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Papa Abel Remembers — The Tale of A Band of Booksellers, Fascicle 3: Learning the Sales Call

by **Richard Abel** (Aged Independent Learner) <rabel@easystreet.com>

Obviously, neither the **Portland Public Library** nor the **University of Oregon** were prepared to do business with the **Reed College Coop** before the acquisitions staff of each had had the opportunity to meet and talk with me face-to-face. So, I made my first sales calls on libraries to give the staffs of each and the respective head librarians a chance to size me up, plumb our book knowledge, outline the trial period they envisioned, broadly define the nature of the books they were planning to acquire from us, and to make their assessments of the wisdom of their decision to open a new book purchasing channel before committing even trial orders to us.

The head acquisitions librarian at the **University of Oregon** was **Dr. Eugene Barnes**, the first of a number of scholar-librarians with whom I was delighted to work in subsequent years. **Gene**, as he was commonly known, was a close student of and writer on Medieval literature. What was set-up as a meeting to interrogate me with respect to my knowledge of the scholarly literature quickly morphed into a convoluted discussion of the changing nature of the Medieval cultural mind, growing out of our mutual interest in this historical period — a turn in the conversation from what I had expected.

The head librarian at **Portland Public Library** was a fine bookman, **Bernhard van Horne**, again the first of a number of first-rate bookman-librarians with whom it would be my pleasure to work. **Bernhard** was strongly in favor of making the library a center of county-wide intellectual growth, in sharp contrast to the common resurging view that public libraries should bow to evanescent, mass-media popular tastes. Our preliminary interview grew into a sharing of common concepts about the central and critical cultural role of the serious book. It was a real pleasure to work with such a librarian and the like-minded staff he had informed. At every opportunity I would drop in on him to continue or embroider upon our first discussion for a few minutes. Again a very different relationship than the “arms-length” association that I had pictured in my mind’s eye.

The **Portland Library** had a reputation as a first-class collection of scholarly books and was anxious to maintain the quality of that collection, as just noted. The university library, like most such libraries during the **Depression** and **WW II** had been starved of acquisitions funds, so was obliged to compensate by filling that accumulated deficit in the OP market and as an active buyer in the new and burgeoning reprint market while also maintaining the integrity of the collection in terms of current scholarly books. Further both had to depend upon the **American News Company** whose

principal focus was on the distribution of magazines and newspapers to commercial outlets and for whom serious books were not a particularly welcome sideline. The other principal supplier was **Baker & Taylor** who specialized in wholesaling books, almost exclusively the current growing deluge of fiction, popularizations of topics of current mass-market interest, and juveniles, to the retail trade and public and school libraries. Both, by virtue of their oligopolistic place in the book market, were able to run their operations pretty much as was convenient and rounding to their corporate ease. The sci-tech-med book market was then largely structured around the establishment of regional monopoly wholesalers, who supplied the books of most sci-tech-med books to college bookstores, hospitals, sci-tech companies, etc. The usual market rigidities, including the denial of access by other vendors, resulting from these monopoly market conditions marked the supply of sci-tech and medical titles. Libraries located in a city possessed of a good bookseller — **Schwarz** in Milwaukee, **Kroch**’s in Chicago, etc — looked to these stores for many of their needs. But such first-rate booksellers were pretty thin on the ground, so, most libraries were dependent upon the few monopolistic/oligopolistic dealers. At that time only a handful of college/university bookstores were anything other than textbook/supply/college “pep” merchandize outlets. Upon learning of all of this, it was clear that there was no bookseller specialized to serve academic and research libraries with the full range of scholarly and research-level books they required.

In the meantime, I had talked to the attorney who both sat on the **Reed College Board** and acted as legal counsel to the college to advise of these startling developments. I argued that as both of these prospective customers were not-for-profit organizations in the state of **Oregon**, the **Coop**, by supplying them with books, was not likely to jeopardize the not-for-profit status of either the **Coop** or the **College**. He agreed. So, while the **Coop** was legally positioned to move ahead it possessed neither the inventory nor the book moxie nor the contacts with all the publishers with whom it was likely to have to deal in order to meet the requirements of the two libraries with which we were to work. It was perfectly clear that the **Coop** was going to have to provide a kind and level of service and book knowledge that radically surpassed that which marked and informed the libraries’ present suppliers. So, I had to quickly make good the **Coop**’s present deficiencies.

In those days the book trade possessed no *Subject Guide to Books in Print*. For reference purposes we had to depend upon *Cumulative*

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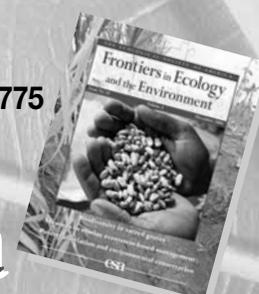
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Book Index and *Publishers Trade List Annual* together with the costly author/title index thereto called *Books in Print* — the “Brown Pig” and the “Green Pig” respectively. Both derived their common names from their shared size, both dimensional and number of volumes, and the color of their binding cloth. The green pig (*PTLA*) was simply a collection of publishers’ catalogs, arranged in alphabetic order by publisher. *Publishers’ Weekly*, then managed by the Melcher family, first father, Frederick, and then son, Daniel, was devoted to the highest standards of the book trade, prizing serious treatments of substantial matters, well above the promotion of mass-media, best-selling entertainment and popularizations. It carried in every issue a listing of newly published books. Unhappily, because these weekly listings were entirely dependent upon issuance of the **Library of Congress** classification and so far from comprehensive or current despite the best efforts of the then dedicated staff. As had been true of the bookselling trade from its beginnings in printers/publishers’ offices, a genuinely good bookstore was heavily dependent upon the bookseller’s memory of authors, titles, publishers, price ranges, and the trade practices of their publishers. Under these circumstances what was I to do to come up to the expectations of customers like these two new, library customers who were informed in their acquisitions and collection-building practices by a large staff of specialist librarians, in the **Portland Public Library** case, and by a substantial and demanding university faculty of narrowly defined specialist interests in the other — for I was a relative newcomer to the trade lacking the years of accumulated book knowledge of the few really outstanding booksellers scattered about the country?

Needless to say I scurried about to make good these early perceived difficulties — a mode of operation which became almost constant and routine as numbers of libraries served, services offered, and range of book titles progressively increased. I wrote all the publishers, usually the small niche publishers, with which the **Coop** had not dealt, soliciting inclusion on their mailing lists for catalogs of new and forthcoming titles. There were something on the order of 1500-2000 US publishers at the time, the bulk of them small, specialized, niche publishers and associations — of perhaps half the **Coop** dealt with, at least occasionally. The next step was to contact all the publishers’ salesmen traveling the West Coast seeking sales calls from them as they possessed the greatest stores of information relative to not only new and forthcoming titles but backlists as well. And lastly, I subscribed to a number of review media, such as *Saturday Review*, as well as journals of opinion such as *Partisan Review*, which were mines of information about current intellectual trends and the writers associated therewith. Additionally, I started subscriptions to several sci-tech-med journals for I had not only to learn of the current writings and ideas in these fields but also make good the lacunae in knowledge of a too

clever undergraduate who succeeded in evading all the hard science course requirements and still earned a Bachelor degree. Utilizing these assorted bibliographic information tools I had substantially augmented the inventory of books in all but the natural sciences in only a matter of months

The purchases of augmented inventories were initially financed out of the **Coop**’s resources which had grown quite nicely in the roughly half-decade of attentive management. Fortunately, as money began to be short to meet 30-day terms, the publishers’ travelers, now calling in increasing numbers, quietly advised that a store like the **Coop** showing positive sales growth could stretch terms of payment out to 45-60 days. I was soon availing the **Coop** of this flexibility.

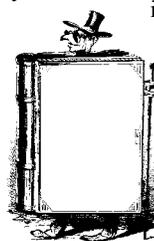
The first of the trail orders began to appear — irregularly and small. None particularly strained our regular inventory or ordering routine nor the hastily cobbled together billing procedure. It soon became clear that these library orders followed the initial appearance of titles by something in the range of 9-18 months. This time-lag arose from the fact that it took about that range of time for books to be reviewed in the various media. So, I had to back up to bring into stock books published in this time-span and reduce the number of copies of entirely new titles. These changes in inventory management led to perceptively improved service to the libraries, which they soon noted and commented upon.

These additions to inventory were severely impacting the available retail shelf space forcing me to commandeer space once used by a now defunct student camera club for a darkroom lab. This, of course, led to a confrontation with the student council, which nominally owned the Student Union building, at the agitation of some as an invasion of their prerogatives, though they had discovered no alternate use for the space. That clamor soon died out displaced by other evanescent grounds for complaints as they came and went. But the **Coop** had the warehousing space immediately needed for shelving the books to serve the needs of its larger and now-multiple customer base. So, the **Coop** by about 1955 was successfully embarked on serving another, and quite different customer base as well as a distinctly separate business venture.

In this same time frame, dissatisfaction with the course-work and classroom content of the high schools with respect to their superior students became overwhelming. So, the **Portland Schools** in company with **Reed College** applied to and received a substantial grant from the **Ford Foundation** to put together a group of augmented classes for gifted children to be offered in several of the Portland high schools. The teachers who had offered to teach these classes were to train together at **Reed College** under the tutelage of members of the **Reed** faculty. I was asked early in the process to recommend a list of books for both classroom study and for supplementary reading and reference use.

While I had occasionally turned to bibliographies in building the inventory of the **Coop**. I

possessed little intimate understanding of them and their construction to fit specific situations and needs. Now, building one such myself I was forced to not only turn to several exemplars for assistance but to come to a clear understanding of the basics of constructing such a guide to a clearly defined bibliographic end. This understanding, augmented in later years, by the use of other more complex bibliographies and the writings of **Bliss** (**Bliss** is probably now a forgotten figure, but was back in those days the acknowledged dean of bibliographic classification, as distinct from bibliographic description, and was the author of extended treatises on classification, which stood on many catalogers’ desks), proved invaluable not only in the formation of the *Approval Plan Thesaurus* but in building the collections of undergraduate and turnkey libraries when those demands arose at later dates.



As alluded to earlier, adequate shelving space for growing inventories was becoming and would become a continuing problem. Additionally, as the businesses grew, more space for billing, accounting, staff, etc., began to press what we had. The immediate answer, while still on the **Reed College** campus, came in an unexpected way. The student-run coffee shop had fallen on hard times under student management. In those days **Reed** pretty largely left the students to their own devices on the assumption that if they were mature enough to enter **Reed** they were sufficiently mature to run their own affairs by their own lights. Finally, the coffee shop failed and the college picking up the responsibility for furnishing such a student facility in the Commons. Now the coffee shop occupied the largest fraction of the space in the basement of the student union building with the **Coop** occupying the balance. So, once again I commandeered this newly vacated space to the same passing outcries of the student council. The **Coop** now had the space to accommodate foreseeable growth in the library bookselling venture.

In about 1956, **Champoeg Press** was formed. I had, in seeking to understand as fully as possible the history of the book, become interested in all aspects of type design and book production. **Lloyd Reynolds**, one of the founders of the revival of fine handwriting, was on the **Reed** faculty. I approached him with the idea of forming a small group of like-minded graphics arts people from the Portland area with the intention of printing the occasional fine, limited edition of *Northwest Western Americana*. He was interested, so we gathered a group of seven, who said they were interested in such an undertaking — among them a book designer, a typographer, a pressman, a binder, an editor (from the **Reed** faculty), **Lloyd** and me. Again, I borrowed money from the college to purchase a used **Chandler & Price**, 15x18” press (the “finger-pincher”), several sets and fonts of Monotype type, paper, ink, binding board, etc. This equipment was set in place in **Reynolds** graphic arts studio. All except the editor set type. The pressman and I printed alternate evenings. We all collated and bound and I marketed the printing of about 300 copies.

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We sold out in about six months.

So I called a meeting to plan for the next book. No one wished to spend as much time as the first required but I wished to proceed. So, I asked the others to resign and after consultation with one of the great OP dealers of the mid-twentieth century, **David Magee**, I settled on **Lawton Kennedy**, a fine printer in San Francisco. The press brought out about fifteen books in editions of 500 to 1250. All won a variety of prizes for fine printing, etc. This venture put me in touch with a splendid group of OP dealers, collectors, first-rate bookmen, and special collections librarians. It contributed hugely to my understanding of the book and its critical role in the formation and maintenance of the culture. As some librarians will recall the **Abel Co.** Christmas keepsakes continued to reflect this relationship to limited editions and fine printing.

With the new avenue of bookselling venture initiated and various planks of infrastructure falling into place the pace of this tale soon accelerated greatly, beginning a trajectory that is still being traced. 🍄

Group Therapy — Screening of Donations?

by **Christine Fischer** (Head of Acquisitions, Jackson Library, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, PO Box 26170, Greensboro, NC 27402; Phone 336-256-1193; Fax 336-334-4731) <christine_fischer@uncg.edu>

GRIPE: Submitted by **David Ettinger** (International Affairs and Political Science Librarian, Gelman Library, and Assistant Professorial Lecturer, Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University)

In an attempt to streamline and expedite our gift book processing procedures, we are considering the possibility of doing some kind of preliminary screening or filtering of prospective donations. Does anyone have any experience doing this and, if so, what are the criteria you use?

RESPONSE: Submitted by **Helen Anderson** (Head, Collection Development, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester)

An endless source of pain and pleasure, the constant stream of incoming gift books can get out of control. Like **Mickey Mouse** in the **Walt Disney** rendition of the *Sorcerer's Apprentice*, we wish for a magic broom to keep things moving.

Let donors know up front what types of materials your library does not accept. Our list includes encyclopedias, magazines, and mildewed, or otherwise damaged books. At the same time, accept that no matter what you tell people, they will still donate these materials. Trust that your list will at least reduce the amount.

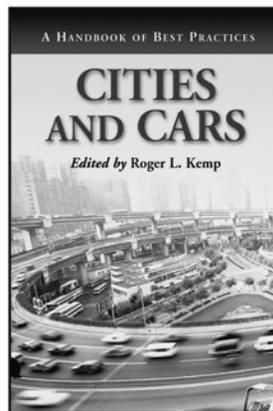
Work on just saying no if you don't think a gift will contain a substantial number of volumes that you'll add to your collections. Have a list of alternatives on hand such as donating to the **Friends of the Library** book sale. Accept that you will receive such collections anyway despite your best attempts to educate staff and

administrators on fielding inquiries. Sooner or later an influential person will clean out his or her office and the contents will appear on your doorstep, the chaff with the wheat.

Once a gift collection has arrived in the library, there are criteria that can be applied to immediately eliminate unsuitable volumes and reduce the amount that collection development specialists will have to review. This makes the entire process more manageable.

I start by focusing on the visually obvious: brittle volumes, mass market paperbacks, *Reader's Digest* condensed books, *Time-Life* series, book club editions and so on — all the things that I asked people not to donate plus more. Out they go. The next category is books in subject areas that I know we don't collect as well as those titles that we all know that appear again and again in gifts. All these go immediately to our **Friends** group for their sale, or to **Better World Books** or yes — I will say it — some even go to the trash!

My best recommendation is to assign the responsibility for reviewing incoming gifts to one person. The ability to review gifts efficiently can be learned through practice, though it helps if the person is curious and energetic to begin with. It also helps to be decisive. The trick is not to get bogged down. Train the person by having them work side by side with someone experienced and familiar with your collections and policies. The basic criteria will quickly become clear and over time he or she will learn the finer points of the process. In this way, you will develop the confidence that cannot be gotten from simply reviewing a list of criteria handed on from the last person on the job or



Cities and Cars

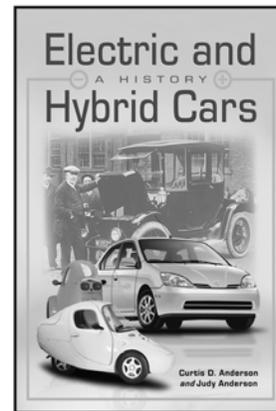
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RESPONSE: Submitted by **Danielle Kwock** (Library Manager, **Fresh Start Women's Foundation**, Phoenix, AZ)

I work in a non-profit special library. Our 9,000 item collection is comprised of women's self-help books and audiovisual materials. About 80-90% of our collection comes from donations. Since our scope is very narrow, we must thoroughly screen each donation to ensure that it supports our library's mission.

When I first began work at the library, I was amazed at how many donations came in. While I was grateful for the donations, most did not fit into our collection, so I had to come up with very clear parameters. First, all books must fit in to at least one of our 14 categories. These include Healthy Woman, Personal Growth, Women's Studies, etc. Second, the books must be in good physical condition, with no visible tears, stains, water damage, or binding problems. Third, books that have been published must have a publication date no earlier than five years from the current year. Books that are older must be very relevant or considered classics.

When potential donors call, we ask them specifically what kinds of books/audiovisual materials they are thinking about donating. We then explain to them our parameters and that any materials we cannot add to our collection will go in the "Book Exchange" pile or

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