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International Dateline — Quiet and Fairly Confident

A Report From the 53rd Frankfurt Book Fair

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This is my third report on the **Book Fair** for *ATG* and I realise that there is less big news, thrills or spills, than before. Admittedly my own knowledge is in scholarly publishing, but careful reading of the special issues of the trade rags given away at the venue do not suggest that there was anything very exciting going on among fiction publishers or vendors of exotica. What has happened to the disruptive impact of the Internet? When will the Big Deal fall over? The **Elsevier Science** people on the old Harcourt booth were coming out of the convenient little offices hiding away behind the books and the people. They were whey-faced to a man (yes, they were all men), but it was not because they realised what **SPARC** had done for them. They were just reworking the budget.

Presumably for librarians, the big question is about the progress of the digital revolution. The answer is that it is going slow. The big thrill for the book sector was said to be **Print on Demand (POD)**. It is difficult to argue that **POD** is really cutting edge. Indeed, there are those who see it as a way of hanging on to print rather than as part of a digital repertoire. It certainly does not overturn existing relationships in the information chain. Other big dot.com ideas from the past (last year) seemed to have lost body. There was no booth for either **NetLibrary** or **Ebrary**, though personnel were spotted in the aisles. Everyone was waiting for a new model to emerge for the former (from the strategists of **OCLC**) and for a model to emerge for the latter. As for the journal hosts, **Ingenta** had the best stand party I went to (real wine), but their business model was not visible either to other than the eye of faith. **Extenza** (the publishing solutions business owned by **Swets**) had a mediocre lunch, which conflicted with a divine lunch next door, but they gave the best present in a Fair almost devoid of freebies. Both promised a lot in their different styles. The heavy tread of **MetaPress** (the **EBSCO** presence) could be heard — they are said to have a lot of money to spend. They were not noisy. As for the technology, after a lot of action a few years ago, the software people have folded up their large exhibits and crept away. Companies like

MicroSoft are present, but the literature is mostly in German. The action is now located at **International Online** early in December in London.

The main talking point over the snatched cups of coffee at breaks in the schedule (one euro deposit) and in the bars of the evening, was not about e-matters. The conversational starter was produced the first day of the **Fair**, which saw a substantial item in the *Financial Times*. “Books for boffins beat publishing blues” read the headline. Actually it was about journals: these money men do not know the difference. It correctly predicted the sale price of **Kluwer Academic**. In following day’s issue of *The Bookseller* (the UK equivalent of *Publishers Weekly*) the British valuation expert **Christopher Gasson** wrote in purple prose about publishing mergers in general. He did not pull his punches and some long quotations for purposes of comment and criticism seem in order.

“To an outsider, acquisitions in the publishing industry look like a stupendous Daliesque banquet in which the big groups are continuously consuming each other, as well as any independent publishers who happen to pass their way... Every year we expect to arrive to discover that the familiar aisles of publishers’ booths have been replaced by a single stand occupying an entire hall. Instead we discover it is much the same as last year, with even the grandest corporate stands — those with multi-story office complexes, coffee bars, mini-gyms and lidos — dwarfed by the sheer scale of the Buchmesse.”

This is a slight exaggeration, but **McGraw Hill** did have two floors. **Gasson** however is hopeful about the future. The smaller company, the niche player, is not dead. He continues:

“It is the stupidity and brutality of the big publishing groups that are the best guarantees of diversity in publishing... There may be some short-term accountancy benefits, but after that, most acquirers seem to find it very difficult to harness and drive the vitality of the businesses they have bought. Somehow it slips away and appears again next year at the booth next door.”

Frankfurt does indeed illustrate the diversity of the business. In hall 8 there was a man with a rabbit. He was advertising a book about the rabbit. Some animal lovers did not like this, but the rabbit looked in peak form. A newspaper item mentioned that a German firm is printing novels on toilet paper. There is one chapter per roll. I did not see this new venture but the owner claimed to be inundated with orders. The British distributor **Turnaround**, which specialises in erotica, gay and lesbian literature and the black experience has an unusual design on the inside cover of its catalogue. This image came from the much talked about *A New Kind of Science* by **Stephen Wolfram**, the very independent owner and developer of **Mathematica**. I went to see the booth. The **Wolfram** book, which is big, made a formidable presence on the shelves, just above a different style of book, shrink-wrapped to avoid browsers, entitled *Huge 2*. Religious publishing was noticeably represented. Within a stone’s throw of the **Taylor & Francis** booth was the presence of a company new to me. This is **Summit University Press** — not an **AAUP** member. Their lead title for 2003 reveals the lives of the ascended masters and their cities of light in the spirit world. There is indeed something for everyone.

Readers of *ATG* may like to know that the Americans are back in **Frankfurt**. Many US publishers have always grumbled about **Frankfurt**, its cost and the problems of getting a cab or anywhere reasonable to eat in the evenings. The aftermath of 9/11 in 2001 left many empty sites where booths had been due to go up. This year everyone came back. A leading New York publisher wrote in one preview that “there is nothing like pressing the flesh.” There is a lot of that going on.

What has the **Fair** got for librarians? The short answer is that there is little laid on for them. I did not meet a single librarian throughout the **Fair**, although a reliable informant tells me that there were about twenty over from North America. There is a revamped **International Centre for Information and Content Management**. **ICOCOM** (not an easy acronym to get the tongue round) ran a scientific programme, but I spotted on the list of speakers only two from English speaking countries — **Abby Smith** from **CLIR** and **Michael Olson** from **Harvard**. There was also a centre with some booths. Some **Casalinis** were there and a few others known to the library world across the Atlantic, but business seemed far from brisk when I visited. This is a great pity. Publishing is laid open to the view in all its rawness. Publishers are talking to each other and selling to each other and cheating each other. It is all very entrepreneurial and librarians would be advised to find out what sort of content is heading their way. Someone should set up a package tour.

ELDRED v. AOL GOLIATH by **Bruce Strauch** (The Citadel)

In the tiny town of Derry, NH, retired computer administrator **Eric Eldred** runs a tiny press devoted to great works of literature. Wanting to republish **Sherwood Anderson’s** *Horses and Men*, he found himself thwarted by the 1998 copyright extension, which inspired him to file *Eldred v. Ashcroft* along with **Jonathan Zittrain**, **Lawrence Lessig** and **Charles Nesson**.

And soon the Supremes will pronounce.

See — **Andrea Foster**, “A Bookworm’s Battle,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Oct. 25, 2002, p. A35.