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Lost in Austin — Boxes of Books

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Last year, I volunteered to read fiction in translation for *ForeWord: Reviews of Good Books Independently Published*. You can read more about this review magazine at www.forewordmagazine.com where you will find subscription information along with many reviews and publisher ads.

Often, after agreeing to do something for someone (not as bad as agreeing to write something), I feel exhilarated, pleased with myself, and ready to expand my horizons. When the work appears (books to read) and deadlines approach, I rue the day I said yes, but the pain is never enough or as long-lasting as it should be to prevent me from saying yes in the future. Never saying no means you are always busy and forever yearning for free time. When I retire, will I have finally learned my lesson?

I am not complaining about reading books for *ForeWord*. Reading is as much a part of me as eating and is more gratifying and less fattening even though it is a lonely, sedentary experience. I am just thinking of the first package of books I received and wondered how I could read them in a very short time and do justice to them. I did not have to review each book but I had to rank the top three (the others were not necessarily rank or unranked, just not as good as the top three). The top-ranked books receive honors as best book in its category and so on, much like the *Westminster Dog Show*, I suppose, but without the tail wagging and treats.

There were only two books that I felt worthy of prizes last year and was able to say why. There was another judge reading the same books but I don't know how that judged ranked them and have not seen the final awards but that is fine, I have no vested interest in seeing which book actually won.

This year, I already feel differently after having read three of eight books and almost finished with a fourth (this in a week today). The

books, done as a favor (I wanted essays and will insist on essays next year), are in the Religious Fiction category. For reasons that I do not need to go into, one year will be enough, but I am glad that I am reading these books. Believe it or not, I am learning about good writing by reading some novels that are not particularly well written and the good news is that I know why they are not good and could help the authors make them better. As an aside, I have a son who is a non-paid associate fiction editor for *Northwest Review* in Eugene, Oregon. He would be much better at this than I am because he is a faster, more discerning reader than I am and he would enjoy it more than reading for a literary magazine because he wouldn't have to write and send rejection slips.

When my box of books arrived, I was at home, having left the office early on a Friday. I had expected six books, not eight, and as I looked at the covers and dust jackets, I felt bad vibrations and wondered if one couldn't, after all, judge a book by its cover. I envisioned apocalyptic, Revelations-based, Christian-right propaganda, but I was mistaken, thanks to the god of religious fiction. It isn't even all Christian. The one I am just about to finish is Jewish in orientation and is about *Esther* and the *King of Persia*. I can almost hear the musical but *Yul Brynner* is dead, *Deborah Kerr* is past her prime, and there is no one left for the roles, as in "if it was filmed before 1965 and in black and white, it is a good movie by definition ... with a few color films of that era worth seeing."

The first of the eight that I selected is probably the slimmest and I grabbed it because it looked easy and would be handy to take with me on a short flight to Houston. I began the book on Thursday evening but didn't get far. By the time my plane landed in Houston the next day, I had finished it. I had a spare in my luggage, a much longer novel. I knew that I

wouldn't finish it on the return flight and wondered if I could finish it at all, the first having been so stilted and maudlin. **Syrup of Ipecac** in a book!

The next book was gripping and well-written. I would have chosen a different ending and was slightly bothered by the supernatural elements, especially at the end, but that is my problem and not a problem of a book.

The next one I read needed an editor. The book takes place in Austin with incidents occurring in New York, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Israel. Very little in the book makes sense, but with some help, it could have been a better adventure story but probably at the expense of the domestic, homey scenes that didn't even help character development. Dialog is difficult to write, but not as difficult as the author made it. This book and the first one are out of the running for a prize, if I can help it.

When I get home this evening (it is Friday again), I will finish my book about *Esther* (after a slow start, I am really enjoying it) and will move it ahead of the book about the Agoraphobic millionaire woman (thirty something) and will try to finish the other four by next Friday. Then I will choose my three favorites, arrange them in 1, 2, 3 order, and write a brief statement for each one. Not all religious fiction is equal, but it is not all bad, either. My hat is off to anyone who can write a good book regardless of genre. But when it comes to reading good books, competitions aside, I have my own preferences and not enough time to read a small fraction of books on my many reading lists that multiply like fourth graders in an arithmetic contest.

Happy reading to you all, no matter what your pleasure.

Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — How Was ALA?

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"How was ALA?" Once or twice a year, that's the first question

thousands of librarians and vendors hear when returning to work from several days away in Atlanta, New Orleans, San Francisco, Chicago, or some other convention city, time spent attending the **Annual Conference** or **Midwin-**

ter Meeting of the American Library Association. It's a question they hear all day long, in fact, on that first day back, as one co-worker after another asks about their trip.

Your first few **ALAs**, it's an easy question to answer. But year-by-year it gets harder. Let's see, you ask yourself, standing outside someone's office or cubicle, were we just in Philadelphia, or was that the one before? **ALA**,

or any large gathering of any sort, always has the potential to devolve into chaos and meaninglessness. So, organizers and attendees impose structure on those several days. At a certain point, the structure becomes the experience. Programs, meetings, appointments, dinners, lunch, receptions, drinks, demos, bed, start over. The cities, their hotels, the meetings, your meals;

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