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# The Business of Academic Bookselling . . . and Buying

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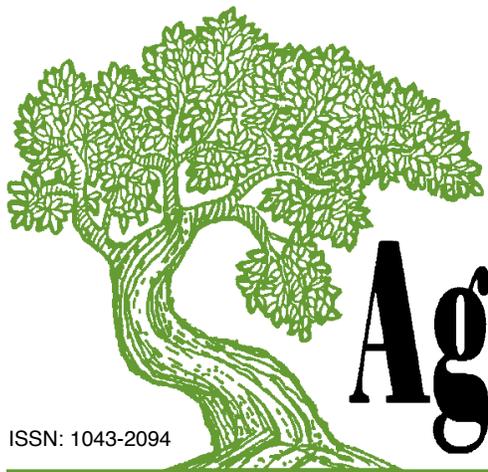
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# Against the Grain

“Linking Publishers, Vendors and Librarians”

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## The Business of Academic Bookselling ... and Buying

by **Bob Nardini** (Vice President, Library Services, ProQuest Books) <bob.nardini@proquest.com>

Nothing makes you feel smarter than being invited to write an encyclopedia article. So I felt awfully smart while writing the entry for “Approval Plans” in the *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, which **CRC Press** brought out back in 2003. That was the second edition of a venerable work that had first come out in 1968. And then last year, when asked to revise my entry for the third edition (still forthcoming), I felt smart again.

Until I re-read what I’d written that first time. Can you retract an encyclopedia article? Probably not. Too bad for me, since some of what I’d said didn’t belong in any encyclopedia. Most of what I wrote was fine, and some of it, to tell the truth, I enjoyed reading back to myself. “An approval plan is an acquisitions method under which a library receives regular shipments of new titles,” I began, a

good enough start, nothing to be ashamed of there. Maybe I should have quit while ahead. Instead, I concluded with a section called, “The Future of Approval Plans.” That’s where I ran into trouble.

Approval plans would spread to overseas libraries, I predicted. Small libraries would begin to use approval plans. Why not? Approval plans were already, for many libraries, “the centerpiece for the collection of monographs.” Didn’t happen, either prediction. Many libraries who’d had one, in fact, had trimmed or even done away with their approval plans. eBooks were not doing well at the time, but I did mention them at least. And

likewise, I mentioned teaching faculty in one sentence and users more generally in another, devoted a couple of sentences to metadata, and followed that by referring in a vague way to “the immediacy of

data” together with “efficiency” a little further on in another sentence.

So, I wasn’t completely off base. But how would I know that the world of academic bookselling was about to change radically, and that the new centerpiece would be usage? That eBook aggregators would arise, first to challenge book vendors and then to merge with them in part so as to be more able to compete and cooperate, simultaneously, with publishers and with one another? That so many publishers would merge as well, that some publishers would become aggregators, and that all would be challenged to attract readers, let alone buyers, for the parallel streams of new books in two formats (or more) that they continued to release in great number? That academic libraries would start to use terms like ROI and become as businesslike as the businesses that served them? That academic librarians would

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## If Rumors Were Horses

March and April have been busy! Even though it’s hard to have anything new to say these days with the Internet so pervasive, there is some big news in our industry. I hope you are keeping up with the **ATG NewsChannel** posts which **Tom Gilson** crafts so thoroughly every week. Also, **Erin Gallagher** from **Rollins College** keeps us up-to-date weekly with her Hot Topics! [www.against-the-grain.com](http://www.against-the-grain.com)



Rita and Willie Ricketts with their grandchildren.

**YBP** has bought **Ambassador Book Services**’ library customers. Your **YBP** representative will be in touch shortly to assist with the transition if not already. <https://www.ebsco.com/promo/ambassador-book-services>

Moving right along, **Follett**, the family-owned bookseller, has acquired **Baker & Taylor**. Reportedly this will boost sales by almost 40 percent and strengthen **Follett**’s presence in a number of markets, from public libraries to foreign countries. Terms of the sale were not disclosed. <http://www.4-traders.com/BARNES-NOBLE-INC-11858/news/Barnes-Noble-Blockbuster-book-deal-Follett-buys-Baker-Taylor-22193388/>

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become much more attentive to their users than to their book collections? And that those books would, as often as not, be seen as a problem as much as an asset?

Approval plans are all about buying books on the chance they might be used. They continue to make sense for libraries with the mission, and corresponding budget, to build research collections. Fewer and fewer libraries, however, can claim that mission, or count on that budget. Instead, the same profiles that fueled approval plans are now the engines beneath the hood for Demand-Driven Acquisition (DDA) programs, generating MARC files under subject and other parameters that can provide patron access to more books than approval plans ever did. Or, many of these same profiles have been retooled for approval plans where no books are bought until a librarian has first reviewed and authorized them online on their vendor's interface, almost like a firm order. How many new books — and which ones, and under what conditions — will academic libraries buy without good evidence their patrons will discover and then open them? Those are the questions faced today by everyone in the business of academic books.

This issue of *Against the Grain* isn't about approval plans. Approval plans, for the past thirty years or so, have simply been my own usual vantage point on the academic book business. In fact the five contributors to this issue, from their own vantage points — three librarians, a publisher, and a consultant — barely mention approval plans. Just a few years ago that wouldn't have been the case. It's a telling sign — as if we needed another — that the business of publishing, aggregating, selling, and buying academic books is going through tectonic change, but at electronic speed.

Among the ways I've been fortunate in my career is that I began it by working for about fifteen years as a book vendor colleague of **Rick Lugg**. Now I'm fortunate once more that **Rick** agreed to write for this issue, since he and his wife **Ruth Fischer** have been as responsible as any individuals I can think of for a healthy portion of that change. When they founded **Sustainable Collection Services** in 2011, their earlier experience as library workflow consultants had revealed to them that academic

libraries held too many print books that rarely circulated, or didn't circulate at all. They built their new business on that insight, and in his *Against the Grain* contribution, **Rick** first provides a recap of how the academic book-selling business has evolved since the 1980s, and then presents data on book circulation that can't be ignored. **SCS**, now a part of **OCLC**, is an example, as **Rick** puts it, of "what the next generation of vendor intermediary might look like," companies who bring analytics to bear on the books and other resources that publishers produce and that libraries buy.

But today's libraries don't simply "buy resources." Librarians realize that another factor that can't be ignored in the market is the purchasing power they have. When academic librarians speak up, publishers, vendors, and aggregators are wise to listen. **Stephanie Church**, of **Case Western Reserve University**, is a librarian with a lot to say. What she says is that assessment is "no longer a buzzword" for academic libraries. A library's importance to a university is no longer assumed. Libraries must prove it, and usage data is one of the ways to "strengthen the story." **Stephanie** also has things to say about print and eBook preferences; DDA, eBook pricing models, DRM policies, and user authentication hurdles; and other questions too. Readers will be thankful that **Stephanie** has chosen to speak up in this issue of *Against the Grain*.

What if DDA went away? While the model has become widespread among academic libraries, one major aggregator has questioned the logic behind DDA.<sup>1</sup> Publishers have recently pulled back or have changed their terms. **Wake Forest University's** library provides "an all-you-can-eat smorgasbord" of books through a large DDA program. **WFU's Carol Cramer** conducts a "thought experiment" in this issue, to find that even with less generous pricing and terms for DDA and Short-Term Loan, "DDA remains by far the most efficient models for an institution like ours." What would **Carol** do if the DDA model was in fact suppressed? To find out, just read her *Against the Grain* contribution.

Librarians aren't the only ones who need to justify how their budgets are spent. Scholarly publishers, according to **Routledge's Alan Jarvis**, "have to rethink their approach to deciding whether individual book projects are worth pursuing." In his wide-ranging *Against the Grain* contribution, **Alan** rethinks just

about every aspect of academic book publishing: total output, consolidation, the long tail, pricing, publishing models, eBook business models, open access, non-library markets, discovery, DRM, analytics, and more. Read it and you will feel like you've taken a short course in today's academic book publishing business.

If **Mark Sandler** had been a baseball player and not a librarian, right about now his number would be retired, a monument erected in the outfield, he'd be shaking hands in a home plate ceremony, and soon, would be on his way to Cooperstown. Instead, **Mark** is retiring as Director, Center for Library Initiatives, at the **Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC)**, a position he held for some ten years, apprenticed with for twenty years working in Collections at the **University of Michigan**. Among **Mark's** grand slams were his roles in **Google's** digitization projects, in the Text Creation Partnership, in shared print, in government documents digitization. I could go on, but best to stop and simply say that anyone who has ever heard **Mark** speak, or read something he's written, knows that they are in for some laughs that won't diminish the thoughtfulness of his contribution. What **Mark** is thinking about in this issue of *Against the Grain* is the future of the book itself in academic life. On that topic, let's just say that **Mark** isn't sanguine. He says a lot more than that, as well, and all of us with our hand in that book culture as it exists today would best pay attention.

All of us in the business of academic book-selling might prefer that things were different — the book unthreatened, library collections revered and not questioned, usage one of those "nice to haves," budgets strong, approval plans soaring, eBook models settled, assessment and analytics merely words in the dictionary. Instead, whether publisher, vendor, aggregator, or librarian, we're all challenged to examine the assumptions and practices that have sustained us in the past. If we are going to engage with our future, one place we are not going to find it, I can tell you, is in the encyclopedia. 🐼

#### Endnotes

1. **Robert Harington**, "Interview with an Empire: Tim Collins, CEO of EBSCO Industries," March 1, 2016. *Scholarly Kitchen*, Web. March 10, 2016.

I know. This is easy to say, flaunts legal and moral authority, and is post-modern beyond any reasonable test. We are beyond scruples here. But stuff is happening at the edges of what we do. The first edge strategy is realizing this. 🐼

*Column Editor's Note: Concepts lifted from an excellent Harvard Business Review monograph, Alan Lewis and Dan McKone's Edge Strategy: A New Mindset for Profitable Growth (HBR Press, 2016).*

Ran into **Daryl Rayner** in Fiesole! I hadn't seen her in ages. Remember her **Rumours from Paddington** column in *Against the Grain* many years ago? That was when she was at **Xrefer** (now **Credo**). **Daryl** is now with **Exact Editions**. <https://www.exacteditions.com/>

Following Italy, a wonderful woman got married at **Boone Hall Plantation** in Charleston this past weekend so my-son-in-law and daughter were visiting. We had the awesome job of babysitting my grandson **17-month-old George Jacks!** What a cutie! **George's** dad (a cardio-thoracic surgeon) has taught him to love books! Who would

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