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ATG Interviews Irv Rockwood

Editor and Publisher, Choice magazine

by Katina Strauch (Editor, *Against the Grain*)

I ran into Irv Rockwood at ALA and we set up this in-

terview. He is a real pleasure to talk to and I am sure that y'all will agree. — KS

ATG: This is the reference issue of *ATG*. Do you have a sense of the volume of reference books that are currently being published? Is it more or less than in past years? What's the volume of print versus electronic format?

IR: Bob Balay, our Reference Editor, would be better qualified to answer this question than I am. What I can tell you is simply that reference is and always has been one of the largest sections in *Choice*. *Choice* reviews a bit over 700 new reference titles a year, roughly 60-65 titles per issue. We have had no difficulty finding titles to review. In fact, we reviewed 726 reference titles this past year compared with 704 the preceding one. What has been changing is the mix. This past year we reviewed slightly fewer books (595 versus 648 the preceding year) and more electronic titles (131 versus 56). Much of the difference, however, is a result of our decision to begin

reviewing Internet sources this past year. Thus, we published 96 reviews of Internet reference sources in 1997-98 versus only 15 the year before. So clearly the mix of reference titles we review is changing. The overall volume, however, is holding steady, and I expect this to continue.

As an aside, I might add that plenty of books are still coming out and the numbers submitted to *Choice* continues to climb. I know that we have been hearing about the death of the scholarly monograph, and I am, I guess, among those who believe this is happening. In truth, however, this hasn't been reflected in the number of titles *Choice* receives. I keep expecting the number of books we receive to decrease, but it hasn't happened so far. Instead, we've been seeing a slow but steady increase. This past year, for example, we received roughly 23,500 new titles from publishers, 200-300 more titles than we received the previous year.

ATG: What about quality? A number of significant reference sets have been published over the last couple of years and there seems to be growth in the publishing of specialized scholarly references.

IR: Again, I think Bob Balay would be

better able to address this than I. But I would certainly agree that there seems to have been a noticeable surge in the volume of scholarly reference publishing activity during the past few years. If so, I think the much-discussed decline in the profitability (perhaps feasibility is a better word) of the scholarly monograph has something to do with it. My guess is that -- confronted with declining sales of their bread and butter product, the monograph -- many traditional scholarly publishers have been exploring new areas, and reference has been one of these areas. If so, this would certainly account for the increased activity we seem to be seeing. As for the future, that undoubtedly depends on just how successful these projects are from the publishers' standpoint.

My impression is that this is a time of great creativity in reference publishing. There seem to be a great deal of innovative new projects. The transition to electronic publishing, and the possibilities associated with this transition, probably has something to do with this. As for quality, that seems to vary a great deal, but I for one am greatly impressed by the quality of many of the reference titles we receive.

ATG: What proportion of the books that
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are published does *Choice* review?

IR: We review about 30% of the titles submitted to us. This past year, for example, we reviewed about 6,500 of the 23,500 titles submitted. Overall, we “reject” an average of seven out of ten books submitted, but this varies somewhat by subject area. The percentage of titles reviewed is higher in some fields. In reference, for example, we tend to review more like 50%, or one out of two books submitted. I hasten to add that *Choice* clearly does not receive a copy of all new titles — nor do we want to. If my memory is reliable — a questionable assumption — over 50,000 new books were published in the U.S. last year. If so, *Choice* receives less than half of these, and we review less than 15%. However, this is more than enough to keep us busy.

Of course, many of the books submitted are “out of scope” and are never serious candidates for review by *Choice*. One thing publishers can do to help reduce the number of “out of scope” titles they submit is consult our review policy guidelines. We do have a formal Selection Policy that we review and revise at least every five years. The most recent version appeared in the September 1997 issue of *Choice*. This is a lengthy document, and it’s not exactly scintillating bedtime reading. Still, it can be very helpful when deciding what to submit to us.

The actual selection decision rests with the *Choice* editorial staff whose job it is to apply the Selection Policy to specific titles. *Choice* has a staff of 7 subject editors who spend a lot of time defining exactly the type of book we want to review, and then reviewing the titles received. In addition, they are constantly looking for and requesting books that look like strong review candidates. All other things being equal, a title that has been requested by the subject editor — as opposed to simply having been sent by the publisher — clearly has a good chance of getting reviewed. However, because it is impossible for our staff to keep up with all the new titles that appear, we also rely on publishers to exercise their own judgment and submit titles on their own. Happily, they are willing to do this.

ATG: *There has been some grouching about not enough reviews being published and also that reviews that are published are basically positive. I know that at least one source, Wilson Library Bulletin, is no more.*

IR: There’s no question that people would like to see more reviews. So would my colleagues and I, and we have managed to slowly inch up the number of titles reviewed. This past year, for example, we published a bit over 6,800 new reviews, roughly 300 more than our historic average. In truth, however, we are operating at capacity. We are reviewing about as many titles as we can handle with our present staff of 20+ FTE’s — just under 25 individuals.

Like you, I have also heard from people

who feel that too many of our reviews are positive. And it’s true that a very small percentage of our reviews — less than 2% most years — are clearly negative, i.e. the title involved is “not recommended.” What’s going on, of course, is that a large number of the titles that are likely to be reviewed negatively are being screened out in-house. Rather than sending a weak title out for review, and then publishing a review that says this title isn’t recommended, we’re just not sending such titles out. If we had unlimited resources and could review more titles than we are presently handling, I would be willing to argue for a change in policy. (I guess it’s more like a “practice” than a policy.) As things stand, however, I think it makes sense to concentrate our efforts on identifying and then reviewing the “best” titles we receive — which is what we do.

That said, I also believe that there is room in the marketplace for more review sources. Our mission is to review materials appropriate for undergraduate collections, and that’s what we try to do. Overall, I believe that *Choice* is doing a pretty great job.

ATG: *Yes. I know we use Choice heavily in my library. It’s a great resource. Can we talk a little bit about your reviewing of Web resources? I know that you have just published Web II, your second annual compilation of Internet reviews.*

IR: That’s true. We published our first Web supplement in August of 1997. **Fran Graf**, our Managing Editor, came up with the idea and then made it happen. Because she was starting from scratch, selecting the sites to be reviewed was a real challenge. As part of her search, she checked out a huge number of print resources, solicited suggestions from *Choice* reviewers, and spent a lot of time on the Internet. If the same site kept coming up time and time again, she added it to her core list which eventually contained a little over 190 sites. She did a terrific job. Web I, as we called it, was a sellout. It had the largest single copy sale of any issue of *Choice* to date.

The second volume, just published, is broader and more systematic. This is a cumulative volume containing reviews of over 480 sites. Of these, 90 are new reviews and the rest are updates or reprints of reviews published during the past 12 months. The selection process for Web II more closely paralleled our usual selection process than Fran was able to do when pulling together Web I. Today, *Choice* is reviewing an average of 35 Internet sites per issue, and all of the subject editors are involved in selecting sites for review.

ATG: *Did you notice John Schmitt’s article in the April, 1998, ATG? (The Art of Collection Development Reference Style, p.28, 30-31) In it, he proposed R-Net, an online reviewing source of reference materials. He likened it to H-Net which is an ongoing reviewing source in humanities. Would you comment on this type of endeavor relative to Choice’s own online endeavors?*

IR: I have that issue of *ATG* on my desk with that particular article highlighted. I am

familiar with H-Net. It’s a good idea. I am not sure that it replaces or competes with *Choice*. I believe the two sources complement one another and that there is room for both. This is one way to address the need for more reviews — increase the number of review sources.

And speaking of reviews, *Choice* has an electronic database containing all of our reviews published since 1988 — over 70,000 reviews in all. We use our database internally all the time and we have plans to launch a Web service that will make this entire database available to our readers and subscribers.

ATG: *Tell us more about this online Choice? How does it fit in with what is available now from CARL and SilverPlatter?*

IR: We are beta testing this right now. Our plan is to launch a commercial version on or about January 1 that will provide subscribers with unlimited access to the entire *Choice* review database. However, because this project is still in the development stage, we are still working on pricing. We do know that it will be subscription-based, at least initially. Eventually, we hope also to offer institutional site licenses and to find ways to make our reviews available directly to faculty. The cost of a basic subscription will probably be comparable to licensing through third party vendors like **CARL** (\$500) and **SilverPlatter** (\$900). The functionality would be different.

One of the problems we face at *Choice* is that our print publication is heavily subsidized by advertising. Without advertising revenues, we would have to charge our subscribers a much higher price. The big question is the volume of advertising revenues we will be able to generate with the electronic product. This clearly has an impact on our subscription prices, and it’s something we are still investigating. We will see. The one thing we can be sure of is that adding a second — actually a third — publication to our list doesn’t mean we will double our sales volume. Nor does it mean we are saving money. On the contrary, we will be spending more money. The electronic version of a publication costs money just like the print version.

ATG: *Don’t I know it! Can you elaborate more on this subject?*

IR: **Cliff Lynch** said it best — “quality costs money.” The bottom line is that electronic publication is not free. It takes time to create a new publication, whether electronic or print, and once it has been created, there are ongoing operating costs that must be covered. Many of these costs are largely invisible to outsiders, but they exist nonetheless. Like many publishers, our single biggest expense at *Choice* is people. We have a staff of just under 25 people who need to be paid, and without them, we cannot do the work. That’s a given. Our second largest expense is production. We know that over the long run, electronic production costs may be a bit lower than print production costs, i.e. lower but not free. We just don’t know how much lower, and that’s part of the electronic pricing problem. When it

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comes to electronic publishing, we just don't have the body of experience that we have with print.

ATG: In the April, 1997 issue of *ATG*, you took us *Inside Choice* (p.56-60). Was there anything that you wished you had told us then that you didn't?

IR: In that article, I made a list of the steps involved in our first receiving a book and the review's publication. Since then, we have gone through the steps and worked on shortening the list. This obviously takes work. We want a system that allows us to produce either print or electronic formats with no additional handling. Eventually, we hope to eliminate 6 or 8 of the steps listed in that article, and we are continually trying to improve our internal efficiency.

All of this, of course, takes money. I came to *Choice* in August of 1995. Between April 1996 and October 1998, we will have replaced every PC in the shop but we will still have some obsolete machines. That complicates everything as well.

ATG: Isn't it amazing that computers get to quit after four or five years but we working humans have to continue to "upgrade" for twenty or thirty years? Tell me, what's it like being part of ALA?

IR: It's pretty comfortable. The location in Middletown insulates us from some of the day to day distractions in Chicago, and the increased availability of technology makes it easier to communicate on a day-to-day basis. We rely on ALA for services like human resources and accounting. It's a relationship that works very well. ALA gives *Choice* an entree with publishers and it helps with recruiting reviewers. The ALA affiliation is a real plus.

I hasten to add that no discussion of *Choice's* ALA connection is complete without mentioning that *Choice's* home within ALA is the **Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL)**. And the truth of the matter is that the lion's share of our daily contacts with ALA are actually with ACRL. This too is a real plus for *Choice*. The ACRL connection gives us access to a terrific pool of talent that includes some of the best and brightest in the academic library community. We tap this pool often for ideas, contacts, and practical suggestions, and I can't imagine our operating successfully without it.

ATG: Tell us about yourself.

IR: I'm a publishing type who got into publishing as an alternative to graduate school. My original intent was to take some time off and then return. (I was studying for my PhD in Political Science at Northwestern.) My first job in publishing was a college sales rep position for Houghton Mifflin. Based in Omaha, Nebraska, I had what was at that time the largest sales territory in the company -- 1,200 miles from the Northwest to the Southeast corner. From the beginning, my goal was to get into editorial -- something I managed to accomplish relatively quickly. Overall, I feel publishing has been good to me and that I've been extremely fortunate. I've been able to meet and work with bright, talented people. I have never been bored, and I have had the opportunity

to do a lot of different things.

On the personal front, I've been married 29 years to my wife Nancy who has her own direct mail business. I commute 80 miles one way from Westchester County, New York four days a week. I'm pretty retrograde since I don't have a cell phone in my car.

Nancy and I have two daughters, Catherine and Margaret. Catherine, who is 24, is a third year student in the doctoral program in Renaissance Studies at Yale. Always an excellent student, Catherine did her undergraduate study at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. This gave us an excuse to go over there

and visit her, which we did several times. Margaret, an undergraduate at George Washington University, is visiting Vassar this fall as a sophomore. Margaret is the family extrovert. Her address book is about three times the thickness of mine, and her energy level is unbelievable. I'm not sure what she's going to end up doing, and neither is she, but people will notice, that's for sure.

Y'all, Irv told me that he truly feels that the Charleston Conference is a really good thing. He says that people really talk to one another! How about that for a recommendation for registering! See this issue, p.31.

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