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David Rubin-Rookwood Press

Katina Strauch
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Interview with David Lee Rubin

President, Rookwood Press <dlr7r@hotmail.com>

by **Katina Strauch** (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <strauchk@cofc.edu>

NB: I met Professor David Rubin at *The Specialized Scholarly Monograph in Crisis* meeting in Washington in September put on by the American Council of Learned Societies, the Association of American University Presses, and the Association of Research Libraries. I know that you will all enjoy this slice of a publishing and literary life. — KS

ATG: So how did it come about that you are a publisher?

DR: After editing several collective volumes for university, trade, and research-institute presses, I decided to see what I could accomplish on my own. The immediate cause was a disagreement over the financing and editorial responsibility for a monograph series invited by the publisher of my first early-modern French studies annual, *Continuum* (1989-1993).

ATG: How many books have you published to date and do you use freelancers?

DR: The first three titles appeared in December, 1994 and January, 1995; by July, 1998, Rookwood Press will have seventeen titles in print. Yes, I use freelancers -- mostly well-trained and closely supervised graduate students in French -- who copyedit and handle production. This slows the publication process somewhat, but the quality of their work more than compensates for slight delays.

ATG: Tell us about the editorial and peer review process for Rookwood Press.

DR: Normally, I receive a letter proposing a book, and if I am interested, I tell the author to send the manuscript. I spend a day or two examining the text and if I like it I send it to two referees, distinguished experts in the field. Sometimes I must send the manuscript to a third referee. Most of the time, the readers recommending acceptance mandate improvements. In that case, I ask the author to devise a revision strategy in response to the readers' reports. I award the contract after the revisions have been approved, either by me or the referees.

ATG: Do you reject a lot of manuscripts?

DR: I reject about two-thirds of the manuscripts that are offered to me, either at the earliest stage, after my personal examination of the text, or on the basis of referee reports. I was offered ten manuscripts last year and of these seven were



rejected. Reasons for rejection include irrelevance to the list, poor research, inept reasoning, bad writing, or lack of engagement with the scholarship in the field.

ATG: Can everybody in academe get published today if they really want to?

DR: The character of publication has changed. Today, certain types of books that would easily have been published by university presses ten or fifteen years ago are not even being considered because they won't sell enough copies to break even. Every scholar can get a good manuscript published eventually, but authors of monographs must look to media other than university presses. Those not defining their project in terms that appeal to university presses must familiarize themselves with the universe of monograph publishers in their field and learn to deal with them.

ATG: You are a professor of French at the University of Virginia and author of several monographs. Can you tell us more about your background?

DR: For the past 28 years I have taught seventeenth-century French Literature at the University of Virginia, where I also serve on the Comparative Literature Committee. I earned my Ph.D. at Illinois in 1967, and before transferring to Virginia, I taught at the University of Chicago. I have written three university-press books on seventeenth-century poetry (one of them on a Guggenheim Fellowship) and I'm preparing a book which will set out to illustrate a new theory of literary translation. In addition to the Rookwood series, I edit *EMF: Studies in Early Modern France*, the successor to *Continuum*.

ATG: What is the profile of your authors? Are they U.S. academics or do they

come from other countries?

DR: A number of my authors are very distinguished senior American colleagues, such as **Jules Brody**, **Judd Hubert**, and the late **Aram Vartanian**. Others are assistant or associate professors at various American colleges and universities. I am currently considering a manuscript by a professor at the University of Glasgow and awaiting the final revision of a major work by an Oxford don.

ATG: Do you publish your books in French or English?

DR: I do publish some materials in French, but the majority of my books are in English.

ATG: How about the library market? You must sell a lot of books to libraries.

DR: I deal mainly through distributors and, alas, don't know who is ordering the books.

ATG: How do you market to libraries?

DR: My "customer" is the collection development officer, whom I try to reach as often and as persuasively as possible, through direct-mail brochures, routing sheets from faculty members who receive

"... approval-plan orders expand annually by a few percentage points."

my annual announcement, listings in dealer's catalogues and publications like the *Times Literary Supplement*, as well as slips from distributors and the Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication program.

ATG: Tell us more about your distributors. It sounds like you work mainly through them which is great with us librarians. We don't like to order direct from publishers. But I guess we have all heard the nightmare stories about small publishers and how it is difficult for you to give distributors the high discounts which they wish.

DR: Distribution is a margin business. It is my policy to grant the discount requested by distributors (which range from 20% to 35%). Distributors who receive the discount they request tend to work more effectively for the publisher. But this can cause a price squeeze. The book must list for an amount which, after discounts, will enable the press to recover its

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expenses, but the price must not exceed libraries' ceiling for any book of its type. Right now I am pricing my library-bound volumes at sixteen cents per page which is mainstream for books on literature.

ATG: *What specific book distributors do you use? And are your books handled on approval plans?*

DR: I deal with the distributors that cater to the college library market. I use most of the distributors in this country — **Coutts, Yankee, Blackwell's, Midwest, Baker & Taylor**, etc. I send materials to the approval plan buyers and thanks to their conscientious work, the approval-plan orders expand annually by a few percentage points. And there are very few returns.

ATG: *I believe that you have distributors in England and France. How did those arrangements come about?*

DR: One of my authors asked me to arrange to have his French publisher, **Librairie Honoré Champion** (Paris), distribute the book he had published at Rookwood. Instead, I proposed to Champion that it distribute the whole list on a permanent basis. I submitted samples of the first-year's books, waited five months while they were vetted, and then received a

standing order for thirty copies of each new title. Some of the titles have been reordered several times. Champion sends catalogues to libraries throughout the world, as does its parent company, **Editions Skatkin** of Geneva. **Grant and Cutler** is my distributor in the UK. This fall, their French catalogue, which is distributed everywhere, contains a special flyer listing all Rookwood Press books, plus excerpts from reviews.

ATG: *Can we talk about review copies for a minute? How significant an expenditure is this for you? And do you get reviews in a timely fashion?*

DR: Review copies are an investment. If that investment yields results, that is—a review within two years of publication, I will keep the journal on my list; otherwise I will drop it. I find that British and continental European journals are the most reliable and, in the US, *The French Review*.

ATG: *At the Specialized Scholarly Monograph conference, there was a lot of talk about electronic monographs. And I know that it has been shown that electronic delivery of some electronic books can boost paper sales. Will electronic monographs ever work? Are you considering them at Rookwood?*

DR: University presses have immense overhead and many are in financial trouble.

They are looking for a panacea, but I think they may have gotten themselves into trouble with the electronic option. Electronic publication is not that much cheaper and the market is thin. Few people are willing to read books on a computer screen and even fewer want to read loose pages downloaded to a slow printer. Of course, things may change and the next generation of scholars might find that this isn't a problem.

ATG: *How about your new list? Did I understand you to say that you are going to publish a textbook? What kind of a textbook?*

DR: Yes, in my 1998 list, there will be an updated and corrected reprint of Floyd Gray's excellent anthology of French Renaissance poetry. It is entirely in French and should appeal to the college and university market in and out of France, where the only competing volumes are less comprehensive or less scholarly, or outrageously expensive. The following year, I will bring out the second edition of a baroque poetry anthology of my own, published a decade ago in Germany. I am hoping that textbooks will eventually underwrite the publication of monographs. That's one of the interesting things about doing what I am doing. I can try ideas that look promising and I don't have to go through a board or clear it with a bunch of accountants. 🐼

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