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ATG Interviews Ron Maas

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"Rumors of Our Death Have Been Greatly Exaggerated"

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In a September 2003 *ATG* article, "Reference Publishing: The View from Middletown," this interviewer noted—more or less in passing—that "the **Libraries Unlimited** and **Oryx** imprints appear to be in the process of vanishing following a recent **Greenwood** reorganization." This was hardly the major point of the article, but, as I shortly learned, it was quickly noticed by at least one concerned reader. My source was none other than **Ron Maas**, General Manager of **Libraries Unlimited**. "You know, **Irv**," **Ron** said politely, "I just read your article in *ATG*, and it could give people the wrong impression. **Libraries Unlimited** isn't dead. On the contrary, we're very much alive, and we're growing." "Hmm," I said. "That's unfortunate. I like to get these things right. Would you like to tell me more?"

And so it was that on a blustery November day, I made my way to the home offices for **Greenwood Publishing Group** and **Libraries Unlimited** in beautiful—but pricey—Westport, Connecticut. After an unusually brief sign-in process (by post 9/11 standards), **Ron** appeared and gave me a quick tour of the physical plant, after which we settled down to work in his reasonably spacious but in no way ostentatious office.

ATG: So Ron, let's begin with Ron Maas. How did you get into publishing?

RM: Well, you might say it was sort of an accident. I hadn't planned on a publishing career. But then, I've only known one person who set out to become a publisher. Everyone else seems to have entered the business by accident.

ATG: Which is why it has been called "the accidental profession." So how, exactly, did your publishing career come about?

RM: Gradually, and the major factor was my love of books. I've always loved books and have enjoyed being surrounded by them. I was raised in Iowa, and I attended the **University of Northern Iowa** before transferring to the **University of Washington** in Seattle, where I completed my undergraduate study. While waiting for residency (and the lower tuition rate), I went to work for **Waldenbooks** in Seattle where I helped open and manage a number of their stores as part of their regional expansion. This was a terrific job for a college student who loved books. It was just a kick to be able to browse, read, and pore through listings and catalogs of 30,000+ books to select the 4,000 or so that we could stock in those days. This was before superstores and **Amazon**, of course. And I had a lot of freedom to choose. We did have a "core collection" that every **Walden** store was supposed to stock, but I got to choose a large proportion of the titles we carried. I was like a kid in a candy store.

ATG: And so at some point you moved from retailing books into publishing them?

RM: Yes, but it wasn't a direct route. My first job out of college wasn't in either a bookstore or publishing. It was a library position with the **King County Public Library** in Seattle.

ATG: And what did you do there?

RM: Two things. I drove a Bookmobile, once again surrounded by books, and I helped provide library services to disabled patrons. Most of these were people who could not easily travel to the library. So we brought the library to them. **King County Public Library** is a great organization, and it was a great job for a fresh out of college book lover, so much so that I seriously considered getting an **MLS**.

ATG: But you didn't?

RM: No. Instead, I took another book buyer position, this time with **Stacy's** bookstore in Palo Alto, California. This was in the early days of Silicon Valley, and I was the technical books buyer. This meant buying books for computer engineers, books with titles like "Z80 Assembly Language" and stuff like that. And that's what led me into publishing.

ATG: How so?

RM: Well, as a technical book buyer, one of the houses I had a lot of contact with was **Osborne/McGraw-Hill**. They recruited me, and I joined their marketing department. That's how I finally entered publishing.

ATG: So what happened after that? How did you get from Osborne/McGraw-Hill to Libraries Unlimited?

RM: There were a few more steps along the way. I spent about two years with **Osborne**, then moved to **Krames Communications**, owned by **Grolier** at that time, and then I moved to **Addison-Wesley's** West coast office in Menlo Park. Up to this point, I'd pretty much been on the marketing side. But after a year at **A-W**, I became General Manager of their teacher resource divisions. At **GM**, I was now responsible for editorial acquisitions as well as marketing, and found that I loved it. **A-W** was primarily a textbook publisher, of course, but our program was a bit different. The materials we published were all supplementary materials or professional books rather than textbooks. It was a very creative operation, we published some trend-setting materials, and I enjoyed it a great deal.

ATG: So why aren't you still there?

RM: **Pearson** purchased **Scott-Foresman** in the mid 90's, and sometime thereafter began consolidating operations and eventually merged my group with another division based on the east coast. I left **A-W** in 1995 to be-

come General Manager of a small, privately-owned, publishing house in Colorado called **Libraries Unlimited**.

ATG: Fascinating. So you joined Libraries Unlimited as General Manager, left for a position with Greenwood, and now you're again the General Manager of Libraries Unlimited, which seems to have followed you to Connecticut. What was it like to be at Libraries Unlimited in its Colorado days?

RM: Working at **Libraries Unlimited** was just a great experience. It was a wonderful, little company. We had a small staff of 25+ people and published 40-60 titles a year. As a small privately held company, capital was always a limiting factor, but it was just a great place to work.

ATG: Can you say a little more about the history of Libraries Unlimited? How was it started? By whom?

RM: **Libraries Unlimited** was founded in 1964 by **Bohdan S. Wynar**, who was, among other things, the former dean of the Library School at **Denver University**. **LU's** first, and still one of its best-known and most successful, titles is *Wynar's Introduction to Cataloging and Classification*, now in its 9th edition. **Bohdan** also launched and edited *American Reference Book Annual*, and *Recommended Reference Books for Small and Medium Sized Libraries and Media Centers*, both of which have become standard reference works.

In its early years, **LU** primarily published texts for the library school curriculum, with a particular emphasis on cataloging and reference. Over time, the program grew to include other textbooks and professional guides for librarians on topics like management and collection development. School librarianship became a third major focus in the 1980's, under a new Editor-in-Chief, **David Loertscher**. His strong interests in research and the role of the school librarian in the curriculum resulted in a number of highly successful titles, and these topics continue to be reflected in our current lists and publishing plans.

ATG: So how did a small, privately-held company like **LU** market its titles?

RM: As a small house with limited resources, **LU** had to be creative about marketing. We used all the usual tools including a lot of direct mail. However, the key to **LU's** marketing success was "word of mouth." The **LU** marketing effort was highly author-driven. We relied on our authors to help us identify meetings worth attending and to provide potentially useful mailing lists. Most important, we viewed every author presentation as a marketing op-

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portunity. We made a point of exhibiting at and attending as many conferences and meetings as possible. A lot of these were relatively small events, and LU would often be the only publisher present. This gave us a lot of visibility in the fields involved, and it was a great tool for recruiting authors. We were "out there among" the people to whom we were marketing and viewed by many as part of the community itself. LU's reliance on "word of mouth" was the most distinctive aspect of its marketing approach, and the results were often extraordinary.

ATG: *It sounds like an approach ideally suited to the markets for which LU was publishing, especially school librarians who can be tough to reach by conventional means.*

RM: That's right. School librarians can be elusive. They move around a lot, reliable mailing lists are hard to come by, and they're a diverse lot in terms of training and professional affiliations, which makes it hard to reach them in a cost-effective way. And reaching them in a cost-effective way is critical, because a lot of them also don't have a lot of money to spend on materials. But if you can get out there and talk to them, they're a great audience. They are particularly interested in professional books and services, and these were the type of books with which LU had the most success in the school library market.

ATG: *OK, so let's fast forward a bit. It's now early 2001. You've left Libraries Unlimited, and you're now Vice President for Business Development at Greenwood. Which means you're the merger and acquisition guy for a major commercial publisher. And at some point, you hear that Libraries Unlimited is available. Were you surprised?*

RM: Well, yes, a little bit anyhow. Nothing in this business is ever a total surprise, but I wasn't expecting a call about Libraries Unlimited. However, I think the explanation for the sale is pretty straightforward. Bohdan had already worked far past the normal retirement age, and he simply felt the time had come to sell. And Greenwood was one of the logical potential buyers. We had the money and the interest. It made sense to talk to us.

ATG: *So what was your reaction? And what was your role in the purchasing decision?*

RM: I was delighted. I saw this as a great opportunity, and I was very active in lobbying for this acquisition. The LU and Greenwood programs are highly complementary, and there is very little overlap. The Greenwood reference program's focus and area of strength was and is in materials for use by students and library patrons. Libraries Unlimited, on the other hand, publishes reference and professional materials for librarians themselves. There were only a handful of Greenwood titles that fell into this latter category, and we simply moved them over to the LU list after the acquisition. That's what I call a good fit.

ATG: *So Libraries Unlimited was a good fit for Greenwood, and Greenwood had the*

cash to make the deal. How did this decision fit into Greenwood's overall strategy?

RM: Very nicely. Greenwood is looking to grow, and growth by acquisition is by far the fastest way to increase your revenue base. Of course, you have to have the necessary capital, and Greenwood does.

ATG: *So there may be more acquisitions in Greenwood's future?*

RM: Good chance.

ATG: *OK, let's get back to Libraries Unlimited. The deal is done, LU is now part of Greenwood, and you're once again the General Manager of Libraries Unlimited. What are your objectives/plans for LU at this point? As you know, a lot of well-known publishing imprints have disappeared over the last few years after being sold. When the deal is announced, everyone says how happy they are, and the new owner declares his or her intention to grow the operation. Six months later the staff is gone, the imprint has been relegated to the corporate archives, and only the best selling titles remain...but with the new owner's imprint on the spine. Is this the future of Libraries Unlimited?*

RM: No, it most emphatically is not. Greenwood fully intends to grow the Libraries Unlimited program. In fact, we've already begun to do that, and are preserving a separate LU corporate structure with its own editorial staff, marketing resources, and Website.

ATG: *How about some numbers?*

RM: Well, as you know, I can't talk about dollars. But I can say something about the number of titles we are planning to publish. For example, last year Libraries Unlimited published 53 new and revised titles. This year—meaning calendar 2003—we will publish 70. And in 2004, we expect to increase again by about the same amount. In its privately-held days, LU typically published 30-60 new titles per year, so we are already above that level and planning to go higher.

The same is true, by the way, for Oryx, the other imprint mentioned in your ATG article. In 2001, Oryx published 26 new titles. In 2003, the tally was 40 new titles. And as of September, Oryx accounted for eight of the titles in the Greenwood top 20 list. So Oryx too is alive and well following the Greenwood acquisition. To be sure, there is no separate Oryx corporate structure as there is with Libraries Unlimited, but we are actively continuing to publish titles that came to us under the Oryx acquisition. So those rumors of the death of Oryx and Libraries Unlimited are greatly exaggerated.

ATG: *I take your point, and I apologize for contributing to those rumors. And I'm also glad to hear that the Oryx and Libraries Unlimited publishing programs are expanding. That's welcome news. More titles for Choice to review.*

So tell me a little more about Libraries Unlimited. How many acquisition editors do you have, and how do they operate?

RM: Well, we have 3-1/4 acquisition editors, and we have what we think is a very distinctive way of operating.

Sharon Coatney handles our school librarianship list, and acquires all our new titles in that area. Sharon is a former president of the American Association of School Librarians and was the chair of the School Library Media Standards Committee of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, which was charged with writing the national certification standards for school library media. In addition to her LU duties, she is currently a member of the PBS TeacherSource Advisory Group. With over 30 years of teaching and library experience, Sharon brings a wealth of practical knowledge to her work. She is based in Kansas.

Then there's Martin Dillon, who is well known from his long career at OCLC where he was, among other things, Director of the OCLC Institute, which provides educational and development opportunities for librarians and information professionals. Martin is currently the Follett Chair in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Dominican University in River Forest, Illinois. An LU consulting editor since 2001, he acquires all our academic library titles, including texts, and is also the Editor-in-Chief for *American Reference Books Annual (ARBA)*. It seems safe to say that he too is highly knowledgeable about the fields in which he publishes.

Last but not least is Barbara Ittner, who is based in Colorado, and who handles our adult services and public library titles. Barbara, who is also an author and librarian, has been with LU for a number of years in a wide variety of roles and is, among other things, currently a member of ALSC.

ATG: *This is a pretty impressive cast of characters, Ron. I'm not aware of very many other publishing houses whose acquisitions staffs have this kind of expertise. That's impressive, and I am intrigued by the geographically decentralized nature of the operation. But I'm also curious about one other thing. You said that LU has 3-1/4 acquisition editors. Who's the 1/4?*

RM: I'm afraid that would be me. While I don't have a lot of time for manuscript work, I do try to stay involved with the publishing program. These days I typically acquire five-six titles a year. It's one of the things I most enjoy doing. As General Manager, I just don't have a lot of time for it.

ATG: *So, you've got a talented, experienced, and decentralized acquisition editor team. That's great, but how exactly does LU go about acquiring new titles and finding new authors?*

RM: Well, when you have an acquisitions staff with this type of expertise and presence in the field, you know an awful lot about what's going on "out there." One result is that a lot of our new projects come to us as "shared ideas." That is, the project starts with an idea that one of our editors may have. The editor then taps his or her network, and in due course, finds someone qualified, willing, and able to take this idea and run with it. In due course, this leads to a proposal, a contract, and then a publication. It's a highly interactive process.

Of course, not all of our projects originate

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this way. Our editors, as knowledgeable as they are, don't have a monopoly on good ideas, so some projects just come to us in the usual fashion. The author has an idea, prepares a proposal, and then begins contacting publishers. But we like to think that chances are by the time you, the author, bring a project to us, we already know you, have a good idea what you're up to, and were probably the very first publisher you met. It's all a result of being part of the community for which you publish. And that's what we think is distinctive about **Libraries Unlimited**. We're publishers yes, but we're also part of the library community, and we intend to keep it that way.

ATG: *That sounds almost like a mission statement. Is it?*

RM: I guess you could say that. Certainly we do have a sense of mission here at **Libraries Unlimited**. Take the information literacy movement, for example. The idea of information literacy isn't really all that new. Librarians have always been active proponents of information literacy. Of course, it has a somewhat different meaning today than it did in the pre-digital world, but the basic concept has been around for a long time. It's just that now it's receiving a lot more emphasis.

As a result, we are also seeing an increased volume of new titles in information literacy at all levels, including many from **Libraries Unlimited**. And we're happy to be part of that effort. That's great, but the really important thing here, to me at least, is that I believe information literacy is not just something librarians value. It's a basic social skill, a core competency for citizenship. As I see it, anything we can do to help librarians promote information literacy is another step on the way to building a better society. What our society needs to be successful, what any society needs, are critical thinkers, people who can and do think independently. And that's what information literacy is all about—teaching people how to find and use reliable information.

The challenge today is training real thinkers, individuals who make decisions based on reliable information, which they independently find and evaluate, and who also know that this is not the same thing as a quick scan of the results of four **Google** searches. The question is whether we want a society full of thinkers or one full of people who do what they're told? Myself, I think we'll be better off with more thinkers. In fact, I think it's essential to our long-term survival. The challenge is finding a way to train more of them in today's environment. As I see it, we're getting better at it, but the technology is getting better faster than we are.

That worries me, and that's why I feel so strongly about this portion of our publishing program. When we publish in an area like information literacy, we are helping librarians perform a vital social mission. That's important to me, and I think it's important to my colleagues here at **LU** as well. We are publishers yes, but we are also citizens, and in this area, and in many others, we have a real

sense of shared mission with our authors and the library community generally.

ATG: *That's very interesting, Ron, and I'm glad to hear it. I'm one of those who believe that job satisfaction seldom comes from money, even when the money is so great that you'd assume it has to be a factor. The happiest people I know are all people who believe their work makes a positive social contribution. And so far as I can tell, you don't have to work for a philanthropic organization to have this kind of satisfaction. Heck, you don't even have to work for a nonprofit. You could, for example, work for a commercial publisher. Imagine that.*

RM: And I have to say that I am very happy working for **Libraries Unlimited**. **LU** is a great little company. For too many people, work is a fatiguing experience that uses up most of their energy. That's not my situation. I get energy from my work here.

ATG: *That's great. And now I'd like, if I might, to move to another subject, the one that was the focus of my earlier article—electronic reference. As you know, this is a big topic in publishing and library circles these days. What can you tell me about **LU's** electronic publishing plans?*

RM: Well, I guess that the short answer is that we are currently publishing a number of electronic titles, and plan to publish more in the future.

Our first electronic title, and our most important one thus far, is **ARBAonline**. This is a subscription product derived from the print version, and it currently includes the cumulative contents of the 1997 through 2003 print editions. Like the print edition, **ARBAonline's** reviews cover reference sources from more than 400 publishers in over 500 subject areas. Unlike the print edition, it is updated monthly. It is, we think, a great collection development tool.

It's also an excellent example of the payoff from the **Greenwood** acquisition. An online version of **ARBA** was something **Bohdan** always wanted to do but couldn't afford. Following the acquisition, we simply made it a priority and got it done.

I can't say a whole lot at this point about our future plans except that we have them. I am currently working with the textbook list, and one of my goals will be to identify titles and content that is suitable for a new customized textbook program. The goal here is to come up with a way to publish low priced custom text materials for the library and information science curriculum. Initially, these would be in print, but our plan is ultimately to make them available in electronic format as well. If successful, the program could well become a prototype for a similar program at **Greenwood**.

ATG: *Sounds like a potential example of publishing synergy, that much overused word. What about eBooks? Are you doing any of these?*

RM: **Greenwood** certainly is, and I've spent some time working on eBooks as part of an internal initiative at **Greenwood**. To date, we've licensed several hundred titles to **netLibrary**, **Baker and Taylor**, **Follett** and others, but are preparing to release a much larger collection in

the spring. By mid-2004 we plan to have a very large and robust collection of eBooks available through a number of different outlets. Obviously, I'm very enthused about the future of eBooks in libraries. I think that now that noise and hysteria of the dot-com phase is starting to fade, it's time for publishers to begin to explore and deliver the full benefits of eBooks and other online media.

ATG: *Which are?*

RM: We think there are several. They solve the multiple-user problem for example. With a print book, one copy equals one user. With an eBook, there's no limit to the number of potential users. For another, more eBooks mean more quality content available on the Web, and that's important when you're trying to build that society of critical thinkers we talked about earlier. And they're a great management tool for large collections—lots of content, minimal space, more user access. What's not to like?

ATG: *True, but there are some critics out there nonetheless, are there not?*

RM: Yes, there are, but I think many of them are missing the point. True, you cannot take an eBook with you to the bathtub, at least not right now. So what? Does that negate the benefits of eBooks? I don't think so. To me, it just means that print is superior for some uses. I don't have a problem with that.

ATG: *So how do you decide which titles to make available as eBooks? And what about the risk of cannibalizing print sales? Is that a factor in your decision?*

RM: I used to worry about cannibalization a lot, but I don't anymore. You're probably familiar with the **National Academy of Sciences Press** experience. As you know, they have for several years now simply made all of their new titles available on the Web for free, without any apparent negative impact on sales.

As far as the decision-making process goes, I can't see any reason not to do an eBook version of anything we publish, the sole exception being pure ready reference titles. I do still worry about cannibalization with that type of work. Also, we haven't yet released any simultaneous eBooks, but we'll be doing so shortly.

ATG: *So you're bullish on eBooks?*

RM: Yes, I am. Our eBook revenues have been modest to date, but our costs have been minimal, we haven't seen any negative results, and this is where the market is going...just a bit more slowly than many of the initial predictions.

ATG: *So what can you tell us about the future of **Libraries Unlimited** over, say the next three to five years?*

RM: Well, we're going to be here, and we're going to grow the program. We'll be continuing to increase the number of new titles. We'll be adding more electronic products, which will probably be subscription-based. We hope to get into online course development for the library and information science curriculum, and we'll definitely be expanding our professional development list. Now that capital is no longer a limiting factor, we're able to do more, and we will.

ATG: *That sounds like it will keep you busy for a while, Ron. Thanks for your time, and good luck.* 🐼