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From the University Presses -- Books For Understanding

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From the University Presses — Books For Understanding

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Column Editor's Note: *This is the first of what I hope will be a regular series of columns about publishing at university presses. If you'd like to suggest an idea or question for a future column — or comment on this one — I'd love to hear from you: <pgivler@aaupnet.org>. — PG*

"Books for Understanding," a topical, on-line bibliography of books published by members of AAUP, was born in the terrible aftermath of September 11, 2001. Our office, about a mile and a half north of Ground Zero at 6th Avenue and 23rd, stayed open. We had lost our broadband connection to the Net and we only had two working phone lines — as it happened, older lines bypassed when we installed a new phone system but, thanks to a lucky oversight by the phone company, never disconnected. We had a Trimline phone plugged into one and a standard 56K modem into the other, and were trying to answer questions and relay messages.

That Friday, September 14, I got an email message from **Sandy Thatcher**, the Director of the **Penn State University Press**, noting that there had been a sudden surge of orders for two recent books they had published, "*Terrorism in Context*," and "*The Holy War Idea in Islamic and Western Thought*." Sandy wondered whether other presses might not also have published books that could help people understand the terrifying events of the previous Tuesday, and whether there might not be a role for AAUP in creating an on-line bibliography to help people locate them.

Later the same day we sent a message to our members inviting them to submit listings for books on:

terrorism and counter-terrorism, religious fundamentalism, Middle Eastern Studies, U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East and South Asia, disaster management, and the history and culture of any of the individual countries that appear to be directly implicated, like Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Our Website was hosted outside New York and was unaffected, but because the modem would be the choke point for both receiving the listings and uploading them to the Website, we asked that they be limited to very basic information: title, author, publisher, ISBN, edition, and year of publication. Members could send us the listings as email text and we would convert them to HTML.

At first we just referred to the project as "A Relevant Bibliography," but on September 18 a message went out to our member-

ship that the first batch of 103 titles was being posted and could be located on the Website under the title, "**Books for Understanding**." A week later the listings were up to 335 titles; by mid-November, when the listings had slowed and we were able to catch up, "**Books for Understanding**" contained 610 titles grouped in 24 subtopics. In addition to those suggested above there were additional topics ranging from Aviation Security to The World Trade Center. It had been written up in *Publishers Lunch*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Library Journal* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. *The New York Review of Books*, *The New York Times*, *The Chronicle Review* and *Lingua Franca* had all donated space for an announcement ad. Most gratifying of all, we were getting thank-you messages from librarians and teachers who found it a valuable resource.

Although it took us seven or eight weeks to gather the information and put the list together, when the terrorists struck on September 11, AAUP members already had over 600 books in print and available to help people understand the antecedents of that terrible day — history, religion, politics, culture, economics — and how we might cope with it — disaster management, anti-terrorism, conflict resolution, grief and counseling. In the three months following September 11, 16 of **Baker and Taylor's** 25 most active titles were published by university presses. Three of them were national best-sellers: **Yale University Press's** *Taliban*, by **Ahmed Rashid**; **North-eastern University Press's** *The New Jackals*, by **Simon Reeve**; and **Rutgers University Press's** *The Twin Towers*, by **Angus Kress Gillespie**.

All this brought powerfully home to me an essential truth about the kind of publishing university presses do. People sometimes talk as if university presses, by the nature of their mission and their nonprofit status, were free to publish without being constrained by markets. That's not true, of course; enough people have to buy what they publish to keep the business going. But it is true that mission and tax status liberate university presses to publish for much smaller markets than would otherwise be the case, and the success of "**Books for Understanding**" demonstrates vividly the social value of being free to publish good books *before* their topics make headline news: so that the knowledge we need to reach understanding is ready when we need it, not a year later.

This September marked the fourth anniversary of "**Books for Understanding**." That first bibliography, which has grown to over 1,000 titles, is now archived under the title "September 11, 2001," and "**Books for Understanding**" is the whole collection of bibliographies we have developed since. There are 29 of them, on topics ranging from Iraq to Voting and Elections; the two most recent, both created this fall, are on Katrina and Global Climate Change.

We've recently made some programming changes and introduced some new features. The site has been redesigned with a clean, elegant look of its own. The book lists offer additional information, such as links to other relevant bibliographies, and display "published" and "last updated" dates for users' reference. Authors' information, where available, is

highlighted for users from the media, or for those interested in setting up expert panels or book events. We also offer an RSS feed of new list topics, in addition to an e-mail notification service.

Some of the biggest improvements, however, lie beneath what you'll see on the screen. Titles are now entered into a database, which allows us greater flexibility in how we use the book data. Bibliographies can be distributed to interested users like jobbers or individual libraries and teachers in alternative formats. The bibliographies can be produced more consistently, and our ability to integrate bibliographies and cross-list titles will be greatly enhanced. Lists published from now on will appear in this improved design — you can see it in "Hurricane Katrina," "Global Climate Change," and "Haiti" — and we've started to convert all the older lists.

Books for Understanding has a new URL at <http://www.booksforunderstanding.html>. You can see the format for the new lists at <http://www.aaupnet.org/news/bfu/katrina/list.html>, and if you'd like to learn more about the RSS feed (and even sign up for it) go to <http://www.aaupnet.org/news/bfu/feeds.html>.

The motto for **Books for Understanding** is "the stories behind the headlines," and the program will continue to grow as new and important topics come into the news. We're always open to considering new topics, so if you think we're missing something significant, let us know: <understanding@aaupnet.org>. 🍷