The Scholarly Publishing Scene: Heavy Lifting Out in the Cold

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I was a judge again for the 39th annual PROSE Awards (www.proseawards.com), which is sponsored by the Professional and Scholarly Publishing Division (PSP) of the Association of American Publishers (AAP). Judging took place on January 7-8 in the AAP’s New York offices. Winners were announced on February 5 at a luncheon held during the PSP’s annual conference at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Washington, DC. (As I write this column in mid-January, I am not permitted to divulge the award winners, which will be known to the world by the time you’re reading this issue of Against the Grain.)

Back in the 1980s, while I was running scientific and technical publishing at Wiley, I chaired the PSP awards program. For the better part of the past two decades, I’ve been the judge responsible for the math and hard science categories, including chemistry and physics, astronomy and cosmology, earth science, and environmental science. I’m also the lead judge in the popular science and math category. What being the lead judge means is that I’m the one who recommends to the rest of the judges which title should be the winner and which titles should take honorable mention in any of the categories for which I’m responsible. (I wrote about the judging process in this column a year ago.)

Electronic products, journals and, of course, books are all eligible for the competition. What that means is that during the month of November and part of December, Kate Kolendo, the estimable PROSE Awards staffer, ships many cartons of books to my home in Upstate New York.

Much to my lanky wife Arlene’s displeasure, the books reside in my study in piles that grow taller as the days grow shorter. This situation came to a head this past fall when I took on the category of multi-volume science reference works. The sheer number of books got out of hand. In fact, Arlene, rather imperiously, I thought, put her foot down as soon as I started lugging through the house the first set of these multi-volume reference works I received. I’d asked Kate to break up the shipments of the sets, so day after day I would find near the front door a stack of five or six cartons that I had to carry and dump in the garage, which became my default location for judging the entries in this category. As a result, a considerable portion of our garage floor became covered with cartons of large and very heavy sets of scientific tomes.

Now the PROSE Awards team, led by John Jenkins, Founder & CEO of Law Street Media and a great showman, make a great to-do about the number of entries that publishers — commercial STM houses and university presses mainly, with trade houses now eligible — submit. The overall number has been growing every year. Kate doesn’t remember whether there were more sets this year than last. No matter: there were more than enough for me — sixteen sets, depending on how I was counting — comprised of over 80 heavy volumes. Did I already say these books were heavy? Well, pardon me. You try schlepping them in the Upstate November cold. Or even one volume at a time in a warm, dry library. It’s yet another reason you appreciate having these books available over the Internet, where you can get at the contents with your fingertips. Anyway, here’s something that might get your attention: the combined list price for the sets was over $33,000 — equivalent to...
Optimizing Library Services — Location, Location, Location ... Libraries Offer Prime Community Spaces

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In Fall 2014, I, along with Shelley Rodrigo, and Mary Beth Pennington from Old Dominion University, hosted a community writing workshop on campus at Elizabeth City State University (ECSU). Originally, our idea was to have an open concept time and space for individuals from different institutions, and just around the community, to come together for a specified period of time solely to work on writing projects. This would not be a formal gathering, or an organized workshop or discussion. Instead, it would be what all individuals with a writing project need: time, space, quiet, and support. In our original promotion shared with faculty, staff, and students at different institutions, as well as community members, I stated that I would be available to talk about writing projects with anyone that wanted a sounding board. However, most of the time would be spent quietly, and individually, tackling our writing projects.

Since we wanted this idea to be so broad and inviting, we thought that it would be best suited for a community space — something not affiliated with one of our institutions. But, as a new venture, we had little time, uncertainty of interest, and zero budget. We discussed community gathering spaces that we could plead with to waive a rental fee. We discussed just taking over a coffee shop or a Panera, but decided against it since we didn’t know how many people we would have. We discussed a community library space, but found that became too problematic due to their limited hours on a weekend. Finally, we decided that ECSU’s campus provided a good venue, and a central location for the invitations sent to individuals and institutions in southeastern Virginia and eastern North Carolina. Although I would have had access and approval to use my campus classroom and office building to hold this workshop, it lacked a central space that was sufficient for this purpose: close enough that individuals could find one another and talk if need be, but not a small enough space so that we are all sitting together at a table to work on our projects. Instead, we decided that ECSU’s G.R. Little Library would provide a good space for this purpose, and give writers access to library materials should they want to utilize any of them in the time that they were there.

The library space turned out to be an incredibly productive location for the writers who attended this workshop. The workshop was scheduled for a Saturday, and just a few weeks before the workshop, ECSU announced that the library would be closed on the weekend because of budget cuts. The workshop was still held, but because it was otherwise closed, it was a quiet and focused area for writers. Some writers chose tucked away nook-like desks to record their ideas. Others used the couches, and lounged as they wrote and reflected. Others, myself included, staked out a large table where I could spread out all of the items in my travel work kit: notes, resources, laptop, coffee, and water bottle. We were close enough that someone could find me if they had a question about the space or the resources, but separate enough that we were all able to identify a place where we felt the most comfortable and productive. And the possibilities of libraries as tremendous assets for community space came to light.