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A Bookseller Views the Future of the Book

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This article will share a captivating bibliodote, discuss points of probable change in the book trade and identify points that probably won't change. It is important to know that the author speaks only from experience (catalogs issued since 1972) and not for any group. Readers are invited to supply additional ideas, take issue, extend congratulations or buy books, as listed at the end of the article.

Bibliodote: At 4:30 a.m. one recent August day a bulldozer finished covering some 200,000 books consigned to the landfill to clear their former home for a new purchaser. The former school had closed after the death of its founder, and the board had given the library to a new college and held it for two years, pending the new college's logistics, only to be told weeks before delivery of possession of the building, "We don't have space, and we don't have money to rent storage until we can build." Board members called the writer who salvaged many of the better titles, but the rest were overcovered that August day. Crime? Well, the destroyed material did include many multi-volume serials (most now on CD-ROM or fiche), superceded editions, broken sets, etc. Crime? Well, who should be convicted? Board of the new school?

Technologists who invented micro-compressive techniques? Board of the closed school? Publishers who begin new editions before the previous edition has been shipped from the warehouse? Or was it one of those inevitables like the collapse of the WYE OAK?

I. Changes in the out-of-print *Booksellers' World*, sometimes

driven by "instant gratification," are seen, without priority, in ease of entry into the field, use of reference works, customer base, book sources, format for convenience and change in booksales procedures.

A. The ease by which a novice can commit mistakes is the corollary to the ease of entry into the bookselling field. Suddenly everyone with access to the Internet can be a bookseller, just copy blindly other entries for the same book, maybe factor in condition. Never mind that the book isn't a true first edition: call it the first *Reader's Digest* condensed edition. Never mind that the copied entry, two volumes in one, lists both the pagination and the number of plates for volume two only (well, I took it from the last page). Never mind the typographical error which priced at \$225 instead of \$22.50. Never mind that copying the original component of a description may be a violation of copyright. Everybody's an expert. Some of us call it bibliographic auto-cest. And the best revenge is to locate a sleeper from the dealer who "guessed" at the price.

B. Reference works will diminish in use and economic value. The trend has already started doing this, and it will not reverse, again thanks to the Internet. Compare auction prices for a long run of auction records sold twenty years ago with a comparable run sold today. For a long time the **Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America** has used as one criterion for membership the size/quality of a dealer's reference collection. (The writer has about 3,000 reference titles, including a complete set of the *National Union Catalog*.) Does the writer joke when he suggests that brand-new Internet booksellers may be considering a new organization, Fellows Offering Old Literature where applicants will be denied membership if they admit to owning a reference book (well, a dictionary, maybe)?

C. Although the Internet has enormously expanded the customer base, the customer, in turn, can select from as many as fifty offerings of one title. Accordingly, while the base may be greater, competition for sales to this base is equally expanded. This base is shifting in other ways, also: Check the average age of those who attend book fairs. Younger customers could be developed by free admission with high school or college identification. And some of this predicted decrease (let alone training the next crop) may be due to dealers not digging new wells for future dealers: how many dealers encourage new customers by offering free programs to civic clubs or library friends groups.

D. The book source pool change reflects the Internet, also. A good friend now sells on (shhhh!) E-Bay many books that once would have been available to the writer. Many private sellers will check the Net for current prices and scandalize the name of the dealer who will not offer three quarters of the "average" price. Hap-

pily for the book-source pool, some institutions will be divesting low circulation, high maintenance or non-germane titles. Unfortunately, income from these sales will not flow to the bookseller; instead, these funds will go to escalating periodical costs, well-deserved salary increases and to repair the ravages of damned-fool shrink-funded boomeranging car-tax cuts.

E. Book format innovations see the generation of more titles in CD-ROMS (storage), talking screens (visual substitute), audio books (the writer logs over 30,000 miles per year—don't mess with my tapes!), Internet magazines, eBooks and desk-top publishing (the writer has re-published over twenty titles). And the writer now offers a Web page catalog posting which created a 40 percent savings in catalog distribution costs. Take hope, however, for...books on paper best fill the needs of people who read them, store them, manufacture them, and sell them. And there is no evidence that I know of that proves there will be any change in the needs of the people who make and use books. Other forms have been tried and most have failed. "Neat," "new," and "futuristic" technologies that meet the requirements of readers may surface in the future, but for now, books on paper do the job nicely, whether the book is being read at the beach, in a library, in school, or on a subway. It is not the publishers and scientists who will change the future of the book—it is the readers and users of books. And so far, they are not inclined to any change.¹

F. Bookseller procedure changes are seen in the reduction of the number of catalogs issued by a dealer, a reduction in the number of dealers who issue catalogs and a reduction in the number of dealers with walk-in premises. Even auction houses are now paying consigners only 2/3 of the buyer's cost (when a 20 percent buyer's penalty is added to a \$100 hammer price and the seller gets only \$80, that \$80 is clearly only 2/3 of the \$120 paid by the buyer). Wouldn't it be nice for dealers if they could charge something per sale to recover the cost of a \$3,500 booth at a national fair? More and more bookfair exhibitors report success is achieved only through sales to other dealers. "Coattail" fairs will become more prevalent (such as the Garage Fair and the Boston ABAA Fair).

II. Perhaps of equal interest to the changes seen in the book trade's future would be things that will probably remain the same, such as enemies of books, service to customers, pricing vectors, professional standards, legacy as tragedy, nomenclatural escalation and the need for appraisals.

A. Continuing enemies of books may include using them as furniture, tools, as a source for prints and maps and revenge, as well as those who are ignorant and college development officers. The use of books as furniture has, does

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looked some source that would yield an answer to this conundrum and could indeed prove that the Web pages are correct. If any reader of this article has some insight into this question, I would invite any leads. Nevertheless, I do stand by my assertions about the fundamental differences between the nature of print and the Internet as institutions of research. The labyrinth of print sources may be daunting to even experienced researchers, but it rests on a solid foundation that the ephemeral labyrinth of the Internet as yet cannot replicate.

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and likely will continue in the forms of table lamps, step stools and even coffee tables; there is even a well-intentioned lady in the south who earns a handy income sawing up fairly thin leather backs into three, four or even five "miniatures" for use in doll houses, etc. Books as tools: who has not seen the book-as-hammer, the book-to-hold-one-corner-of-a-table, the book-as-ballast-to-drown-cats and the book-to-hold-open-the-out-house-door. Destruction of books for their plates and prints seems self-explanatory, while books as revenge can be explained as giving a crippled, dog-eared, scarred, backless copy of *American Dictionary* 1890, to someone despised: "This belonged to my mother, and I hope you will cherish it in memory of her." Ignorance reflects itself in cello tape, shellac on leather, drink rings, high-lighting, and more. The concept of college development officers as *enemies of books* raised some eyebrows when first mentioned by this writer: cases can be documented where these people stifle "Friends of the Library" groups because the wrong-headed officer envisions that group as encroaching upon his turf, neglecting to see that, properly nourished, the relationship can be a win-win "won" situation.

B. Service to customer will continue to include going the second mile, long memories and customer education. The second mile includes telling a dealer who wants to order a diary by a salmon fisher that the best-known specialized collector had already been alerted about this diary (dealer bought it anyway because he took the time to call the specialized collector who had been out of town). Long memories, frequently enhanced by card files, alert the customer who just missed an item when another copy comes along. Customers have long memories, also: the writer once ran an ad and ten years later a collector called, as a result of that ad, to offer one of the three best libraries the writer ever bought. Customer education can take place on one-to-one (please hold the book with both hands), informally in groups (talks to collector groups), or more formally by alerting customers to experiences such as the rare book school. (Please see list of reading options at end for details.)

C. Pricing vectors that won't change include authorship, association, autograph, content, condition, edition, site (of printing) and sight (appearance). Dealers will still need to factor for inflation from a 1978 auction or catalog price, and instinct will still be vindicated when one receives two orders for a book (dealer's worst dream: 20 orders for an out-of-print book). And, as a challenge, can the reader identify what will likely continue to be the dealer's best friend: hint, it's not the computer. Look for the answer in the last paragraph. Finally, added here because it doesn't fit anywhere else, the most exciting book in the world will continue to be the next one.

D. Professional standards will continue to be the best guarantee for the customer who should be able to buy with a guarantee of a "full cash refund" for any "misrepresented material."

The writer used to help uninitiated customers understand that a dealer's membership in the **Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America (ABAA)** was akin to being a CPA; the writer doesn't use this comparison as freely now. As a former member of the Board of Governors the writer would add that, also as with other organizations, nothing happens as fast as those who introduce an idea would wish.

E. Legacy as tragedy sounds foreboding, and indeed it is, all the more so for being an area which the writer sees as a constant, not an area of change. Briefly, most booksellers are sole proprietors. Those with more than one person on staff are considerably fewer, but those that are second or third generation are even fewer. A quick scan of the ABAA directory suggests that less than ten percent of those listed are second generation. What will happen as the other 90 percent retire or die? Flash: where does the reader think that other dealers find some of their books? No generalizations, but certainly a shared sadness—and no major change foreseen.

F. The practice of nomenclatural escalation will continue to kaleidoscope, sometimes for cosmetic purposes ("near very good" and "else fine" are two recent examples) and sometimes for administrative survival (Deans of Library Services become Deans of Information Resources).

G. Finally, a need for appraisals will not go away. People inherit, people donate, people sell and they all need good information. Qualified appraisers are few and far between, with even fewer having participated in the only IRS Workshop (Feb. 1993). And variety of material will remain constant. In the current year the writer has worked with 14 linear feet of family/business records 1780-1930, **Romlyn Hough's** *American Trees* (a real joy, that one!) and a copy of the *Declaration of Independence* (destined to cover care-center expenses for the owner's aged parent, this copy was found to be an 1876 printing).

These, then, are some of the changes and some of the constants the writer envisions in the antiquarian book trade. For further information, reading, or challenge the reader might wish to consider one or more of these options:

ABAA directories (with code of ethics) can be obtained from:

ABAA, 20 West 44th St., New York, NY, 10036-6604. Email: <abaa@panix.com>.

Berger, Sidney. *Future of Books and Libraries*. Manuscript in progress, shared by author, 28 Oct. 2002. **Sidney Berger, UCLA**, 8265 West 4th St., Los Angeles, CA, 90048. Email: <sid@ucla.edu>.

Dealer's best friend? Pencil for marking up the price.

Herring, Mark. *10 Reasons Why the Internet Is No Substitute For A Library*. Poster. Approx. 30" x 20". Available by writing to **Dr. Mark Herring**, Director of Library Services, **Winthrop College**, Rock Hill, SC, 29733 or by emailing <herringm@winthrop.edu>. Cost: \$10.00 includes shipping.

International Conference on the Future of the Book, Cairns, Australia, 22-24 April 2003. <http://www.Book-Conference.com> (information to writer courtesy of **James Lawton, Brookline Village Bookshop**, P.O. Box 470521, Brookline, MA, 02447. Email: <books@compuserve.com>).

Rare Book School, University of Virginia. 114 Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, 22903-2498. Phone: 434-924-8851. Fax: 434-924-8824. Website: www.virginia.edu/oldbooks.

Safire, William. *Old Books Have a Future*. Washington, DC, 1993. 8pps. Out of Print (see your dealer).

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Endnotes

1. **Richard Weatherford, Alibris**, memo to the author, 6 Sept. 2002.

The Future of Books and Libraries

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In a conference on Information, Technology and the Humanities in California, the call for papers said that one of the interests of the conference was "The History of the 'Book'"—with the word "book" in quotation marks, implying that in the future, with Technology what it is and what it is becoming, the book as we know it will have evolved in some way. The further implication is that the evolution will be to some electronic medium (or to several), and the book as we now know it will be a thing of the past.

This has been the prediction of the technocrats who push for state-of-the-art hardware and software in our academic institutions and libraries, assuming that the bandwagon they are on represents the wave of the future and that this wave is good.

* * *

About seven years ago, when Fort Ord military base closed, the **California State University** system decided not to waste the military

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