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ATG Interviews Leslie Mackenzie

Publisher of Grey House Publishing

by Tom Gilson (Associate Editor, *Against the Grain*) <gilson@cofc.edu>

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

ATG: What motivated you and Richard Gottlieb to found Grey House Publishing? Did you have prior experience in the industry that led you to believe there was a need that you could fill? What was that need? Were libraries a primary market from the beginning? And where did the distinctive name “Grey House” come from?

LM: When Dick and I met, I was a copywriter at Scholastic. He had dropped out of corporate life, having run the Macmillan Library Services group for six years. He then spent two years skiing in Stowe and occasionally doing publishing/consulting work. His consultancy was called Grey Cottage Associates, which evolved into Grey House Publishing as time went on. GHP’s first publication, the *Directory of Mail Order Catalogs* (1981) was always intended to have a dual library and professional markets, as did most of the directories that followed.

ATG: When was Grey House Publishing founded? How many employees did you have to start with? What was the publishing landscape like then? How many reference-type books were being published every year?

LM: Grey House was founded in 1980, in the freight elevator lobby of a friend’s office space. Staff consisted of Dick and an assistant. For the *Directory of Mail Order Catalogs*, he recruited a temp team of out-of-work actors/graduate students and free lancers. The reference publishing/library marketplace was enormously vital, led by Macmillan, Scribner’s, OUP, and Gale. Unfortunately I don’t have any numbers on the quantities.

ATG: What was the connection between Grey House, and its *Directory of Mail Order Catalogs*, and *Facts-on-File*?

LM: The first edition of the work (1981) had two versions, a hardcover edition which *Facts-on-File* marketed to the libraries, and a paperback edition which Grey House marketed to the industry. We printed the work and *Facts-on-File* advanced monies for their inventory. This helped us “bootstrap” the startup. Many thanks are owed the late Ed Knappman and Marty Greenwald, of *Facts-on-File*. *Facts-on-File* was not involved in subsequent editions.

ATG: Starting with that one title “The *Directory of Mail Order Catalogs*” in 1981, Grey House now counts in its catalog numerous directories, reference works and online databases. What are the key factors that led to this impressive growth? What were the biggest challenges/risks you faced? How did you deal with them? If you had the chance, what would you do differently?



LM: Grey House is one of a handful of reference publishers started by entrepreneurs in the last thirty years. It’s a tough publishing sector with heavy, upfront, investment costs. Probably our biggest challenge over the years has been absence of investment capital. There have been some terrific opportunities that we passed on for that reason.

But we did see an opportunity to develop and/or acquire important vertical industry resources that have become leading information tools. Largely because we couldn’t afford to license major database products, and pay for the IT support that would be required, we built our own software. And as each product was developed or acquired, it was rolled into our proprietary platform. All the directories are now available on our GOLD (Grey House Online Databases) online offering.

We could not have done it without the support of our two senior Editorial and Marketing managers, Laura Mars and Jessica Moody, both of whom have been with us for over fifteen years.

In 1998 we acquired three general reference titles from Gale and published new editions. They included *Value of a Dollar*, *Research Service Directory*, and *Older Americans Information Directory*. All three were successful and led us to develop, and acquire, additional new titles aimed at the high school, public and academic libraries. Our reference products are available as eBooks through almost all of the leading eBook vendors.

ATG: Do any of your reference publishing partners contribute titles to GOLD (Grey House Online Databases)?

LM: No, the GOLD platform is devoted to Grey House products.

ATG: Grey House has a record of developing and adding successful new product lines. Is there a specific strategy that guides your efforts when you are considering bringing a new product to market?

LM: Small companies don’t spend a lot of time on strategies. We are always looking for information needs that are unfilled or filled inadequately. Input and feedback from our librarian customers have been critical in the development of some of our product launches. It’s worked so far.

ATG: Grey House has a number of publishing partnerships, most recently with EBSCO’s Salem Press and H.W. Wilson. How do those partnerships work? What is Grey House’s commitment in these arrangements? What is the EBSCO commitment?

LM: Last year EBSCO was reviewing the Salem and Wilson “print” publishing activity, while continuing to maintain the ongoing electronic products. We learned of this, contacted EBSCO, and with a lot of urgency and good will, both sides negotiated a “license” agreement, whereby Grey House became the “print” publisher for both lines.

EBSCO continues to produce and market Wilson electronic content, and simultaneously feeds that content to Grey House for the Wilson print product line.

This fall EBSCO is producing a number of new products for Salem. Grey House, with EBSCO’s oversight, can also fund and publish new works and new editions in the Salem line. Grey House’s first efforts with the Salem imprint will also be published this fall. All Salem print products come with access to a free online version. That will continue.

ATG: Why partner instead of acquire? Is it purely a financial decision?

LM: Broadly speaking, it’s not our decision. It’s our partner’s choice to either divest a product line or retain it. Most frequently they maintain the editorial and electronic rights and license the print to us.

ATG: Are there any new partnerships in the offing that you can tell us about? We’d love to break the news to our readers.

LM: Dick has a number of potential transactions on his “deal” board. I know ATG is always on his “announcement” distribution list.

ATG: Most of these partnerships seem to involve Grey House publishing only print editions. How is that a winning strategy in this age of digital information? Do you make any of your partners’ resources available online?

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LM: It varies from transaction to transaction. Right now we have three different models. In one case, all we have is print rights, no sales access to the online. In another, we helped build a better online model and sell both print and electronic, with the electronic sales now representing close to thirty percent of revenues. And in the third, we have rights to sell eBook and online versions of specific titles, but not the entire database.

ATG: *You do seem committed to online editions of your own directories via GOLD (Grey House Online Databases), and many of your reference books are available from eBook vendors. When did you start making your directories and reference works available digitally? Are they all available via mobile devices?*

LM: Our first title, the *Directory of Mail Order Catalogs*, was picked up by **Dialog** in the early '80s. And we have always sold subsets of the directory records to industry buyers. Our own launch of our online database products was in 2005. And **Gale Virtual Reference Library** was the first major eBook vendor of our reference titles and remains the most successful.

Grey House Publishing Canada's directory products, the most important reference tools in Canada (including the 166-year-old *Canadian Almanac*), are available via our **CIRC (Canadian Information Resource Center)** product, and have a significant electronic revenue component. The **CIRC** content is available on mobile devices.

ATG: *How has the digital age changed your approach to reference publishing?*

LM: It hasn't.

ATG: *As we move into this digital environment some publishers have expressed concerns about piracy. Has Grey House experienced problems with online editions of your resources appearing on piracy sites?*

against the grain

publisher profile



Grey House Publishing

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OFFICERS: **Richard Gottlieb**, President; **Leslie MacKenzie**, Publisher.

AFFILIATED IMPRINTS: Grey House; Salem Press; H.W. Wilson; Universal Reference; Bowker; Sedgwick Press; Street Rating Guides; Weiss Rating Guides; Grey House Publishing Canada.

KEY PRODUCTS AND SERVICES: Industry Directories and Databases; General Reference; Health and Education, Statistics and Demographics; and Online Databases.

CORE MARKETS/CLIENTELE: High School/Public/Academic Libraries; Vertical Industry Segments.

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 70

NUMBER OF BOOKS PUBLISHED ANNUALLY: 70

HISTORY AND BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF YOUR COMPANY/PUBLISHING PROGRAM: See accompanying interview with **Grey House** publisher, **Leslie MacKenzie**. 🌿

LM: We have not seen any egregious examples of piracy of our IP. If any of your readers come across it, please let us know.

ATG: *Is there a sustainable product mix that includes print and digital for a reference publisher like Grey House? Or will digital products become the dominant provider of income stream? If so, how is Grey House preparing for it? If not, what makes you think there is a future for print?*

LM: Our business model is based on print. If there is a secondary electronic revenue stream, God Bless. **Wikipedia** and **Google** have effectively destroyed the general encyclopedia market (a moment of silence for the late and lamented **Brockhaus**, the wonderful German print encyclopedia.). But there is still a substantial market and opportunity for tightly focused, in-depth, high-quality, print reference works, with an electronic component.

ATG: *With all that is going on at Grey House how do you make time to relax? And when you do, how do you spend your time? Do you have any favorite activities or any special interests?*

LM: In our spare time we raised three children — now young adults, and restored a 1780 home. I've sat on a number of Town and Charitable Boards. I still enjoy running and gardening. **Dick** spent twenty years as a volunteer fire department paramedic (ret'd), and is currently a Town Constable and Justice of the Peace (there is a librarian discount on weddings).

ATG: *We wish we had more time to talk. We've really enjoyed our conversation and have learned a lot. Thanks for making room in your schedule to speak with us.*

LM: Thanks a lot. It's been fun. 🌿

on in my collecting career. I have to have an interest in the contents and go for looks and the completion of sets. For my 21st birthday somebody gave me a partial set of miniature volumes of **Shakespeare**. Originally issued on a weekly basis with a newspaper this set, in its own bookcase, took me about 15 years to complete, and now I am working on a second incomplete set in a different binding. I used to stick to a price limit, but nowadays I push myself higher if I see something I really like, and prices have also gone up considerably. I also buy newly-published small books if they are attractive enough, but for the most

part I avoid religious works, dictionaries and the like, which are frequently produced in small sizes. My favourites vary, but last year I enjoyed the *Olympic Oath*, which I have in a really tiny version. I have a lovely miniature book bound in white vellum called *Minibibliophilia* which describes some of the books I have, and others I aspire to collect. Most of my collection is 19th or 20th century. Sometimes I weed the collection by size!

ATG: *How would you advise someone interested in starting their own miniature book collection? Are there specific publications they should read or Websites they should explore?*

EAC: Haunting secondhand bookshops used to be the order of the day, but if you don't

want to stir from your desktop I suppose you could collect online, but really it's not the same. There is a *Miniature Book Society*, but I am not a member. I recommend looking at **Louis Bondy's** *Miniature books for a start*. **Bondy** was a specialist book dealer who I was lucky enough to meet many years ago, and his book is still useful. More recently you could look at the exhibition catalogue from the *Grolier Club* called *Miniature Books: 4,000 Years of Tiny Treasures*. Looks like there will always be scope for me to collect.

ATG: *Thank you so much for talking to us today. We enjoyed it and really learned a lot.*

EAC: Thank you, it's been a pleasure. 🌿