

April 2012

Oregon Trails -- The Ego and I

Thomas W. Leonhardt
oskibear70@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Leonhardt, Thomas W. (2012) "Oregon Trails -- The Ego and I," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 24: Iss. 2, Article 37.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6156>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

definition must be swift, imprecise, and in many cases ultimately unproductive for the prospective employer. Pedantic HR staff rush through checklists and discard those resumes and cover letters absent the most obvious qualifications. Politically correct criteria are invoked in an often naïve attempt to atone for the wrongs of the past and summarily disqualify candidates — based on revised but no less discriminatory standards.

3. Some in the library world fail to understand the value of vendor experience. This strikes me as odd because so much of acquisitions work is learned on the job and in interacting with publishers and vendors, and yet I've encountered this view more than once. Everyone benefits from a better understanding of the practices and culture of the other's world.

It is also curious to me that some in the library world (and indeed a few of my instructors in my LIS experience) view the vendor community with some suspicion, as though to be affiliated with a commercial enterprise is to somehow be tainted. This view is both simplistic and wrongheaded. With the exception of only one, now rather dated, example of a company whose business practices caused

libraries grief, this industry is remarkably absent graft and corruption.

My admittedly limited experience suggests libraries and vendors are, in fact, more alike than different. Any assembly of people engaged in some collective activity inevitably develops an organizational culture. I've been in more than one library where the workplace climate is both immediately evident and highly toxic. Conversely, not all vendors represent engines of brutal efficiency and highly-calculated, precise economic performance. Prior to the abolition of the Net Book Agreement in the UK (which, in effect, forbid discounting books and thereby guaranteed a solid profit margin for booksellers), **Blackwell's** was an example of an overstaffed, bumbling, and somewhat paternalistic organization, but not one that could be characterized in any way as predatory. (A former colleague was fond of referring to the company as the "Bertie Wooster of the British book trade.")

Instead, in my view people bring what they can and will to their jobs, be it enthusiasm, innovation, weariness, self-absorption, energy, or laziness. The climate and culture they encounter may inspire growth and change. If the work environment is too weak or unfocused it may exert no influence at all. If it's really bad it can exacerbate the worst in people.

Whether it's a casualty of my transit of middle age (i.e., can't remember much of anything anymore) or a genuinely accurate perception of our world, I can't say — but my

sense of libraries and vendors is that, on the whole, we're collections of people trying to do good work. To hearken back to my fellow **Kent State** students, these people bring an enormous amount of creativity, knowledge, and sheer eagerness to the table. I will be deeply saddened if this is wasted, whether it's because of a poor economy, badly defined institutional priorities, or inept hiring practices. They and we all deserve far more.

Will it all work out? I can't say. I just returned from a couple of weeks in Germany, and up until this trip I thought all the drama surrounding the debt crisis and the threat to the euro was hyperbole. After **Cameron's** veto and the subsequent response throughout Europe I am compelled to revise my thinking, and consider what might happen if the Eurozone collapses. The consequences for the economies of many countries will be devastating, and the support for and opportunities offered by libraries will be severely jeopardized.

I'm more fortunate than many: I have a job, and I've had several offers from the vendor world as well as libraries. I have the relative luxury of being able to wait for the right position, instead of accepting the first (only?) opportunity. Others aren't so lucky. My advice to prospective employers is this: take a little more time. Be a bit more creative in your thinking. Look beyond the two-dimensional description provided in response to your position announcement, and approach your pool with a more open mind. You'll likely get a better hire. 🐾

Oregon Trails — The Ego and I

Column Editor: **Thomas W. Leonhardt** (Retired, Eugene, OR 97404) <oskibear70@gmail.com>

For those who read my last column, you must be reminded of the trailers at the end of each episode of "Arrested Development" where **Ron Howard** tells viewers what to expect in the next show except that those events never transpire. I promised more stories of book sellers I have known but it is that time of year again when *Foreword Magazine* ships boxes of books to volunteer readers, so I have been busy reading in two categories, Autobiography/Memoir and Essays.

As I read, I ask myself, what makes a good memoir? How does a good essay differ from a poor essay and what are some of the elements of each? I have enjoyed several of the books even though I didn't think that they deserved one of the top three ratings or even an honorable mention. Others offended me. There is no other word to describe my negative reaction to them. Some of the writing was technically competent, some was hackneyed and awkward. I used to hate it when a professor scribbled that "Awkward" next to something that I had written. Awkward? How? What

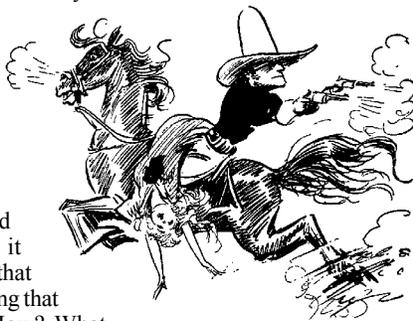
should or could I have written? But now I understand that sometimes a phrase is awkward and there is nothing more to be said. It is up to the writer to mull it over and come up with something better. That is what a good editor does. A good editor questions and challenges a writer to reconsider and rewrite or excise a word, a passage, a paragraph, or an entire section. It has happened. Just ask **Thomas Wolfe**, **James Jones**, or many another writer who had something to say and knew how to say it but sometimes had trouble knowing what to cut. When does less mean more?

When writing book reviews, you have an obligation to explain in as much detail and clarity as you can what you like or don't like and why. It is not enough, despite the current atmosphere of blogging and television journalism, to simply discard a piece of writing. Everyone is an expert in today's atmosphere of non-stop communication, but no one

seems to have any cognitive authority, an authority based on education, knowledge, and background. Opinions are woven with opinion, hearsay, envy, rancor, deep-seated emotional feelings, and ideologies. If I don't agree with you, you must be at fault, but nuanced discussion of differences and resources seem nonexistent. We don't have time to listen respectfully to informed discourse that is backed up by facts. Presidential hopefuls are paraded as debaters but who appear as naked emperors in a forum meant to win points on spin, draw laughs with vapid jokes, and destroy opponents through *ad hominem* attacks. We deserve better, and authors, no matter how awful I might regard their books, deserve a reasoned decision before they are relegated to the bottom of the pile.

When reading essays, especially personal essays, and autobiographies and memoirs, it is important to separate one's personal feelings about topics and judge the writing on style and substance. Both must be present to deserve a top three ranking, and substance is to be preferred over style. Having nothing to say but saying it well reminds me of the graduate student explaining in great detail courses, theories, and favorite professors. In fact, one

continued on page 37



The Acquisitions Institute at Timberline Lodge

May 19-22, 2012



www.acquisitionsinstitute.org

Oregon Trails from page 36

of the memoirs that I read contained much about the author's classes (they were dance classes but still boring), her dorm room, and her roommate. It didn't help that her roommate was **Madonna Ciccone**, a fellow dance major at the **University of Michigan**.

In too many instances, the writing has been mechanically competent but flat and lifeless. Most lives are boring, so there must be more to a successful memoir than a laundry list of one's achievements even if they are worthy of mention.

But nineteen of the autobiographies/memoirs that I read for Book of the Year consideration were not about famous people, and, of the two with some degree of renown, one seemed to have cataloged every event in his life from birth until well into his eighties (he is still alive). I have no doubt that it is an important book from the standpoint of his stature in the music world. His career covered many decades, and he worked with some of the most talented people in the world. But the sheer detail at such length wears one out, and it becomes necessary to skim through the work looking for the interesting parts.

My number one choice was a memoir by a poet and painter who tells of her years in Brazil as the wife of the Canadian ambassador. Even

when she describes a boring cocktail party, it sounds interesting. She lovingly describes people, plants, animals, the hired help, the Brazilian cities, customs, art, architecture, poetry, and food. The oppressive heat and mosquitoes are so vividly described, I found myself eager to go to Brazil, ready to change clothes several times a day when in the hot, humid states during spring and summer.

My second choice was about growing up in New Orleans in the 1950s and 1960s as the son of two wealthy eccentrics, one of whom was **Ruth of Ruth's Chris Steakhouse**. The author is telling his story, but mostly it is through his parents, their activities, and the city of New Orleans. As with the woman in Brazil, I had a longing to be a part of that New Orleans culture that can also be found in *A Confederacy of Dunces*.

The third-place book was about growing up Italian in America, and, as with the others, the author tells of her life not as a litany of her accomplishments and activities in a vacuum but as part of a large Italian family that was assimilating into the American culture while being rooted in centuries-old customs brought from the old country.

These successes were personal stories but told within a social context and with reflection and insight. They had something to say and found an elegant way to say it.

Personal essays can fail for the same reasons

memoirs fail. Yes, you love your children but do we need to know what kind of cereal they had for breakfast or that they had breakfast at all? Some things are universal, and breakfast, at least on the Upper Westside of Manhattan, is a given. The essayist I am thinking of would have benefited, too, by some close and sensitive editing. A lesson to be learned for personal essayists is that less is often more, and more is often excessive and tiring.

Another essayist writes about her time working on ranches in west Texas. Ranching is a hard life, but she never says so; she tells us so in loving detail but not wordy detail. She never comes right out and says, "Death is a constant in ranch life." Instead, she pens small vignettes in which things go wrong, animals die, and people get hurt. She conveys this without preaching. Her essays and vignettes describe life and death on the ranch and on the prairie, but we are never told what to feel. She touches our feelings through her choice of words and events. It is often what she holds out of the story that grabs our attention and illuminates the story at hand.

Good writers learn to excise passages, no matter how well-written, that do not advance their story, no matter how beautiful the prose sounds. Mechanically competent prose will not overcome a lack of substance and boring remains boring no matter how grammatical. 🐾