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Op-Ed-Opinions and Editorials-The Crisis of the Scholarly Monograph Conference

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Op-Ed — Opinions and Editorials

The Crisis of the Scholarly Monograph Conference — Washington, DC, September 1997

by **Thomas Bacher** (Director, Purdue University Press, 1532 South Campus Courts E, West Lafayette, IN 47909-1532; phone: (765) 494-8251)

I went to the Future of the Scholarly Monograph Conference alongside the Potomac a short time ago. The topic was discussed in caucus (like other events in a city that always seems to be at the root of many societal problems that Congressional transients and international tourists rarely see), bringing together the somewhat less than usual suspects: university press directors, librarians from research institutions, members of scholarly associations, distinguished faculty members, and administrators from prestigious universities — stakeholders in the current crisis that seems to be enveloping the publication of the academic tract that lends credibility to teaching credentials and deigns one down the path to Edenous tenure. However, the bound, narrowly defined book was near death and, unlike a vampire, the predilection to carry on from this generation to the next seemed like a whisper in a roomful of shouting revolutionaries. In fact, some librarians in attendance had already plunged the stake into the book's leathery cloth.

"Why?" "Why care?" "We're publishing too many books," "The electronic revolution is not really free." and "What crisis?" were the continual comments emanating from the gathered experts. Nasty murmurs, filled with vestiges of economic loss and subtle finger pointing, mostly at those commercial publishers who were not invited in the first place, permeated the room like cigar smoke at a Helm's home gathering. A thing, this monograph, like other technologies had run its course and would have to be replaced by, but oh not so quickly, the electronic panacea of stupendous digital distribution so that someone in Borneo or Cuzco could automatically grab the vaporous text, download, and, even, yes, read it to become aware of the newest theory concerning the antho-socio-multi-cultural underpinnings of tourists' buying habits of handmade (by poor Peruvian Indians) chess sets whose pieces replicated the last great battle of the tradition-rich Inca kings against the progress (parading as religious) bearing Spaniards. Holy Machu Picchu!

The joint was jumpin' as speakers took to the podium to present the way it was. Provosts, fingernails bitten to the skin, providing the reality check that comes with signing numerous checks, detailing one after another the administrative support they have granted to scholars and researchers but reigning the crowd in with frank discussion of the Franc and dollar and the tightness of funds before spreading the sermon of their holy duty, as protectors of research and education, but please don't request another thing. Thank you. I've been forced to draw down the bottom line again.

Publishers sowing seeds of economic ruination because no one will buy that work in the numbers adding up to break even — that work on the little bit of 18th century German history in the original mother tongue meant for every American scholar transmitted by the indomitable acquisition editor of the house who knows best in these situations. It has potential readership and great promise. It will fill the windows of the Barnes and Nobles Superstores, another opening soon in your neighborhood, receive exquisite reviews (albeit four years after publication when the stock has already been destroyed) and be a "must"

read by the 15 Germanic scholars who seem to have lost favor with their respective deans. Mostly, the tome, like some other acquisitions, will fill warehouse shelves educating the pickers who take one off each year leaving 250 more to go for the pickers' children and children's children who will have forged a link with the past by continuing footsteps to Aisle 19, Bin 97 for the next three decades to send out the monthly copy like other rites of summer, fall, winter and spring.

Librarians will see this book rarely (or never), perhaps when the new director of the University Press arrives looking for cheap, fresh ideas in old publications with new introductions. "Hi. I'm the new Press Director. It's nice to meet someone who deals with books." "Nice to meet you, too. But sorry, we stopped doing that a while ago." Rather, librarians have become intermediaries in the process washing their hands like Pilate in the quest to become totally electronic, relying on mere ether to distribute the knowledge of the (sic) Western world to the multitudes. These keepers of the store show diagrams displaying supra-inflationary trends in both price and amount of materials published over the last ten years, making it impossible to keep up with the pace and ridding their customers of precious information. They have opted to pick and choose, reduce serially, and store aggressively, leaving shelves and decimals after Dewey bare.

Faculty members struggle with the metaphysics of it all, trying to ascertain the first causes in their lives that led them to academia and the holy grail of publish or perish. Publish once and tenure might come. Publish twice and your committee will have no recourse. Publish thrice and the rooster will crow with admiration and exaltation. The traditional book that is, because

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faculty and their graduating graduate students have not found that the road to ink and paper is beset with New York style potholes swallowing big yellow taxis and modified dissertations in a

single gulp. These educated folks continue to cradle their copies and place them on their dean's desk, and hold them up on television, at least the local public access channel, and display them proudly on the mahogany shelves of their home study where the academic-on-sabbatical will spend nights deep in thought with a snifter of cognac in hand. Several well-edited and peer-reviewed monographs will become notches on Professor X's belt of academic achievement, reviewed favorably by her peers, quoted in articles in journals that she edits, held in her adopted children's hands, and provide her with a little, very little, royalty income. How can you pass Web sites around at the Thanksgiving table anyway?

In all the perfunctory conversation like speeches in front of a 1920s labor mob prior to the inevitable physical confrontation, for surely the delivery of information has changed, will have changed, and must change, the worth of the word itself as embodied in the compilation of one's scholarly thoughts seemed lost in a grand scheme to maintain the operational status quo.

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The electronic revolution portends the need to downsize and emphasizes the multi-faceted nature of job responsibility. Unlike the commercial publishers who have faced this reality by conglomerating and eliminating duplication and payroll, university presses have not yet come to terms with the crisis. Building large internal staff and other overhead has prevented them from taking advantage of a continually-changing environment.

The effects of a new physical Weltanschauung takes years to become firmly entrenched. Until recently, we have been clinging to Newtonian concepts that have shaped our perceptions of the world. By emphasizing the nature of cause and effect, we became convinced that reality was in the seen event, the physical entity, or the book. We could only grant recognition to what was held in our hands. Since 1905, a new physics has been invading Newtonian space and transforming our perceptions. We have come to realize that our action is one of many points in a moment that we call time. The mechanistic and understandable has been overtaken by the fluid and changeable. We may never again comprehend our world as completely as we thought we had previously. In a cloudy future, we are confronted with unknowns that challenge us to take into account unseen causes and consequences.

Also, a new technological revolution is firmly underway which leads to a set of new contradictions. The advent of movable type had a profound societal and psychological impact. On the one hand it fostered individuality through creativity, but it also led to the curse of nationalism highlighted by the scourge of fascism and nazism. The core nature of the invention, scientific repetitiveness, dictated a new paradigm in which man began to exist. The book and its subsequent distribution opened up the door to the downfall of authority by effecting a gathering of the less fortunate. Yet, in the yin and yang of life, typography also led to mass media distribution and control. Our independence allowed us ironically to point out our differences in black and white and subsequently reemphasize our view's superiority. We stereo-typed ourselves.

Today, as we see fights in Congress over funding the arts, logical fights full of rational arguments, one is painfully aware of the heights to which the epistemology of science (the repetitive creation) has come to dominate our world. Individuality has been subsumed into a row of statistical variations on the norm. We must be able to quantify the return on our investment in real terms. Quality of life considerations (the benefit for the one) have little persuasive, measurable outcomes.

The burgeoning electronic revolution has allowed us to gather the world together at our keyboards at our convenience. We are capable of creating our own Web page, banking at 3 AM, and ordering almost everything from our study. We email to India and search Russian Webs. We bookmark the best weather site to prepare for next week's vacation. In the near future, we will be attaching videologues to the electronic messages sent by our children to their grandparents. Our individuality is lost in the steady stream of electronic instructions that emanate from our computer. Our destiny is to become a member of a chat group, news group or listserv. We are well on our way to becoming a node on the family LAN. We have suppressed our personality by hiding within a much larger room, driving down the center lane of life, and shouting from the crowd.

The contradiction of our times will be how this current mass repetition is replaced by the new cultural centrifuge of individu-

alism. Precursors of the future are evident in glimpses of the present. Technology has provided us with the real capability of designing our own unique educational tract by conglomerating courses from various disparate schools into a reflection of our own tastes and needs. While the logical Newtonian approach, the scientific approach, required that one collect the most data on a given problem leading one to ascertain a solidly logical answer, the Einsteinian approach makes us take into account the causality of events from a multi-variate viewpoint. Education, which at present creates a more-encompassing tunnel vision as one steps higher up the degree ladder, will place more emphasis on the generalist, an individual who can synthesize and act in all situations, not the specialist, an individual who is only a part of a particular clan. A society dominated by technology will muddy the differences between specific knowledge by basing activity in technique (how to operate the device across settings) not in tenet (why operate the device in a particular setting).

University presses, in particular, must be aware of the transformation in people's perceptions. Ritualistic reading, reading from cover to cover, of the latest monograph is a trait of the past. Having learned to cut and paste from infancy, the next generation of educated adults will read in bits and pieces and as a part of their personal multi-tasking. There is a propensity to consider this a "bad situation" for some unsubstantiated academic reason perhaps due, in part, to an educational generation gap that pits the book against the Web. Further, we are seeing a growth in customization at the expense of the assembly line. Coursepacks

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are not a passing fancy but a permanent (not in length of life) fixture of classroom activities and teaching methods. University Presses must adapt to this new environment in which speed of distribution and form of distribution will play a vital role in their success.

The death of the book is not new to publishing. The bells for the information carrier have tolled as each new mass-media device has been invented. In 1933, one publishing executive saw it this way, "The rise and fall in the use of the book does not depend on its competition with motion pictures or radio. It can and will live side by side with them and will still provide the most remarkable means yet devised by man for the perpetuation of his ideas and hopes, and can still give the most individual service to those who want to choose their own time and place for diversion, instruction and inspiration." **Bennett Cerf** saw it, too. "I am sure you have been told that television has hurt the cause of reading in America. This is absolute nonsense! Television is only the latest in a series of things that has raised the hackles of disturbed publishers. Publishers, incidentally, are the most easily disturbed people I ever have met. All you have to do is ask a publisher, 'How's business?' and he starts crying. Sometimes his tears bounce right off the decks of his private yacht! The fact of the matter is that neither television nor anything else will ever stop people from reading good books, if they have been taught actually to enjoy reading when they were children."

We are now faced with another death knell for the book in a world in which the most ordered item on the Internet is the book. The continuing advance in readers' scholarship seems to portend a promising future for the University Press. New emphasis has been placed on the young reader. Still we must ask ourselves

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and city states, and finally among different civilizations called countries, is now global. And this global competition spurs innovation and technological advances at an increasing rate. For a long time environment and geography gave some of us advantages over others, but it is obvious that the end of isolation will gradually eliminate geographically-induced advantages. A sheep cloned in Scotland is instant news in Thailand. A new rice strain developed in Thailand can be grown next week in Tanzania. You can eat a Big Mac in Moscow and Nairobi, and quinoa from Peru was last year's trendy food in New York restaurants. This year it's Chilean sea bass.

Throughout Jared Diamond's book, he interweaves observations from his twenty years among the hunter/gatherer mountain tribes of New Guinea. He is not a sentimentalist; he does not romanticize them into the Noble Savage. He reports, for instance, that the leading cause of death among these people is murder. But at the same time he believes that the average child in these tribes is smarter, more social, and more self-sufficient than the average American child, despite a lack of exposure to technology. In fact, he blames technology, especially television, for this dumbing down process in our culture (the average American child consumes seven hours a day in front of the boob tube). I believe that *Sesame Street* and other "quality" children's programming is the culprit, teaching children not to read but rather to watch, passively and alone, resulting in the life-long couch potato habit. We are out of touch with our history, our social evolution. No society ever valued this kind of assault on its children, let alone tolerated it.

Mono Lake Stories by Martha Clark Cummings.

Rowbarg Press, 0-9646201-2-X, \$8.95

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The various lives, experiences, loves, desires, and losses of contemporary lesbians are explored in Cummings' debut book, *Mono Lake Stories*. Through the nine stories we meet Robin, Ginger Darling, Molly, Chloe, The Duchess, Maxine, Jill, Helen, Lillian and many other warm and passionate women. Each of the stories present lesbians living life. Compassion, irony, and wisdom make the stories human; yet the threads of loneliness, threat and isolation make the stories real. Although these nine stories are dissimilar in their portrayal of various women throughout the country and in different time periods, they all contain the major undercurrent of lesbians coming to terms with the ramifications of their sexuality. The nine stories cover many topics of the human condition: family, love, lost love, children, home. Some noteworthy topical themes found in this book are: drug addiction, family strife, and sexual harassment. Moreover, the stories cover many topics of a lesbian and gay genesis: first experiences, coming out, the "bar scene," being closeted, and family tension. Cummings adroitly weaves the experiences of gay women into the tapestry of modern society. Taken as a whole, these stories show the diversity, the joy, and the troubles that reside within that world.

The title of the collection comes from the first story, "Mono Lake." This story is about a heroin addict living in the Eastern Sierra. The unnamed female protagonist works as a room cleaner in her sister's motel. The brother-in-law has made passes at the young woman and continues to do so. The female protagonist is in love with a local waitress, but seems more concerned with trying to kick her heroin habit. In one memorable passage, the main character compares herself and her would-be-girlfriend to the tufa towers which rise up out of Mono Lake: "We stand

there, tall and strange and beautiful, mysterious shapes formed by a mixture of elements that is ordinary but almost never happens. For a few short months in the summer, the tourists come ... and stare at us ... And then the road is closed for the winter and that's that." This typifies the beautiful and emotionally sympathetic portrayal of Cummings' characters but also perfectly captures their sometimes lonely and often elegiac existence.

The Sapphic theme continues through out the remainder of the stories. In "Absence Makes the Heart," the main character, Robin, is forced to visit her family at Christmas. Tension and trouble follow as Robin has been asked to leave her lover at home. Robin's mother makes it clear that "Kate still doesn't count as family." "An Incident" is a gripping story in which a female student falsely accuses a lesbian teacher of sexual harassment. The story points out that sexual harassment may become the McCarthy cry of the 90's. "The Duchess" refers to a bar where another unnamed female protagonist, this one bearing a broken heart, meets and pursues Chloe, a younger woman. The protagonist ends up falling in love with the same type of woman who broke her heart previously.

The most poignant story of them all is "Lillian's Piano." This story within a story centers around a woman reminiscing with her current lover about her previous lover, Lillian. Lillian combines Daisy Fay's airiness with Mame's societal bludgeon. As with the main character, the reader too cannot keep from falling in love with Lillian. But as with all great starlets, there must be a fall; in Lillian's case it's back to heterosexuality. The narrator omits this fall from her reminiscence, allowing Lillian to keep her faerie charm and lust for life, music, and fellow women, at least in the world of the story.

Mono Lake Stories is an astute collection of modern windows into the lesbian soul. The reader discovers women so naturally constructed that they may be your neighbor, or your friend, or you, and they may be named Chloe or Ginger or Helen or any other name in the world. 🌿

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several questions. How can University Presses cut their overhead? How can University Presses upgrade their importance to their home Universities? How can Presses find advantages in licensing their products? How can Presses continue to publish the monograph in an economical form? How can University Presses market and sell their titles better? How can University Presses get out of the business of reaction and into the age of proaction? How can University Presses change their costing and revenue models?

Dark grey clouds were beginning to roll and rumble above the Capitol building at the end of the Scholarly Monograph in Crisis Conference. Rain was inevitable. Parting words at the last luncheon, under participants' breath, were of confusion. The monograph as an entity was probably going to or had already changed itself. The University Press on the other hand was still trying to figure out where to get on board. Keepers of University Presses were beginning to feel like folks who lived in the less-enviuous areas of the District and had the most complaints about services and safety. And, unfortunately, like those folks, the way to change was not an easy one, requiring a bundle of self-sacrifice and risk-taking. Economics still seemed to be the overriding concern, and, obviously, an accounting was necessary. However, as I sat at Eero Saarinen's impressive terminal, which happened to be in renovation to fulfill the architect's dream, a question kept coming and going like the arriving and departing flights —Have University Presses become statisticians and forgotten their art? 🌿