June 2000

Op-Ed-Opinions and Editorials-How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Merger

John Abbott

Appalachian State University, abbottjp@appstate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Abbott, John (2000) "Op-Ed-Opinions and Editorials-How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Merger," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 12: Iss. 3, Article 13.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.3368>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Merger¹

by **John Abbott** (Coordinator, Collection Development, Appalachian State Univ., Boone, NC)
<abbottjp@appstate.edu>

In the past year, library and book publishing news brought notification that two important academic book jobbers, **Yankee Book Peddler (YBP)** and **Academic Book Center** were acquired by two of the largest general book jobbers, **Baker & Taylor** and **Blackwell Book Services** respectively. Concern exists in some academic library acquisitions and collection development offices that these mergers signal an unfortunate end to the largely familiar and friendly business of supplying academic monographs. Some wonder what life will be like without **YBP** and **Academic** as independent entities; the CEOs of these companies were known by first name and it was a convivial relationship. Some suspect that we, as fiscal officers for our libraries, have driven the quest for bargains so hard that we cut **YBP** and **Academic's** profit margin to the bone and we are responsible for driving these two jobbers into acquisition deals with faceless conglomerates. Certainly there are many concerns about this change, but I am not worried and offer for your consideration six reasons not to worry either:

1. The Fertilizer Age and the Fall of Abel. One reason I am not worried is that academic libraries have been here before. In the 1970s, when many academic libraries used **Baker & Taylor** as their book jobber (and when **YBP** and **Academic** were germinal), **Baker & Taylor** was bought and owned for a time by the **W.R. Grace Corporation**, one of the largest producers of fertilizer in the world. It was not a smooth pairing I am told by those who were there, but academic libraries and **Baker & Taylor** survived and really flourished during that time. During that same period, the **Richard Abel Company**, a pioneering book approval jobber, went under and, in part, the current **Blackwell North America (Blackwell's)** rose to fill the gap by taking over many of the former **Abel** clients. At the time I suspect those libraries wondered and worried, to abuse Napoleon's famous palindrome, if "Abel was I 'ere I saw BNA." Again, the resilience of the book acquisition business proved itself able to adapt with change.

2. The Inevitable Tends to Happen. A few years ago at consultant **Rob McGee's RMG's Annual Presidents' Seminar** at **ALA Midwinter**, the presidents/CEOs of the leading library technology companies were gathered.

Massed on a single dais, it was striking that almost all of them were gray-haired and long at the helm. This is not an ageist statement. It was obvious that these people had worked hard, long, and had achieved some level of financial success. It was a safe prediction that their faces would be gone soon and that library automation would be changing as these companies submitted to mergers and acquisitions to allow these leaders to cash-out and to step down. This has happened. Acquisitionmania and economics of scale not withstanding, smaller, personality-driven companies such as **Secor's YBP** and **Fast and Halloran's Academic** have a finite life span. The sale or disappearance of **YBP** and **Academic** was inevitable, merger or not.

3. Jonah Didn't Ride Piggyback. In my earshot, most of the discussions regarding these actions characterize them as mergers. I think it is significant that this is some librarians' spin on what has happened. The Web pages of all four of the companies involved never use the term merger. In all cases, the actions are identified as acquisitions. This is a significant dissonance: Merger implies mutualism and equality, and while some librarians may wish for this to be the case, our old vendors have been swallowed whole. The mental image is of **Jonah**, in the persons of **Barry Fast** or **John Secor**, living in the belly of the **B&T** or **Blackwell's** whale. Unless the prayers of some librarians cause them to be delivered up and belched out on a beach somewhere, the corporate bodies of both consumed companies will be assimilated by the respective whales. Additionally, in most horizontal corporate acquisitions, the identity of the purchased companies tends to disappear as the comfort level with the larger company increases and memory and brand-loyalty to the former entity wanes.

4. Book-Jobbery Occurs Below the Horizon. Book jobbers are important, perhaps vital to library operations. It is difficult to imagine life without that service, but these companies, though important in our world, exist below the level of corporate perception in the larger

economy. A search of **Lexis-Nexis**, **Ebscohost**, and **ProQuest** business databases found only one mention of these acquisitions outside the book industry press. While these are very important events for libraries, the academic book jobber industry, based on narrow margins coupled to the fuzziness of the scholarly monograph, has an uncertain future and is understandably unimportant to the larger corporate markets. This may be a little ego bruising but it is actually a good thing. It is unlikely that an **RJR** or other conglomerate will wade into this business and **W.R. Grace** will not be back. If this is the case, it is good for libraries because book jobbery remains a small pond and we, as librarians, can wield considerable influence with the vendors in this microcosm.

5. Fearing the Monolithic Vendor. If this argument is wrong. What if book jobbers are attractive to further corporate appetites or perhaps **Baker & Taylor** buys out **Blackwell's** in its North American operations? Will we be subjected to a monopoly (recognizing that there is still an important cadre of niche book vendors in **Coutts**, **Majors**, **Bookhouse**, etc.)? I don't think this is worrisome. In the confines of the industry, it will be relatively easy for a group of entrepreneurial employees to break away and set up faster-moving competition. Good and/or aggressive products and services succeed and the market's invisible hand is active. In the 1970s, there was concern that **General Motors** or **IBM**, like **Microsoft** today, would run the world, but this isn't what seems to happen. Companies that become overly large collapse under their own convoluted mass. Smaller companies rush in for the kill. Before I believed this, a few years ago a new **RoweCom** rep called me wanting the business of the library where I worked then. During the conversation I thought to myself: this person should not quit their day job. Now **RoweCom** owns **Faxon**.

6. Book Jobbers in the E-text world. The concept of a separate business entity known as a book jobber may

continued on page 40

Profiles Encouraged

Rick Anderson

Head Acquisitions Librarian

Jackson Library

UNC Greensboro

(336) 334-5281

<rick_anderson@uncg.edu>

Born when and where: 1965 in Palo Alto, CA (but raised since infancy in the Boston area)

Current residence: Greensboro, NC

Education: B.S. (1991) and M.L.I.S. (1993) from Brigham Young University

Summary of job experience: Bibliographic searcher/inputter, then section supervisor in the Acquisitions Department at BYU's Lee Library (1988-1993); bibliographer at Yankee Book Peddler (1993-1997); Head Acquisitions Librarian at UNC Greensboro (1997-present).

Family: Wife Laura Wolz, kids Maggie (7), Bryan (4) and Tucker (1)

Most recent accomplishment: My first speaking honorarium

Most recent goal attained: Joined the staff of Bluegrass Unlimited Magazine

First job: Scooping ice cream at Brigham's in Harvard Square

Fondest memory: Having ten dollars in my pocket and knowing I could buy any record in the store that I wanted; then spending hours trying to choose between Fred Frith, Joe Val and Pere Ubu

Favorite pastime: Listening to 1970s-era reggae while reading hard-boiled detective fiction

Hobbies: Reading, writing, guitar, banjo, Irish flute, bodhran

Last book read or literary tastes: Right now I'm reading Robert Conquest's *Reflections on a Ravaged Century*, but mostly I'm a Robert B. Parker/James Lee Burke kind of guy.

Pet peeves: Tribalism, cant and rah-rah

What would you like to be doing five years from now? Playing a genuine Irish flute, a Martin HD-28 guitar, a Bart Reiter Whyte Laydie banjo (with the gryphon peghead inlay) and putting away enough money to get my kids through college. (Hmmm ... I may have to make some choices ...)

Had I but world enough and time: I'd write fewer reviews and more music, and I'd practice a lot more.

Single most important piece of advice: Question your own motives at all times.

Biggest surprise: The fierceness and intensity of parental love. I expected it to be deep and strong; I didn't expect it to shake me like a rag.

Op Ed

from page 38

be unknown in a decade. Ten years from now, scholars appear likely to prefer their monographs, particular in STM and many social sciences, in electronic form only. The library building will house an increasingly humanities-only collection of books. What will happen, then, to book jobbers when so much of the service they provide deals with a physical item? Why shouldn't libraries expect that we will submit the order directly to the publisher using the new 13-digit ISBN and the publisher will FTP the work back to us in seconds. Developments in EDI fund transfer will make the jobber's previous place at the hub of the academic monograph publications wheel less important. If jobbers continue to exist to serve university libraries, they will be handling a shrinking number of paper scholarly titles and likely will be handling the still lively market in trade books. A growth area for jobbers will be the domain of rights management and handling copyright permissions.

Not to worry about these acquisitions is not to take lightly the importance of book vending. Speedy and fiscally simple means of buying books is very important to any library. What might librarians prepare for rather than being concerned about these recent actions? Is it likely that book jobbers will begin to behave like serials agents, particularly in assessing a surcharge rather than selling at a discount. Book jobbers have developed costly Web-based data manipulation engines to assist collection managers and acquisitions librarians in querying about their profiles and accounts. These have traditionally been provided at no charge. The future will probably include annual fees for the more powerful features to allow jobbers to recoup development costs. What about the level of service? To meet the demands of competition, book jobbers, known for their high-touch service, will likely begin to resemble the phone company model where reaching inside and finding a living human being is difficult.

So there is plenty about which to worry, but these acquisitions are not the focus. The next stage of book acquisition will be different and librarians need to keep their eyes open and throw our weight/budgets around in a calculated way to get what we need from the new book vending relationships.

¹With apologies to Stanley Kubrick and to Dr. Strangelove wherever they are.

Here's Looking At

from page 36

Yes, this means libraries would pay for profiling. It also means that profiling could be improved much more quickly. If a good profiling system can identify "core" titles, perhaps a library can spend less time on selection. If an enhanced profiling system can reduce the time spent writing, monitoring, and revising approval plans, that time can be reallocated. If library-based profiling can reduce the costs of some vendors, a portion of those savings could offset the cost of profiling. ILS vendors could view this as a collection development module, fitted to their systems. Publishers could see it as highly targeted marketing to likely buyers, worth at least a single copy from which to profile.

Can it work? We believe it can, both operationally and economically. Is it a good idea? We think so; that's why we're putting it out for comment. What's it worth? That's for the market to determine, but we believe it can more than pay for itself. We're interested in comments for or against, refinements, calumny, or quibbles, either directed to us or to *ATG*.