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ATG Interviews Matthew J. Bruccoli

Publisher, Scholar, Bibliographer, Biographer

by **Katina Strauch** (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

ATG: Where to begin? You are such an accomplished scholar and publisher, both a biographer and bibliographer. Your work on F. Scott Fitzgerald and the DLB is well known. Tell us about yourself. How did you begin your professional career?

MJB: My professional career began in 1954 when I walked into the **Alderman Library** at **UVa** and asked **John Cook Wyllie**, the Curator of **Rare Books**, for a job. He couldn't pay me, but he let me work with him without salary: The best deal I ever made. **Mr. Wyllie** was the most complete bookman I've ever known. He made me a bookman and trained me as a bibliographer. I later worked with the great **Fredson Bowers**, but I owe my professional life to **Mr. Wyllie**.

Bookmanship determined my career as a scholar and publisher. My collections made it possible for me to write biographies and bibliographies and to edit literary texts. Book-collecting triggered my reference-book projects. Books make more books. Everything connects if you pay attention.

ATG: Tell us about Bruccoli Clark Layman. How did you get your own imprint at a big publishing house?

MJB: Bruccoli Clark — later **Bruccoli Clark Layman** — resulted from my friendship and subsequent partnership with **C. E. Frazer Clark, Jr.** We met in 1962 when I was running the **Centenary Edition of Nathaniel Hawthorne** at **OSU**, and **Fraze** was in the early stages of building his monumental **Hawthorne Collection**. He was a brilliant collector, and we shared the same book-related ambitions. **Fraze** was a marketing consultant — not an academic — who loved books and made himself a superb **Hawthorne** scholar. We created the **Bruccoli Clark** imprint in 1969 to publish limited editions of material from our collections, books about book-collecting, and bibliographies.

Fraze lived in Detroit and was involved in friends-of-libraries activities there with **Frederick Ruffner**, the founder of **Gale Research** to whom we owe great debts. **Fred** began using us as consultants on bibliographical projects. When we produced books for **Fred, Bruccoli Clark** became a **Gale** imprint. **Fraze** was my luck: I could not have accomplished what I have done without him.

We were able to start the **Bruccoli Clark** imprint because **Fraze** and I had friends in the book world and the publishing world who advised and encouraged us. Contacts are always essential. **Vernon Sternberg** of **SIU Press** — the best publisher-editor I've ever worked with — and **Pat O'Connor** — the king of paperback editors — and **William Jovanovich** of **HBJ** — were generous with



Photo by Susan Oken

their help. You are as good as your friends make you.

We were willing to gamble our own money on publishing ventures. I borrowed on my insurance policies, and **Fraze** invented new kinds of arithmetic.

Luck is mandatory. In addition to my luck in finding **Fraze**, I was lucky in knowing writers who let us publish their work — starting with **James Dickey**.

ATG: You are a first-rate scholar and have devoted much of your time to reference and bibliography. Some academic departments look down on this type of endeavor. Could you comment on this?

MJB: It is true that some academic departments look down on bibliographical-editorial-textual scholarship. Some English Departments are dominated by book-dopes (people who do not understand the use of books). So are some libraries. The hell with them. You establish your values and do your work because you trust your instincts. You build research collections for libraries in the certain knowledge that the books will be used after the library administrators are gone.

ATG: Tell us why you became a reference book "junkie" and publisher.

MJB: I became a reference-book publisher because I got much of my education from them and therefore believe in their utility. At P. S. 83 I began reading or browsing reference books and pseudo-reference books because my teachers there taught me almost nothing; and I needed to determine the fields of my ignorance. I learned nothing about literature and literary history at the **Bronx High School Science**, and I continued to rely on

reference books to fill the holes. At **Yale** I needed literary reference books to catch up with my better-trained classmates.

Accordingly, it was natural for me to produce reference books that would function as teaching tools. The **BCL** facsimiles of great manuscripts (*The Great Gatsby*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The Sun Also Rises*) allow bright students and able teachers to reconstruct the creative process for those masterpieces.

ATG: The DLB is a classic. Tell us about how you got started doing this.

MJB: The **DLB** began in November 1977 when **Frederick Ruffner** summoned **Fraze** and me to Ft. Lauderdale to attend a meeting on authorial biography. The other consultants discouraged **Fred. Fraze** and I ad-libbed a proposal for a multi-volume work and made out a budget on the back of an envelope. After **Fraze** secured **Fred's** approval to develop the project, I wrote sample entries, and we convened planning sessions. **Vern Sternberg** was the key advisor. He came up with the idea of publishing the **DLB** as stand-alone volumes: volumes to be used separately and sold separately.

Fred authorized us to produce three vols, then six, and then ten. **DLB** Volume 1, *The American Renaissance in New England*, was published in 1978. At our peak we produced 20 volumes per year, which has been reduced to allow libraries to keep up. The **DLB** is the most comprehensive literary reference series ever published. As of September 2005 **BCL** has produced and **Gale** has published 307 regular **DLB** volumes, 45 **DLB Documentary** volumes, and 23 **DLB Yearbooks**: 13,500 author entries totaling 84 million words. The **Yearbooks** have been terminated in response to librarian complaints that they didn't know where to shelve them. No printable comment seems possible..

ATG: Tell us about the Documentary Volumes.

MJB: The **Documentaries** are my pets. There is nothing else like them. They combine the functions of reference books and portable archives. They provide access to research documents in the great libraries of the world and private collections. They expand and democratize learning and teaching. I regard them as irreplaceable. The circumstance that 19 **Documentary** volumes were published with their own numbering, while 27 **Documentaries** were published with **DLB** numbering, has caused confusion.

ATG: Will the DLB ever be finished?

MJB: The **DLB** will never be finished.

continued on page 31

Interview Matthew Bruccoli
from page 30

Writers keep writing. New writers keep emerging. New literatures keep developing. But another 50 regular **DLB volumes** should make it substantially complete. We particularly want to maintain the **DLB Documentary volumes** and to make them selectively available in trade paperback format after publication in the **DLB**. Six **Documentary volumes** have been reprinted as paperbacks.

I am disappointed by the meager advice that I have received from reference librarians. I want to know how the **DLB** can be modified to make it more useful for their parishioners. Books are the most valuable and enduring products of a people. It follows that the lives of writers are of permanent interest to serious readers.

ATG: Tell us more about **Bruccoli Clark Layman**.

MJB: **Richard Layman**, my former graduate student, was the first **Bruccoli Clark** employee. He is now the vice-president of **BCL**. We have 45 employees in Columbia, most of whom are responsible for editing, vetting, checking, and proofing **DLB** entries. **BCL** invests considerable time and money in getting it right.

Bruccoli Clark Layman's work is not limited to **DLB volumes**. Series produced for **Gale** by **BCL** and its **Manly, Inc.** imprint include **American Decades**, **World Eras**, **History in Dispute**, and the **Gale Study Guides**. We also produce reference works for other publishers, including **Facts on File**, **ProQuest**, and **Omni**.

ATG: What comments do you have about on demand publishing and eBooks?

MJB: I welcome demand publishing as a way to resuscitate books and to publish unprofitable books. But I regard online reference tools and "virtual libraries" with suspicion. Most of the online reference sources

that I have consulted are untrustworthy. The online products that originated as online projects are crap-shoots. Many are peppered with factual errors because they do not seem to have been vetted or even checked. Nonetheless, librarians seem to prefer online reference tools. The great advantages of online publishing are ease of access and instant correction. The obvious solution is that major reference works should be available in print and online — as is the **DLB**.


ATG: What has been the impact of consolidation in publishing?

MJB: The consolidation and conglomeratization of publishers and publishing worries the hell out of me because American publishing is now controlled by accountants and business-school types: not by book-people. The executives in charge don't value authors except as money-makers. They are competing for the next meretricious blockbuster. **Mary Lee Settle** has observed that "a whole industry depends on us and treats us like ____." **Random House**, which was started by **Bennett Cerf** and **Donald Klopfer** in 1925 because they loved being publishers, was known as an authors' house. It is now a cartel owned by **Bertelsmann** that requires two pages of **LMP** to list its divisions and sub-divisions. **Mr. Cerf** and **Mr. Klopfer** would not be able to get into the building now. And there is the sad decline of **Charles Scribner's Sons** — the house of **Maxwell Perkins**, **Fitzgerald**, **Hemingway**, and **Wolfe** — now an imprint of **Simon & Schuster**, which is a division of **Viacom**.

ATG: We understand that you and your wife are big antique collectors. How do you spend your spare time? What do you like to read? Have you donated some of your collections to libraries?

MJB: My wife and I are not antique collectors, but she has a magnificent dollhouse furnished with 19th-century furniture and miniature books. We spend our "spare time" — which is not spare time — in book shops.

Booking is not a hobby. Bookmanship is my way of life. **Arlyn** reads more than I do. Apart from research reading, I enjoy reading spy novels on plane trips, but they keep turning into collections.

We have given most of our book collections to university libraries, including the **Matthew J. and Arlyn Bruccoli Collection of F. Scott Fitzgerald** and the **Joseph M. Bruccoli Great War Collection** — both at the **Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina**. These have their own published catalogues. Other collections that we have donated to the **University of South Carolina** in memory of **Dean of Libraries George Terry** are described in *22 Collections* (**Thomas Cooper Library**, 2005). We have also donated collections to **UVa** (**Wyllie, Bowers**, and **WWI**) and to **Kent State University** (**O'Hara, Lardner**, and **Chandler**). There are no shelves in a coffin. 

Addendum to Interview — In late 2005, after this interview was conducted, **Gale** decided to discontinue book publication of the **DLB** in 2007 and convert it to online publication only. **Gale** is responding to diminishing library orders for the **DLB**: librarians presumably prefer **DLB** online. I have discussed the impending death of reference books — not just **DLB** — with librarians; they have informed me that:

- 1) Teachers no longer make library research assignments.
- 2) Students do not use the library. They complain that libraries are "icky."

Some reference librarians apparently do not understand that **DLB** volumes are planned and published as complete separate volumes — with the exception of a few two-volume or three-volume sets — that cover a period or genre or movement or national literature. Librarians can purchase the **DLB** volumes they require. — **MJB**

Library Marketplace Interview — Self Publish or Perish: How one Author Moved from Self Publishing to the Mainstream

An Interview with Gregory Desilet author of *Our Faith in Evil* and *Cult of the Kill: Traditional Metaphysics of Rhetoric, Truth, and Violence in a Postmodern World*?

Column Editor: **John Riley** (Sales Director, Eastern Book Company) <jdriley@comcast.net>

Column Editor's Note: Self-publishing has been flourishing ever since new print on demand (POD) technologies have given authors the ability to print copies of their works as they sell, rather than maintaining a cumbersome inventory. It has gained new re-

spectability in recent years because of the quality of the content and the professionalism of the production. We'll be exploring those themes in this interview. Before we begin, it is useful to remind ourselves that **William Faulkner** and **Mark Twain** can both

be counted among the self-published!

Gregory Desilet is the author of two books, the first one self-published, and his most recent, **Our Faith in Evil**, just released by **McFarland**. He will walk us through his

continued on page 32