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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- How Was ALA?

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Lost in Austin — Boxes of Books

by **Thomas W. Leonhardt** (Director, Scarborough-Phillips Library, St. Edward's University, 3001 South Congress Avenue, Austin, TX 78704-6489; Phone: 512-448-8470; Fax: 512-448-8737) <thomasl@admin.stedwards.edu>

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 judge 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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they start to blend together. Philadelphia or Atlanta? Hard to tell apart.

But you try, and so no sooner has the conference broken up than it reconvenes all over the place as attendees serially recap their ALA for people at work, for other colleagues, and for themselves. We sift through notes, we decide to keep or (usually) throw away handouts and junk giveaways, we write reports and memos, send emails, sometimes talk formally, but mostly make small talk before really getting back down to work. How was ALA? We answer the question, or we try to.

Which isn't to say that there is an answer. Actually there are many answers. If some giant piece of software tried to analyze all those casual conversations about ALA, all the committee reports and expense reports, all those emails, all the memos, it would say that these people couldn't have attended the same event.

Thousands of attendees walk by one another on the sidewalks and in the hotel lobbies and down the long convention center corridors for days. Everyone's busy with their own ALA. Programs, meetings, speeches, forums, ceremonies, receptions, keynote addresses, dances, restaurants, hotel lounges, museum getaways, time-out shopping excursions, they're like parts you pull out of a do-it-yourself kit. Depending upon the city, there are riverboat cruises, cruises on the bay, cruises on the lake, literary walks, walks through graveyards, garden walks, walks for architecture, history walks. My ALA may not look much like yours. The president's gala must be a highlight for a lot of people, but lots of others spend decades going to ALA and never get near it; probably couldn't even find it. Likewise, for many vendor-attendees, the exhibits are ALA, but for many librarian-attendees the exhibits are a sideshow, at best.

Librarians think of ALA as a professional conference. But vendors know it's really a trade show. They've paid for the privilege of thinking that way, through considerable exhibit fees that account for much of what it costs to put on the conference. ALA meetings are definitely part of the trade show industry. Industry? That's right. Trade shows are a big business. Some 11,000 trade shows take place in the United States annually. To the associations and professional groups staging them, they're serious business indeed, since the money taken in often accounts for well over half of a group's overall annual operating revenue. The industry is highly organized, complete with Websites, strategic planning consultants, trade journals, its own conferences and seminars, its own associations of trade show organizers, and of course, its own vendors.

ALA, while not one of the largest trade shows, is not small potatoes either. March is historically a strong month at the **Las Vegas Convention Center**, one of the industry's principal destinations. (ALA, by the way, is tentatively booked into Las Vegas for **Annual 2014**.) In March 2003, the LVCC hosted nineteen shows. Only eight had over 10,000 attendees,

among these the **Associated Surplus Dealers/Associated Merchandise Dealers** (55,000), **International Health Racquet and Sportsclub Association** (18,000), **International Wireless Communications Expo** (12,000), and the **National Association of Pizza Operators** (13,000). The most recent **ALA Midwinter Meeting**, in Boston, drew just short of 13,000, better than the 10,500 or so the prior year in San Diego, but not as good as **2003 Midwinter** in Philadelphia, attended by 13,664. **ALA Annual Conferences**, held in the summer, can draw over 20,000, as 2002 in Atlanta did. The SARS scare kept **2003 Annual** in Toronto, for which ALA had had high hopes, down to 17,570. **Annual 2004** in Orlando, another disappointment, even so drew 19,731. **Annual 1994**, in Miami—now there's an ALA people can remember—is always known as the worst ALA in a generation. It drew only 12,627. Even today you'll hear complaints about the heat, the humidity, and the impossible logistics of getting to the next meeting in some hotel miles away down the beach. Measured by volume of complaint, Orlando, which in general is a top trade show destination, was a mini-Miami for librarians.

Drawing attendees to the conference is the name of the game, and throughout the trade show industry, that's more difficult than it used to be. Ever since 9/11 many people have chosen to stay at home, or to stay a day or two short. There's more information online, of course, often enough to make it feasible to skip the trade show. Or, to have a virtual meeting online. And in business after business, as companies have merged or as large firms have ploughed under smaller ones, there are fewer potential conferencegoers in the first place. Attendees, and the organizations sending them, are thinking harder about what they get for their convention dollar.

ALA has been immune to none of this. Last year, in fact, some of the largest ALA exhibitors threatened to withdraw if the association didn't take steps to increase foot traffic on the exhibit floor. Too many attendees, as the exhibitors saw it, were dropping the exhibits altogether. The loneliest place in the world is an exhibit hall where the exhibitors spend most of the time checking their watches, reading email, and talking to one another; or when things really get unbearable, perusing one another's literature. Exhibitors, pacing away the hours in booths which can easily cost tens of thousands of dollars—and sometimes more than that—and where exorbitant convention center fees to rent

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even a trash can for a booth have become the stuff of legend, were getting to know one another all too well.

ALA conferences are famously overscheduled, so the complaining exhibitors had a point. Divisions, sections, committees, subcommittees, boards, councils, task forces, discussion groups, interest groups, round tables, hundreds of officially recognized bodies of one sort or another are all holding business meetings, putting on programs, or hosting some other kind of gathering. A typical ALA meeting has over 2000 scheduled events. They're listed in a master schedule that's as impenetrable to a novice as computer code, which it resembles, a dense grid of acronyms, start times, end times, room numbers, and venue codes. The printed program for an **ALA Conference** is as thick as the phone book for a medium-sized city. A good part of it is taken up by this master list of heavily overlapping, often redundant, always serious-looking meetings. Exhibits? As one Weblog posting put it last year, "I've always been a bit of an exhibit snob, poo-pooing the exhibit hall as a bit of unnecessary fluff that, frankly, I didn't have time for." And this posting was an attempt to encourage visits to the exhibits.

But there's another side to it. Much of the expense of exhibiting at ALA is within the exhibitor's control. While you might have to grin and bear it when it comes to pricey trash

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Bet You Missed It

Press Clippings — In the News — Carefully Selected by Your Crack Staff of News Sleuths

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Column Editor's Note: Hey, are you reading this? Your esteemed column editor would like to know what you think! Zip off a quick email to <pmrose@buffalo.edu>. Does BYMI fill your needs? Do you have any suggestions for changes? I'm listening! — **PR**

CULTURAL OR SPIRITUAL?

by **Pamela M. Rose** (University at Buffalo)

The definition of the word "Anasazi" — used for almost a century by archaeologists to denote ancient pueblo dwellers — is considered derogatory for some Pueblo Indians, who prefer the term "ancient Puebloans." Some national parks are being accused of censorship in their attempt to be sensitive to the Indians by declining to carry books using the word. In another case the term "rock art" is said to suggest European cultural activity rather than spiritual undertaking, so New Mexico's **Petroglyph National Monument** bookstore won't stock **Rock Art** in New Mexico by **Polly Schaafsma**, which also shows sacred images tribes believe should not be photographed.

See — "Sensitivity or Censorship?" in Random Samples section edited by **Constance Holden**, *Science*, Feb. 25, 2005, p.1197.

MONKS, FIRE, WAR, THEFT, AND NEGLECT

by **Pamela M. Rose** (University at Buffalo)

Just how likely were individual handwritten books to survive the Middle Ages, or entire works to be lost? How much of science has really been copied down through the generations, and of the survivors, how much might have been lost in translation? Using the **Verhulst-Pearl** logistic equation for population growth and making assumptions that texts were copied on demand rather than mass printed as they were after the invention of the printing press, **John Cisne** takes a unique and stimulating approach to calculating the percentages of texts that have survived or gone extinct, and thus the amount of knowledge that we have inherited.

See — "How Science Survived" — Medieval Manuscripts as Fossils" by **Sharon Larimer Gilman** and **Florence Eliza Glaze**, *Science*, Feb. 25, 2005, pp. 1208-1209, and the full article, "How Science Survived: Medieval Manuscripts' 'Demography' and Classic Texts' Extinction" by **John L. Cisne**, *Science*, Feb. 25, 2005, pp. 1305-1307.

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vendor looks ready for the next **World's Fair**. Nobody makes them outfit their staff in boater hats and flashy suits as if they're staging a vaudeville revival. Nobody encouraged them to hand a microphone to a rented **Elvis** impersonator. Some companies, it seems, think of ways to give attendees good reason to think twice about visiting the exhibit hall.

Remember that trade show/professional meeting question? All those librarians who skip the exhibits think that **ALA** is a professional meeting. Vendors can argue about that and maybe there are some answers in no-conflict scheduling, exhibit-floor *hor d'oeuvres*, and in other schemes. But maybe vendors could get the message, too. **ALA** is a professional meeting. Nobody told the vendors they weren't allowed to leave the

cans, nobody forces anyone to fill exhibit space with structures so elaborate the ven-

exhibit floor. Nobody's turning away vendor badges from all those meeting rooms and auditoriums. Vendors might find that getting involved in that side of the conference is the best use they can make of their time at **ALA**. They might find there aren't many better ways of learning what's important to librarians than to attend their meetings and programs, and to join their committees and groups. They might find that when librarians think of your staff as members of the library community, you just can't buy better marketing than that. When's the last time you wrote up a big sale in the booth anyway? Come to think of it, did you ever?

Calvin Coolidge once attended a state fair and was asked beforehand if he planned to give a speech. "No," the laconic president answered, "I am going as an exhibit."

Coolidge had a better sense of humor than he's usually given credit for. But do all library vendors get the joke?

DOCTORAL DELAY

by **Pamela M. Rose** (University at Buffalo)

The last assessments of U.S. doctoral programs by the **National Research Council** were published in 1995 and 1982, however the next survey may not meet even its delayed projected publication date of 2008 due to lack of funding support from the federal government. Measurement of graduate education is important at a time when many schools are facing competition from other nations for the world's best students, and ceding ground to commercial rankings by *U.S. News and World Report*. The suggestions that universities help pay for the survey has been met with opposition, and to exploring other ways to assess graduate education quality through mining existing databases.

See — "Funding Woes Delay Survey of U.S. Graduate Programs" by **Jeffrey Mervis**, *Science*, Jan. 7, 2005, p. 29.

HEY, LARRY SUMMERS! READ THIS!

by **Bruce Strauch** (The Citadel)

In a world of PIN numbers gone mad, we're reeling from the memory challenge of random but essential information. And a gender gap may be developing with major sociological implications. Women are mostly "bilateral" using both sides of their brain equally while men are skewed to either the verbal or scientific lobes. Will the requirement of strictly numerical or mixed passwords create an economic gender gap? And will this have to be studied and debated *ad nauseam* in the ivory towers?

See — **Matthew Kaminski**, "MK7364565," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 10, 2005, p. A16.

BILLIONAIRE TID-BITS

by **Bruce Strauch** (The Citadel)

Martha Stewart is out of the slammer and worth \$1 billion. **J.K. Rowling** is now in billionaire status with her cut of \$3 billion in sales of **Harry Potter** stuff. Of the **Forbes** list, 18 billionaires are high school drop-outs. **Lev Leviev**, Israeli billionaire is trained to do a *bris*, the Jewish circumcision ritual. And of course we have to note that mere tycoon/celebrity **Paris Hilton** is "dating" Greek billionaire **Paris Latsis** in a **Paris & Paris** hook-up.

See — "By the Numbers," *Forbes*, Billionaires Special Issue, March 2005, p.184.