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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — A Bibliotecal Heresy: Cost over Quality?

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My personal level of *angoisse* rises and falls with the exchange rate. When the dollar falls against the Euro, I am more than usually aware that the average price of some European books would shock the layman. I decided to gather some information about several of the most expensive presses I deal with.

YBP's **GOBI 2** has much to offer the embattled selector. I queried **GOBI 2** and asked it to display all **de Gruyter** titles treated by YBP in 2003. **GOBI 2** gave me the number of titles and helpfully calculated the total dollar amount. The average price for a **de Gruyter** title in 2003 was a disturbing \$128 (list price). **Kluwer** and **Benjamins**, two other Batavian budget busters, averaged \$120 and \$114.

My fellow bibliographers on various listservs remind me that quality counts. They point out that **de Gruyter** is known for the quality of its publications. It may be one of the last great academic publishers in private hands, giving the presumption and expectation that their publication decisions are based more on scholarly considerations than on the bottom-line performance of a title. It backlists almost every title ever published; production standards are high. What more could we want or hope for in an academic publisher — except a less expensive product?

Maybe this is bibliotecal heresy, but why is it not reasonable to expect that a book will stay in print for only, say, five years, then go out of print? When demand arises, a second printing (or photocopying with permission) can take care of need. I don't expect **BMW** to keep making the Z3 ten years after first production. Fashions change in the book world as well.

To corroborate this reputation for quality I went to the **H-Net** site and read, or rather, skimmed 21 book reviews of titles published by **de Gruyter**. Remember, most reviews of anything (except movies) are generally positive. Book reviews are no exception: on the whole they are positive — a book is by its nature a good thing — so we're dealing with degrees of goodness here. I conclude that **H-Net** reviewers judge **de Gruyter** publications to be slightly better than the average academic title. Ten of the 21 publications would be considered "pretty good"; but six were significantly above average; only one, however, merited praise such as "magisterial" or path-breaking; only one was severely criticized. Several reviewers commented on the length of **de Gruyter** titles and amount of detail presented.

de Gruyter also publishes dissertations, as **OCLC** records make clear, or works based on dissertations. It is unclear how much editorial work and revision has gone into the published work. (**de Gruyter** also publishes *Habilitationen*, or second dissertations.) Surely some of their more popular titles "float" their more esoteric titles, as is the case with many of our university presses. Ultimately it is expensive to produce a monograph that will sell only 300 copies worldwide. Someone has to pay the piper.

Generally with a **de Gruyter** imprint, one can have confidence that it will be a well-edited and attractively set and bound book that is an important contribution to scholarship. But, given our policy at **UNC** — and we are not alone — of deferred binding, we actually prefer to get a paperback copy and put that in a commercial library binding after two circulations. The commercial library binding that we put on a book, if warranted, will be stronger and more durable than the **OEM** binding. Sometimes libraries pay for more "quality" than we actually want.

While the quality is certainly there in the case of **de Gruyter**, sometimes the scope of con-

tribution may be quite narrow. Here's a case in point: **Harvey, Mark**. *The grammar of Gaagudju*. (Berlin; New York: **Mouton de Gruyter**, 2002). This monograph is based on the author's 1992 dissertation. Why did it need to cost \$178? **Lincom**, a linguistics specialty house in Munich, is able to produce grammars from around the world for a lot less money. Perhaps it was because there is no other identifiable grammar of **Gagadu**, an aboriginal language of Australia? With no competition for this monograph, price was almost not an object of concern. (Holdings worldwide: 30 and rising.) But, **Routledge** also charges a lot for their "obscure" grammars as well. Perhaps that is a standard price for the topic and **Lincom** is the exception. We need more exceptions!

Frequently one hears faculty and other bibliographers complain about books from **Peter Lang**. Scholars choose to publish with **Lang** for a variety of reasons, however. Again using indefatigable **GOBI 2**, I calculate that the average price of a **Lang** imprint (English-language titles only) is around \$46. This is more in line with the price of British academic trade publications. **de Gruyter** is somewhat out of line with British academic trade costs and certainly with French book prices, which are a real deal

in comparison. I often select **Lang** books when the topic is important to our patrons.

I am shocked (really) to see that the average price of an **Edwin Mellen** title (again, per **GOBI 2**) has reached \$115! Especially since that press has been controversial since the "exposé" in *Lingua Franca* (September/October 1993). Yet surely quality varies quite a bit with **Mellen** publications.

Have we reached the point where selectors need to exercise as much caution with **de Gruyter** and **Brill** publications as we do with the **Mellens** and **Langs**? Yes, if circulation can be used as a guide. By and large, English-language titles from **Lang** in our catalog have circulated about as much as **Brill** titles, one to six circulations each. An assistant did some checking of circulation records for **de Gruyter** titles with a publication date of 1992. Circulation is generally much lower than one would like to see for relatively expensive books. About one third of the English-language titles have circulated more than four times. But 18 percent of the English titles have not circulated since 1993. Not surprisingly, titles in English circulate much more than the German-language titles. German-language circulation could only be described as low. From conversations with other bibliographers I believe that circulation patterns in other libraries will be similar to ours. Bear in mind, however, that a ten-year period is short: we are buying these books for the ages, as we say in our more grandiose moments.

Results for **Benjamins** (Amsterdam) titles were similar. We looked at books which have been in the collection since 1984. Of 37 titles held in the main library, 11 (30%) have never circulated; ten (27%) have circulated once; eight (22%) have circulated two to four times and one (3%) has circulated more than four times. Foreign language is hardly an issue here: only three (8%) **Benjamins** titles were not in English.

The operative motto should be "greater cost demands greater scrutiny." It's not that I don't trust **de Gruyter**, or **Brill**, or **Benjamins** to produce quality monographs: I do. But their monographs are often terribly specialized and quite expensive. Is this the best I can do with my devalued dollars? (Would they float if I threw them into the fountains of Rome?) Without awaking the ugly spectre of utilitarianism, could I, should I be doing something more useful with the money?

Perhaps I should alter my selection patterns? It would be easy for me to select more moderately priced books from other publishers. Some would be in English and some would circulate as much or more than titles from the most expensive publishers. Is one or two or three cir-

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culations worth three or four other books that could be purchased for the cost of one **Benjamins** or **de Gruyter** title? If I used the money differently, I might be purchasing many more potential circulations than I am by sticking with expensive, well-reputed publishers.

On the other hand, I can't stop buying **Benjamins** and **Kluwer** titles without risking faculty ire. If publications of the most prestigious international presses are not available in anticipation of need, I could appear to be either incompetent or contrarian. I may inconvenience the chaired professor or the dissertating grad student who needs the most specialized material. In the long run I risk reducing the quality of the collections for some potential short-term gains in circulation. By favoring **Kluwer** and **Benjamins** titles which are mostly in English, I would be contributing to the decline of German as a language of scholarship in our collection—ironic and sad for a West European bibliographer [sic].


So, I am torn between the need to purchase high-quality but expensive books that will make a richer collection but will rarely circulate and the possibility of favoring less expensive (English-language) titles from less prestigious presses in Europe. It is tempting to buy four or five of these instead of the **de Gruyter** title. And I might actually get more circulation from those than from the **de Gruyter** title.

Now that so many titles cost well over one hundred dollars each, I feel obliged to do some investigation to make a sound decision. (Of course deliberation by bibliographers adds fur-



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ther to the cost of purchasing expensive monographs.) On an experimental basis I am trying to cooperate more with **Duke University's** library on expensive titles from European presses.

Have we reached the point where the traditional model of scholarly publication and distribution of information has broken down for monographs as well as for serials? 

A Bibliotecal Heresy — Response from Walter de Gruyter

by **Dr. Anke Beck** (Editor in Chief, Mouton de Gruyter)

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We at **Walter de Gruyter Publishers** are somewhat surprised by the ongoing debate about the price structure of books published by our company, and gratefully accept the opportunity to respond directly to **John Rutledge's** article "A Bibliotecal Heresy: Cost over Quality?"

The above-mentioned article was written by a librarian operating under financial constraints made even worse by the current exchange rate. We acknowledge, and hope it is clear, that our response is not aimed toward **John Rutledge** personally. Rather, we take our response as a welcome opportunity to introduce our publishing policy and to explain why some books will always be more expensive than others; why it is difficult to compare some publishers with others; and why, in conclusion, we think it is not appropriate to denounce one particular publish-

ing house for pursuing "bibliotecal heresy" when their goals may be totally different from other publishing houses.

There is a puzzling element to articles of this nature, commonly known as the "apple and oranges problem." **Walter de Gruyter** is not just one company, with one program and one price structure. Rather, it consists of many entities, with two primary divisions. The first is **Walter de Gruyter**, the parent company, with its humanities departments including Theology, Classics, Philosophy, Archeology, (German) Literature and (German) Linguistics, and the Natural Sciences and Medicine divisions. All of the aforementioned departments publish mainly in German. Second, there is **Mouton de Gruyter**, which was known as **Mouton Publishers** until acquired by **Walter de Gruyter** in 1976. More than 90 percent of this division's publications

are in English. **Mouton de Gruyter** is therefore the only division that is comparable to **Kluwer** and **Benjamins**, the publishers highlighted by the author of "A Bibliotecal Heresy." Both **Benjamins** and **Mouton** are scholarly publishers with a core program in linguistics.

It is presumptuous to believe that the circulation of a German-language book in an American library would be as high as an English-language book in the same library. Although Germans sometimes choose to ignore this fact, the ability to read in the language of the philosophers is lower than the German writing academia acknowledges. That, however, does not make contents written in that language less important. It is true for a large percentage of **Walter de Gruyter** publications that the subject matter is German original texts (like **Kant**

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