commodity of all. The bottom line is that *Booklist* now operates on the assumption that either reason — quality or demand — is sufficient to recommend purchase.

Continuing Issues

While the 60's left a lasting imprint on *Booklist*, the subsequent years have seen many additional changes. Indeed, *Booklist* continues to be a work in progress. And like most print-based publications, *Booklist* is today grappling with the panoply of issues posed by the advent of electronic publishing.

One non-issue at *Booklist* has been the question of whether to review electronic publications. These have been covered in *Booklist's* nonprint section on a regular basis since 1981, the same year in which IBM introduced its classic PC. Shortly thereafter, *Booklist* began carrying reviews of CD-ROM materials as well. Today, in an era in which nonprint materials account for a growing share of library acquisition budgets, *Booklist* regularly reviews audio, video, and electronic titles along with its bread and butter focus — print.

Nor has *Booklist* ignored the challenge posed by the rapid rise of the World Wide Web. *Booklist* devotees can today visit *Booklist's* award winning Web site <<http://www.ala.org/booklist>> to examine a current selection of reviews and obtain a variety of additional services. In addition to searching the review database, which is updated biweekly, visitors to the *Booklist* Web site can access a wealth of feature articles, consult a newly developed cumulative index not available in the print edition, and communicate via email with the *Booklist* staff. Best of all, they can do so at no expense since the *Booklist* Web site is currently free. Some might see this as a lost opportunity. Others would agree with Bill Ott that, for now at least, the Web is best seen as a marketing tool. In this view, the Web site's primary value is its ability to introduce a new group of readers to *Booklist* and provide current subscribers with additional services. The current Web site per-

forms both tasks admirably.

A more difficult set of issues for *Booklist* are those associated with licensing. Review journals like *Booklist* — or *Choice* for that matter — are a scarce commodity. As a result, *Booklist's* reviews are of interest to a steadily growing number of vendors who would like to license these reviews for use in their own electronic products and applications. The result is a steady flow of licensing proposals from an increasingly diverse set of potential partners including publishers, book distributors, and information providers of various types.

While the attention is flattering and the financial terms often tempting, many of these proposals raise issues for which there are no definitive answers. Chief among these is the question of "cannibalization." Should *Booklist* knowingly license its reviews to a vendor whose product when introduced will ultimately cut into *Booklist's* current subscriber base? The answer is clearly "no." But if the principle is clear, the practice is often less so. How is one to determine in advance whether any given electronic product will compete with the magazine, thus leading to a loss of current subscribers? Too often the answer is that one cannot — as this author can attest. In today's rapidly changing publishing environment, *Booklist's* negotiation of licensing agreements often becomes an exercise in uncertainty.

These hazards notwithstanding, *Booklist's* reviews are now available under license from a variety of third parties. Among these are CD-ROM products available from **SilverPlatter** and **Bowker**. In addition, *Booklist* reviews are also available through **Brodart's TIPS** service, **Follett's Sneak Previews**, and **CARL's NoveList**. The last of these has gained acceptance rapidly since its introduction in March 1994 and is now licensed for use in 1 of every 15 public libraries in the United States. As NoveList's popularity has grown, so have revenues. The success of NoveList has been such, in fact, that CARL and *Booklist* recently announced a new initiative to support and strengthen readers' advisory services in libraries.

The NoveList example is instructive in several respects. First, it has been financially rewarding for *Booklist* whose revenues from NoveList are now in the six-figure range. More important however, NoveList is an example of a licensing opportunity that helps create new roles and open new markets for *Booklist*. In particular, NoveList has helped *Booklist* position itself as a readers' advisory service in addition to its traditional collection development role. Nor is this accidental. Rather, it is the result of a continuing effort to find new roles for *Booklist*, one which has been conducted with particular vigor by Bill Ott. As Bill noted in a recent joint *Booklist*/CARL press release, "Reviews and book-related features are selection tools, of course, but they can also be powerful tools to help library staff put the right book in the patron's hands." As the NoveList example clearly shows, *Booklist* continues to transform and reposition itself today, ever evolving, ever a work in progress.