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Papa Abel Remembers — The Tale of A Band of Booksellers, Fasicle 8: The Birth of the Approval Plan

by **Richard Abel** (Aged Independent Learner) <rael@easystreet.net>

The next several months, of early 1963, were spent developing the Approval Plan in the experiment with the **Washington State University Library**. **Don Stave** and I engineered this development work internally as we discovered problems and shortcomings. **Ann Connette**, the Acquisitions Librarian was a key player in this development work. She was most alert to any problems and shortcomings which emerged at her end and equally helpful in developing solutions that were necessary not only for **WSU** but for other university libraries as well. **Don** or I were repeatedly on the phone to her or traveling to Pullman to confer with her. So, it can be truthfully said that **Ann** and her staff were key players and designers of the Approval Plan mechanism.

Early on we discovered that books-in-series, whether genuine series or publishers' series, constituted a continuing problem. We initially tried the solution of getting a listing of **WSU's** standing orders, some of which we held but the bulk of which were with publishers or other vendors. But this means of resolving the matter soon proved unsatisfactory for several reasons. Finally, we suggested that all the standing orders for books-in-series be given us for execution. We agreed to send volumes in the series for which **WSU** had actual standing orders under the **WSU** order number on a separate invoice. Any volumes in-series for which **WSU** had no order but which fit within the library's collecting profile were simply sent in as approval titles on the weekly Approval Plan invoices.

But, this resolution led to another internal problem for the company: that of a far better system for controlling standing orders. We held a number of standing orders for various libraries but nothing comparable to what lay in store for assuming the responsibility for dealing with such significant numbers as we would have to deal with if our hopes for the broad utility of the Approval Plan and hence its adoption by other libraries were realized. The manual system that had served well in its early days would likely no longer suffice. We, therefore, experimented with several solutions to the problem over the next couple of years before we came up with a satisfactory answer.

There was a continuing concern by the library that we might be missing books, which they considered useful in their collection. This was not a remote "what if" or "precautionary" concern inasmuch as the bibliographic control of books in the book trade in those days was still a somewhat off-the-cuff kind of an affair. **Bowker** ran in every issue of *Publishers Weekly* a listing of newly published books. This list was derived from the proof slips issued by the **Library of Congress** on

all books published in the previous week. But **LC** cataloging was not only badly backlogged but many publishers simply failed to supply the copyright office with new books upon issue. So, many titles did not appear in the *Publisher Weekly's* listing for months following publication — not infrequently a year or more — or simply never made their way in. Given all the problems underlying the issuance of **LC** proof lists the appearance of any particular title in them and the *Publishers Weekly* listings was a very erratic affair.

We were, however, ordering from publishers' seasonal (fall & spring) forthcoming catalogs. So we typically received copies of a new title very shortly after or even before publication date, despite the legendary hang-ups and destruction of packages in the Postal Service's Chicago sorting center through which virtually all of our book shipments had to pass. (There was no **UPS** in those days; so all book packages were shipped via book post, a variant of parcel post.) To further cloud the picture publishers almost routinely published titles that had failed to be included in forthcoming catalogs or were late additions to their lists due to the widespread practice of buying co-editions or quantities of title, including exclusive US distribution rights, published overseas. So, to some degree the company was always playing a catch-up game to make certain we had ordered all titles.

Therefore, to assure ourselves that all titles of interest had been ordered I routinely reviewed *Publishers Weekly* and checked it against our shelves and manual backorder files. This checking chore had been turned over first to **Fred Gullette** and then shortly before **Fred** left to open the San Francisco office to **Don Stave**. So, to reassure **WSU** of the adequacy of coverage we agreed to furnish the library with an annotated copy of the *Publisher Weekly's* weekly book list, showing both all the titles we had received and those we had sent or would be sending to **WSU**.

In the meantime, we had learned from **WSU** that many of the faculty found that having books in which they were interested already in the library had proved a boon. But then the problem of bibliographic control emerged in the library. This problem of control affected both circulation and the catalog when it was used for bibliographic research. At first the library cobbled together a manual checkout system for all books lent to faculty and graduate students. But it was awkward to use and prone to mistakes of oversight. Nothing was done initially about the catalog bibliographic research problem other than placing the Approval books on a set of shelves in the acquisitions office. A corollary to the bibliographic research problem

was that some libraries in those years still attempted to apprise faculty of new acquisitions, often using departmental notes to that end. The library was very interested in some means of advising faculty of new Approval Plan acquisitions as the staff wished to stimulate faculty to come to the library to both assist in selection and to encourage them to look to the Library as a useful scholarly tool. We clearly had to work out these problems at our end. But these solutions remained to be worked out when we had gained experience with a larger body of users of the Plan, in order to find a general and widely useful means of so doing.

I should note in passing that it was at **WSU** that I became acutely aware of the then significant backlogs of acquired books that sat for weeks or months on shelves awaiting **Library of Congress** cataloging. In those days libraries largely acquired catalog cards as sets from the **Library of Congress**. The libraries were thus relieved of the substantial costs of original cataloging. They usually had to add only the Cutter number for shelf-list control, if they were prepared to accept **LC** cataloging wholeheartedly — which a surprisingly large number were not, routinely getting into the entries and modifying to meet local historical practices. Such extended waits, of course, cut right across the Approval Plan objective of assisting the libraries in acquiring books upon publication in order to assist faculty and students (particularly graduate students) in scholarly pursuits to keep up better with increases/advances in debate/knowledge in all the fields of study undertaken by the parent university or research institution. I knew we had to take some action here but had no clear plan for so doing. That was a matter for a later day.

The spring of 1963 was marked by another major milestone. **Fred Gullette** agreed to open and manage an office in San Francisco to serve the libraries in northern California and Nevada — from San Luis Obispo north to the Oregon border. Portland was now serving only Oregon, Washington, British Columbia and Idaho — as well as providing back-up inventory, buying, and accounting for all the offices. **Fred** and **Tom**, in Los Angeles did the bulk of traveling in their respective areas of geographic responsibility. I continued to travel to the Northwest libraries and as well as the Los Angeles and San Francisco territories, but the latter less frequently and to visit the other offices, introduce new programs and services, and assist in dealing with the problems that always occur when dealing with highly skilled customers possessing very decided views on how things should be done.

After several months of experimenting and refining the Approval Plan system we were ready in the summer of 1964 to take the

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Plan out to a few other libraries upon whose goodwill and help in refining the Plan we could count. The **University of Washington Library**, whose Acquisitions Librarian was **Ken Allen**, was approached and was prepared to give it a go. The **University of Oregon Library**, **Eugene Barnes** in charge of acquisitions, also agreed. In the meantime **Tom Martin** lined up a couple of southern California libraries, as well, as did **Fred Gullette**.

It quickly became apparent that the firm was incurring substantial costs in duplicate invoicing efforts and costs for largely the same universe of new Plan titles in its two, then three offices. We had already adjusted our purchasing procedures for new/forthcoming to accommodate the inventory needs of the Los Angeles office. I was ordering for two offices — a few copies for the Los Angeles office and a greater number for the Portland office. The Los Angeles office would send all orders they were unable to fill to Portland to tap its larger, central inventory. They simultaneously replaced desired branch office inventory from the Portland inventory. It required very little adjustment to adapt these procedures to accommodate the new San Francisco office. The largest problem was to educate the publishers' representatives in the new coding being used to distinguish the quantities destined for each of the three offices — as I simply marked up the forthcoming catalogs with our orders, which

were then sent to the reps. I had merely to adjust quantities to reflect the needs of each office to meet the Approval Plan and inventory needs.

But what was now clear was that we needed both a more effective means of dealing with the growing costs of billing and the means of solving some of the previously unsolved problems internal to the libraries. So, using our earlier developed, continuous, multi-part order-control/reporting forms as a model, I developed a 7-9 part, 3x5 form. The number of copies and the paper color of their various parts were unique to each library joining the Approval Plan, as was the pre-printed heading indicating the particular library for which the form was intended. The parts each carried a brief legend indication of the use of that part. Thus, the first 3-4 parts were invoicing parts, depending on the number required by the library for budget control and for transmission to the institution's accounting department. These invoicing parts were followed, in the most extreme cases, by separate parts for the public catalog, the shelf-list, notification to the faculty of receipt of the title, and a circulation record. A copy for our Accounts Receivable file closed a set.

At the same time the firm purchased several, then remarkable typewriters, called **Flexowriters**. The latter both made a punched tape of every character, space, line etc. of a typed document and typed the document. The same tape could be used to sequentially drive a number of **Flexowriters** — in the case of our firm, eventually 12 machines. When the individual library

continuous forms had been printed and were on hand, the responsible individual typed up a "model" form and simultaneously punched a tape. When the day's receipts of new titles had been typed, the resulting tape was run from the first machine to the next and then the next. Each **Flexowriter** in the array was carefully aligned with the others to prevent tape breakage. Each machine was loaded with the continuous forms for each specific library — and off the entire **Rube Goldberg** assemblage went cranking out initially hundreds of forms and eventually thousands of forms daily. At something approximating the full extent of the Approval Plans in place by 1965 the operation required not only 12 **Flexowriters** but several input and machine-control staff members plus a skilled supervisor. The latter was no job for one easily flustered. The mere jobs of amalgamating the several tapes being produced by multiple staff members into a single master to drive all 12 machines; make certain that a sufficient number of forms for each library were available to the machines on a daily basis; dealing with the inevitable machine and system breakdowns — now fashionably referred to as "machine crashes;" — and finally meeting the daily, late afternoon shipping deadlines, were far from child's-play.

Here it should be noted that with these continuous, multi-part forms several of the problems that had emerged early in the history of the development of the Approval Plan noted above were resolved thus improving the efficiency of the libraries. This evolution

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Lost in Austin — In a Second-hand Bookshop

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*What waits me on these shelves? I cannot guess,
But feel the sure foreboding; there will cry
A voice of human laughter or distress,
A word that no one needs as much as I.*

*For always where old books are sold and bought
There comes that twinge of dreadful subtlety —
These words were actual, and they were thought
By someone who was once alive, like me.*

— Christopher Morley

Christopher Morley is no longer alive, either, but when he was, he was a great champion of books and bookstores. He was mercifully spared the demise of bookstores and books, too, if we are to believe all we read about hard times in the industry.

I admit to buying second-hand books via the Internet but my record of purchases at two of the **Half-Priced Books** locations in Austin admit me into, I am guessing, a small but solid group of readers who contribute hundreds of dollars a year to the used-book trade. I buy new books, too, but all of my favorite authors have long since departed and are no longer writing.

There is nothing like a well-stocked book shop, new or second-hand (a much more respectful term than used-books, a term that is tawdry by comparison). It is more fun than television or the movies and healthier, too. I am not only walking around or standing for prolonged periods of time but I am exercising my mind or letting my mind wander into a state of relaxation and otherworldliness that compares favorably with meditation, a recommended way to help reduce blood pressure and stress.

Many of us love bookstores, purveyors of new and second-hand books but how many would drive 560 miles round trip just to visit a second-hand book store? Admittedly, it is easier to drive that far to go shopping when you live in one of the western states or a southern state as large as Texas (how large? About half the size of Alaska, it's that big).

Our original plan (my wife went along for the ride *and* the books) was to drive to Archer City, spend a few hours browsing, and then spend the night, browse some more in the morning, and then head for home. We finished early (more about that later) so we decided to drive back home when we considered the advantages of sleeping in and waking up in one's own bed. Besides, Texas highway 281 is one of our favorite roads.

When I lived in Norman, Oklahoma, my parents were still alive and well in Canyon Lake, Texas. I could drive straight down Interstate 35 and turn right at FM (Farm to Market) Road 306 and head for Sattler, Startzville, and Canyon Lake or I could drive over to Lawton, Oklahoma and Ft. Sill where **Geronimo** is buried and take TX281 past Blanco and turn left at TX46 and then over to Startzville and Canyon Lake, going a bit out of my way but avoiding Dallas and Austin and enjoying not only less traffic, but more interesting (and not so ugly) scenery.

But back to Archer City, hometown of **Larry McMurtry** and the Last Picture Show now that we are off Hwy281 (we turned left at Windthorst and took TX25).

We were going to visit **Booked Up: Fine, Rare & Scholarly Books**, **Larry McMurtry's** second-hand book shop housed in four buildings, two of which adjoin one another with another directly across the street and the fourth down the street near the public library and the water tower (we didn't visit that one). (Go to [\[pac.com\]\(http://pac.com\) for photos and more information. Be sure to read the *Important Announcement* and be happy that the store is still there.\)](http://www.bookedu-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

By **McMurtry's** own account (p. 111, *Books*), "Our own store, **Booked Up**, now contains remnants of the stock of at least twenty-six bookshops. Most of these purchases are sorted, repriced, and put in their proper section, but knowing as we do that some book buyers resent too much organization, we leave a couple of long walls, containing maybe 120,000 books, unsorted, with books that range in price between \$10 and \$40."

I could not have stated his case better or with such authority. I can attest to the unsorted books and it is fun but one would take days and we didn't have days. I was looking for books by my favorite authors, authors whose works I collect. They happen to be writers of fiction so I was in luck because much of the fiction is in reasonable order but not all because in those 120,000 unsorted volumes one is likely to find novels next to a work of history or travel or literary reminiscences.

I found, in the unsorted areas, some books that I would like to own but that were overpriced. I could have bought the facsimile first edition, in slip-case, of *The Grapes of Wrath* at another store for half of what **Booked Up** was asking but even the less expensive item was overpriced so I didn't buy that one either. That is a minor criticism. If I lived close enough to **Booked Up** to visit regularly, I would soon run out of shelf space even as I ran out of money.

I found four books by **Christopher Morley** that I didn't own (one was a variant) and **Philip Wylie's** *Finnley Wren* in fine condition with dust jacket, each purchase costing either \$10 or \$15. And to make things even better, my receipt is on **Booked Up** letterhead with each title and price neatly written by hand.

Several hours after we entered the front door of **Booked Up**, it was still daylight and I wanted to leave while I was ahead, so we hopped in the car and headed home.

I would like to return to Archer City and stay in the local hotel so that I could be at the door when **Booked Up** opens at 10 a.m. and stay until it closes at 5 p.m. I would spend more time on the ladders so I could properly explore the top shelves in what used to be, I think, a commercial garage. I was reminded a bit of the **Northern Regional Library Facility** in Richmond, California including the chilly temperatures that are healthy to books and not so bad for humans, either, if you wear a sweater.

There is a rare book room across the street but there was no staff there and I didn't want to fetch anyone (the sign says to go ahead and fetch) but I did visit the room containing review copies and galleys of books. I found one I wanted but I needed to fill up with gas in Windthorst so I demurred. Maybe it will still be there when I return. 🐾

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of the Plan had taken two years to get to this point of utility.

I strongly wish to make unambiguously the point that several competent people spent a great deal of time, hours of examination and thought, and substantial financial resources to bring the Plan and its procedures along this far — that is up to the summer of 1965. A handful of people advanced the opinion that the Approval Plan was little more than an enlarged Farmington Plan. However, the Approval Plan was not the relatively easy straight-forward system employed by the Farmington Plan. In

this latter case, the booksellers' job was a little more involved and complex than collecting a copy of all the new titles published in a single country in some stipulated period of time, dividing them among the participating libraries along broadly defined subject categories and billing/dispatching these groups of books periodically. That, of course, is the consequence of the fact that the two systems had vastly different objectives: the Farmington Plan to assure at least a single copy of every significant title published overseas was held in the US. The Approval Plan objective was two-fold; to get a copy of every title published in the US, initially, into the hands of scholars as soon as available and secondly to significantly reduce the costs to the libraries of acquiring such titles. 🐾