

November 1998

## ATG Interviews Martha Whittaker

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### Recommended Citation

Strauch, Katina (1998) "ATG Interviews Martha Whittaker," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 10: Iss. 5, Article 18.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2997>

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# ATG Interviews Martha Whittaker

Vice President, Marketing — Academic Book Center <marthaw@acbc.com>

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

**ATG:** So, you used to be General Manager of *UnCover*. What's it like working for a book vendor after selling articles over the Internet? Is it a case of a high tech person in a low tech environment?

**MW:** It's a good change of direction for me. My days at CARL were among the best in my life, but I was ready for a new perspective. I feel a bit like I've come back to being a librarian again. There is much more contact with books and libraries in this job than I've had for a number of years, and I really like that.

**Academic Book Center** is a marketer and product developer's dream. It's a profitable business with a solid customer base, but it's the least well known of the major book vendors. Academic has been focusing on excellence in the areas of operations and customer service, and hasn't spent a lot of time on marketing. We now have the resources to pay serious attention to marketing and product development, without neglecting the other things we do so well.

People do ask me how it feels to work in the low-tech side of the information industry, but that's not an accurate assessment. Bookselling is not low tech at all. We're in-



involved in all kinds of things that require sophisticated technological functioning — like EDI, shelf-ready processing, OCLC interfacing — not to mention supporting approval plans and offering a web interface to the bibliographic database.

**ATG:** You are advertising for a new technology person. Have you found anyone yet? Are you looking to hire a librarian or a techie?

**MW:** Ideally both. We have had a lot of good applicants. We want to hire someone able to roll up his or her sleeves and work.

Two of the finalists are librarians. We are looking for someone who understands the trends in libraries and is able to empathize with the challenges that acquisitions and collection development librarians are facing today. We want a person who has experience working with strategic partners, and who has a finger on the pulse of the new technologies. A large order. [Paul Buchanan, formerly head of computing at **Washington University Library** in St. Louis joined Academic as VP of Information Technology on Oct. 1].

**ATG:** What are your goals for Academic Book Center?

**MW:** Initially, for the company to revitalize its image and do a more effective job of telling its story. We are starting to be noticed more, but there are still a lot of folks out there in the library world who have no idea what we do. We have a loyal customer base and legendary great service. We're financially solid, and we have many innovative products such as **BookBag**.

We have redesigned our Web site, to be released in November, which shows us to a better advantage and will heightened our vis-

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ibility (<http://www.acbc.com>). We have a really cool ad campaign beginning this fall [running in *ATG*], which incorporates an intellectually challenging contest. And we are about to publish the first issue of *It's Academic*, a customer newsletter.

Beyond these visibility initiatives, we understand that the key to our survival is providing value to librarians. Our customers are working with book budgets that are seriously impacted by the rising costs of serials and electronic resources, but they still \*need\* books. We must ensure libraries maximum value for their book-buying dollars, and provide more services like qualitative reviews, shelf-ready processing and cataloging support so that they can stretch those dollars in creative ways.

At the same time, publishers are dealing with their own economic pressures, and these often have a negative impact on the discounts they offer vendors. We need to provide our colleagues in publishing with a good return on their investment to guarantee that we can continue to work together effectively, and we need to do this in a way that allows all of us to prosper.

**ATG:** *How many accounts are out there anyway? Is there enough business to go around? And, what's the point of buying a bookseller anymore? Will we see any more consolidation?*

**MW:** The number of books published each year continues to grow, and our business continues to increase, in spite of the squeeze on the purchasing power of libraries. It's true that growth these days is partly a matter of vendors trading market share around, but that's not the whole story—particularly in the U.S. where the economy is strong.

Consolidation among book vendors is inevitable. But there are some new markets out there, and new ways to position existing products. Distance education, on-demand publishing, and out-of-print services are some examples.

Six months ago I would have said that the real new market is in the global economy. Things have changed recently, but Asia and Australia are strong markets for *Academic*, and remain so in spite of the economic downturn there. Eighty-five percent of the resources on the Internet are English-language materials. There continue to be opportunities globally for English language booksellers.

**ATG:** *Is there a future for books in the scholarly communication process?*

**MW:** There is definitely a future for books in the scholarly process. Obviously, the recreational reader still prefers books. But books continue to play a vital role in the educational and scholarly world too.

Electronic publishing fills important needs for timeliness and rapid distribution. And software does wonderful things. But so far nothing beats books for synthesizing, democratizing and archiving information. Books are user- and scholar-friendly in a way that computers have not yet become.

My daughter recently wrote an article on cocaine addiction. She goes to school in the Philadelphia area and has access to wonderful resources, many of them electronic. But, when she wanted a broad overview, she went to books because they synthesize and bring together concepts and are easier to use.

**ATG:** *Janet Flowers and I just did a survey on ACQNET on the use of credit cards by acquisitions and collection development departments and the results are reported in this issue of ATG (see p. 19). There was an overwhelming response from people actually ordering over the Internet and using credit cards. And a lot of them are using online bookstores like Amazon.com. Does this alarm you?*

**MW:** People are going where they can get the best deal and I don't blame them. I understand why people like to use credit cards. Everyone likes the free float you get. We buy on credit cards whenever it's feasible too.

But I believe that when a place like [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com) or [Barnesandnoble.com](http://Barnesandnoble.com) attempts to go beyond supplying mainstream, mass market materials, the savings, the speed, and the convenience become considerably less apparent.

Book vendors provide shelf-ready materials, technical processing, and approval plans. The customer service staff at *Academic* are bibliographic experts, and they perform research services that customers find invaluable.

Opportunities abound for traditional book vendors to form alliances with online bookshops in ways that are not always in competition. We will be discussing this at a Lively Lunch in Charleston in November.

**ATG:** *Tell us about yourself. Where did you grow up? Were you trained as a librarian?*

**MW:** I grew up in Provo, Utah where **Robert Redford** was a local celebrity. (In fact, he still is, but now more as an environmentalist than as a heart throb!) I got my library degree from Denver University. After that, I lived all around the US—from California to Illinois to Georgia, before finally settling back in the west. My father still lives in Utah and I visit often.

I have a husband and two wonderful children, though I am suddenly an empty-nester since my daughter is at Haverford College (a valued AcBC customer, I might add) and my son has just graduated from high school. He was a non-traditional student, and is now the dairy buyer for a local Whole Foods Market, a wonderful national chain specializing in natural foods. With my husband, I am involved in the **Colorado Music Festival** in Boulder.

I don't have any music training but my husband is a frustrated musician and violinist. He's a lawyer, has been teaching for 25 years and is active in local politics as another outlet for his creative side. 🐼

**NB:** *No doubt, we have all heard Martha's husband, **Chris Mueller**, on NPR commenting on contemporary legal issues. Just think, next time you hear him, you will have a connection. And we have to all say "hey" to Martha in Charleston! — KS*

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fill gaps. Some of the names that come to mind as former employees are—**Charles Ellis**, President, **Wiley**, **Barbara Colson**, President, **Cambridge Univ. Press**, **Pieter Bolman**, President, **Academic Press**, **Phyllis Hall**, Publishing Director, **IEEE**, and **Al Henderson**, Consultant, just to name a few.

**ATG:** *We can't end this interview without talking about **Library Acquisitions: Practice and Theory**. I believe that you and **Scott Bullard** started that journal many years ago. And we are reporting a title change in this issue of *ATG*—**LAPT** will become **Library Collections, Acquisitions and Technical Services** with the 1999 volume.*

**RM:** This bring back good memories. Over a couple of beers, Scott said it was about time **Pergamon** did something for the library community and the journal evolved. The concept was to bring out a quarterly journal at a low price similar to other library journals published by **ALA**, etc. and to service the acquisitions industry. The price was held steady for over five years, which was unheard of out of **Pergamon**. Boy, did I take heat on the pricing structure! I recall the review of the first issue was disastrous. If you remember, Scott had great knowledge but was not always a company type of guy. With this poor review, we regrouped and it survives today under **Carol Hawks Diedrichs** as Editor-in-Chief. Also I would be negligent not to point out that at one time, if you recall **Katina**, that **LAPT** and **Pergamon** were to be involved in the **Charleston Conference** as a management group. Fortunately, for you, this did not occur, but the compromise was that papers from the conference would first appear in **LAPT**. This now takes us back to **Asti's**. Thanks for the opportunity to appear in *ATG*. I too am sorry to miss this year's meeting. See you next year! 🐼

**NB:** *Unfortunately, Bob will not be in Charleston for us to talk personally with him about this interview. But — next year? Plus there's always email and even—gasp—the telephone! — KS*