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Oregon Trails — Publishers' Catalogs Revisited

by Thomas W. Leonhardt (Oregon Institute of Technology) <leonhart@oit.edu>

The Fall/Winter 1998 catalogs from publishers have been out for a while now. The package I most look forward to contains catalogs from each of the publishers distributed by W.W. Norton. The Norton catalog alone has me despairing of ever getting to a millionth of the books that seem worth reading and it convinces me that I know even less than I knew I didn't know.

But I had seen an essay in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* just recently that was about how scholars are turning more and more to writing about popular culture. Not having read the article (I have taken to skimming the *Chronicle*, much as I skim most newspapers hoping to find something of interest, something well written with some depth and no personal opinion. It is a hopeless cause and one more numbing aspect of growing older that helps one accept that truly final stage. I am not grateful.) I cannot tell you how popular culture is defined or why it is more appealing. I guess I really do not want to know. But I was a bit curious about how the university presses were dealing with manuscripts on popular culture, so I decided to peruse a few of them to see for myself, using my own definition of popular culture.

Anything having to do with movies, radio, and television, meet my definition, as does mass media, a term that the **Syracuse University Press** uses. Actually, their catch-all category is "Television/Mass Media/Journalism." Perhaps we should copy **Ezra Pound** and say that we are interested in university presses and popular kulchur (I think that is how he spelled it), especially after seeing the offering on page 2 of **Syracuse University Press Books for Fall & Winter 1998**. There it is, *Rod Serling's Night Gallery: An After-Hours Tour*, by Scott Skelton and Jim Benson, and there is a picture of Rod himself, opposite a picture of Roddy McDowell. Get it, Rod and Roddy? The late Mr. McDowell even contributed a blurb for the book.



On page 3, two more television books are announced, *Cue the Bunny on the Rainbow: Tales from TV's Most Prolific Sitcom Director*, by Alan Rafkin and *Bonfire of the Humanities: Television, Subliteracy, and Long-Term Memory Loss*, by David Marc. These books, each a part of the "Television Series" (get it?), are not representative of the Syracuse line, but the first two are featured on the catalog's cover and may well be what pays the bills for the more traditional titles that are being offered for sale in the coming months.

The **University of Pittsburgh Press** catalog for spring 1998 features **Honus Wagner** on the cover. Even if you don't know who he is, you can tell by the picture that he was a baseball player, albeit from another era when bats were still taped at the handles. Inside on page 2, we learn about *Honus Wagner: A Biography*, by Dennis DeValeria and Jeanne Burke DeValeria. In 1996, a baseball card depicting Honus Wagner sold for \$640,500—the largest sum ever paid at auction for a sports artifact. What could possibly make that piece of cardboard, approximately one-and-a-half by two-and-a-half inches, worth more than half a million dollars? The DeValerias tell the unique story behind this now-famous baseball card and the man depicted on it. In so doing, they accurately present the local, regional, and national context so readers gain a thorough understanding of Wagner's times.

Ever since the late Commissioner of Baseball, **Bart Giamotti**, a scholar who waxed eloquent about baseball, America's national pastime has become legitimate fodder for scholars—how to write off your season's ticket as an educational expense and get tenure, too. Popular culture? I should hope so. What about **Indiana University's** new books for fall and winter of 1998? It is almost all about culture, popular and otherwise. There are titles in religious studies that overlap into regional studies and Jewish studies, for example, *Taking Up Serpents: Snake Handlers of Eastern Kentucky* (a re-release), by David L. Kimbrough, *Middletown Jews: The Tenuous Survival of an American Jewish Community* (newly released paperback), edited by Dan Rottenberg, and *Falling Toward Grace: Images of Religion and Culture in Indianapolis*, edited by J. Kent Calder and Susan Neville, photography edited by Kim Charles Ferrill. There are also two cookbooks (issued and reissued in July) and four railroad books due in October. These are probably all more readable than most of the other titles in the catalog and will help pay for other titles such as the re-issue (Library of Indiana Classics) of Gene Stratton Porter's *At the Foot of the Rainbow*.

The **MIT Press** catalog for spring 1998 has many interesting titles. One that struck

my fancy and that seems to be about popular culture is *The Aesthetics of the Japanese Lunchbox*, by Kenji Ekuon. It is listed as a design book. You make the call. "The Makunouchi Bento," or traditional Japanese lunchbox, is a highly lacquered wooden box divided into quadrants, each of which contains different delicacies. It is also one of the most familiar images of Japan's domestic environment. **Gertrude Stein** might say that a lunchbox is a lunchbox is a lunch box. But "Ekuon reads the Japanese lunchbox as both object and metaphor." "With an agility more characteristic of poetry than of design criticism," he connects everything from food, television, motorcycles, package tours, and department stores to landscape, ecology, computers, and radios, all the while keeping his eye on his subject. In this book of magical transformations, nothing is what it first appears, but everything is deepened by "lunchbox theory." Consider the influence of the lunchbox on TV viewing, for example: chopsticks are used to stroll through a meal, just as remote control devices are used to browse TV channels. This book reveals a world of secret connections between its covers, in the spirit of the lunchbox itself.

I was about to give up finding something about popular culture in the fall and winter 1998-1999 catalog from the **University of North Carolina Press** when I discovered, on page 20, a title in the Richard Hampton Jenrette Series in Architecture and the Decorative Arts: *Sticks and Stones: Three centuries of North Carolina gravemarkers*, by M. Ruth Little, photography by Tim Buchman. "An old graveyard," writes Ruth Little, "is a cultural encyclopedia—an invaluable source of insight and information about the families, traditions, and cultural connections that shape a community." But although graveyards and gravemarkers have long been recognized as vital elements of the material culture of New England, they have not received the same attention in the South. *Sticks and Stones* is the first book to consider the full spectrum of gravemarkers, both plain and fancy, in a southeastern state.

Somehow, as I worked through the catalogs, I had more trouble accepting the books about television and a baseball card than I did about the lunchbox and I had no trouble at all with the gravemarker book. The television books, although I haven't read them, appear to be not just books about popular kulchur but part of the popular kulchur themselves, books that one might find at any of the chain bookstores or even the chainstores that stock a few books that their shoppers might find appealing. A biography of Honus

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sotto voce — Some Thoughts on Purpose and Libraries

by **Bob Schatz** (Vice-President of Sales, Academic Book Center)
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Nearly twenty-five years ago I was in library school. Those were the days. Had you asked anyone in those hallowed halls of the University of Oregon's Department of Library Science (now defunct) why he or she was there, and you could count on hearing one or more of the following three answers:

Because I love books and what they stand for.

Because I love learning.

Because I couldn't get a teaching job.

We were an idealistic, near-sighted group of individuals trying both to change the world and avoid getting sucked into the mire we perceived was represented by the world of business. I'm living proof that one era's mire is another era's career path, but I'll save that particular discussion for another column.

Times have certainly changed, though. Business is now seen as the model after which all organizational enterprises are to be fashioned. Learning for learning's sake has given way to learning for a purpose (read: making money), and the very idea of loving books is about as quaint as saying that you love your father's old record player. As for out of work would-be teachers, well, they'll probably always be among us. When asked to speak to a library school class, I don't ask students why they are there for fear that the answer will be: Because we love information.

Such a statement sets me to gagging, but would probably warm the cockles of Bill Gates' heart if, in fact, he has any cockles left in that world's richest heart. In a universe where access takes precedence over ownership, where people download images of famous works of art as wallpaper for their PCs instead of going to museums, I am an anachronism.

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Wagner is one thing but to celebrate the asking price of a piece of cardboard, and that is what it sounds like it is, seems to be just an extension of the current obsession and preoccupation with sports and celebrity. An analysis of that obsession seems the proper scope of scholarship and scholarly publishing.

Can one love books these days? If you have doubts, you won't feel any better by reading articles such as **Andre Schiffrin's** interesting column in the September 4th *Chronicle of Higher Education* entitled *Public-Interest Publishing in a World of Conglomerates*. To reduce his excellent prose down to its essence, the quest for great literature at a growing number of publishing houses has been replaced by the quest for fifteen percent profits, leaving little if any room for books of significant scholarship that cannot make an equally significant contribution to the bottom line. Where publishing was once the domain of an entrepreneurial class of literati, it is now one of many investments in the portfolio of huge companies that look at it as just another manufacturing concern. Their needs are to feed their stockholders, and that's done by thinking of books as units and moving as many of them as possible.

On one hand, the informational book is being pushed aside by technologies that deliver information in more flexible forms, but at high costs to places like libraries. On the other hand, there is pressure to reduce trade and scholarly publishing to a set of blockbusters and would-be blockbusters, leaving unpublished an increasing number of otherwise worthy titles. Being a book lover today increasingly means loving what books used to be, not what they are.

Like many people, I still feel enriched when I visit bookstores, especially smaller ones. I'm not one for the Barnes & Noble/

“Where publishing was once the domain of an entrepreneurial class of literati, it is now one of many investments in the portfolio of huge companies that look at it as just another manufacturing concern.”

Borders-type bookstore. My mind goes numb looking at all those book jackets. Unless I'm searching for a particular title, I'm not comfortable browsing in such a massive environment. In some smaller stores, though, I'm delighted to still see books of significant literary quality that will never make anyone's bestseller list. I thrive on such books. Those books are still lovable to me, and I cling to that feeling for all it is worth.

In spite of my wallowing in the lamentable state of books and publishing, I know I need to get over it and move on with my life. Nostalgia for the good old days won't improve the situation. For those of us who became librarians because of some love for books, we need to hold onto that ideal by fighting for a continued place for books in libraries, and by encouraging people to buy books that are worth reading, even if it means hunting further than the nearest B. Dalton Bookseller to find them.

If you really want to strike a blow for what's right, don't let anyone you know go to library school because they love books, (or information, for that matter). There's no room in libraries anymore for wide-eyed idealists. What we need are an influx of pragmatists willing to grapple with the significant and growing issues that surround the role of libraries in higher education and in society as a whole. Find someone who wants to be a librarian because he or she is unwilling to see libraries reduced to just being places where databases and bestsellers congregate, and hope they have what it takes to perform the difficult but rewarding work of librarianship. If these intrepid individuals can't be found, then we may soon come to a time when education students tell their classmates that they are pursuing degrees in teaching because they couldn't find any work as librarians. Or worse, that they couldn't stand what books and libraries had become. 🍄



I am not saying that there is no room for non-scholarly books. The kinds of books published each year should reflect the general population, and we should be glad that there are books for fans of television and baseball and even Howdy Doody lunchboxes, but, profitable as those books might be, should they bear a university press imprint? 🍄