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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.

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his excellent prose down to its essence, the quest for great literature at a growing number of publishing houses has been replaced by the quest for fifteen percent profits, leaving little if any room for books of significant scholarship that cannot make an equally significant contribution to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/

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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. 🌱

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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.

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? 🌱