Against the Grain

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ATG Interviews Theodore Pappas. Executive Editor and Chief Development Officer at Encyclopaedia Britannica and Archives, American University in Cairo

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Executive Editor and Chief Development Officer at Encyclopaedia Britannica

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

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ATG: Mr. Pappas, please tell us a bit about your career path. How does one get to be the Executive Editor and Chief Development Officer of one of the most legendary names in publishing history?

TP: My background is in history — American and European, with a specialty in Russian studies — and I've found that broad interests like these are well suited for a general encyclopedia's wide swath of coverage. Plus, I routinely read encyclopedias as a child — I loved the serendipity that encyclopedias offer — so then working for one seemed like a natural fit professionally, and very rewarding personally.

ATG: Encyclopaedia Britannica recently celebrated its 250th anniversary and both CNN (<https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2019/06/27/100-club-encyclopedia-britannica.cnn>) and CBS Sunday Morning have done wonderful stories about it. How did these opportunities come about? What was it like being the center of attention during a nationally broadcast news program? What has the reaction been to this nationwide exposure?

TP: Britannica's historic 250th anniversary has generated a lot of attention around the world, and both CBS Sunday Morning and CNN have nicely reported on the occasion with TV coverage. CNN incorporated its coverage of Britannica in its "100 Club," (see above link) which is a program dedicated to companies 100 years and older and with global appeal. The response has been wonderful.

ATG: A number of fascinating facts were disclosed during the CBS broadcast (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2g4oXAtIU>), but we were hoping that you could tell us more about two of our favorites — the "Answer Girls" and the "Whole Set Club"?

TP: The "Answer Girls" refers to the all-female Library Research Service that Britannica created in 1936. Beginning that year, buyers of the print set received 50 gummed coupons that entitled them to ask 50 questions of Britannica over a ten-year period. In return, the buyer received a personalized report summarizing the latest information on the topic they asked about, all researched and typed up by one of Britannica's "Answer Girls." The women were all college-educated, some with graduate degrees, and at its height, the department had 100 women issuing upwards of 150,000 reports annually. This department was phenomenally successful, and newspapers and magazines like *Glamour* routinely highlighted the department, often with headlines — reflecting, of course, the common perception of working women at that time — like "Brains, Beauty, and Britannica." In fact, the department has long been considered the inspiration for the 1957 *Spencer*

Tracy — Katharine Hepburn movie *The Desk Set*, in which Hepburn plays the director of an all-female reference library tasked with researching answers to a wide assortment of questions — the very task of the women of Britannica's Library Research Service.

Simply put, the department was a public relations bonanza, keeping the Britannica brand alive during the difficult days of the Great Depression and reflecting one of the many ways that Britannica has met the public's need for information through the centuries. It reveals a truth about publishing that's just as apt now: consumers need to be dealt with on their terms, meaning information needs to be delivered to them in the manner they desire. This is especially true today, in the digital age.

The "Whole-Set Club" is what I term those special folks who have read an entire Britannica print set, and those hearty souls have included famous writers such as George Bernard Shaw, who read everything in Britannica except the science articles, and C.S. Forester, who supposedly read his Britannica print set an astounding three times. He reportedly could read at a rate of 4,000 words per minute.

ATG: From your perspective, what are the most significant, landmark accomplishments in Encyclopaedia Britannica's publishing history? In what ways has Britannica most influenced the modern world of information gathering and delivery?

TP: Encyclopaedia Britannica's First Edition (1768-71) was a marketing marvel, offering both quick definitional information as well as long academic treatises, all conveniently packaged in a mere three volumes, in an easy-to-use A-Z format, with helpful cross-references and 160 detailed illustrations. It proved how successfully information could be commodified and mass communicated, and it sowed the seeds of the publishing phenomenon called Britannica that continues to this

day, 250 years later, in digital form. Britannica continued this pioneering spirit in the digital age, creating the first digital encyclopedia for LexisNexis in 1981, the first multimedia CD in 1989, and launching the first encyclopedia on the Internet in 1994, seven years before Wikipedia.

ATG: Encyclopaedia Britannica announced the end of the print set in 2012 and is now digital. Can you explain the economic model that has allowed Britannica to remain viable? What other factors have enabled you to make the successful transition from print to digital?

TP: Britannica has long listened to consumers and taken note of the kind of information they want to receive, and so when readers in the late 18th century began increasingly reading biographies for their information on the world past and present, Britannica shocked traditionalists by incorporating biographies in the encyclopedia. Though this novel type of entry cost Britannica its editor, who resigned in protest, Britannica's owners had sagely discerned the way the marketing winds were blowing, and the same holds true for Britannica today — we deliver quality content, content the public wants, and in the manner the public wants to receive it.

Moreover, in the age of fake news and rampant misinformation on the Internet, Britannica's value proposition as perhaps the largest fact-checked, general-reference database in the world is only growing in importance. Our encyclopedias, offered at differentiated reading levels, along with a slew of supplemental classroom tools and products, are now used in schools in 88 countries, and our combined websites are generating more than five billion page views annually.

ATG: How has the availability of free online resources, in particular Wikipedia, impacted Encyclopaedia Britannica's place in the information market? Why should researchers turn to Britannica rather than Wikipedia? What do you offer that Wikipedia does not?

TP: Sites like Wikipedia, as well as many blogs and social media sites, that offer answers to questions of little critical importance (when you really don't need to know for sure whether an answer is really completely right) will likely always be popular. After all, their content is free and they're fast, and there's little consequence if they're wrong. But consumers, including students and teachers, are growing increasingly savvy, and they no longer are simply enamored with mere access to the millions of words of undifferentiated content that search engines like Google deliver up in

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seconds. That's why verified, reliable, curated content like that offered by **Britannica** is only growing in importance in an age of fake news and misinformation. That's why an increasing number of companies (and the ministries of education of countries around the world) want to partner with **Britannica**, because they realize the importance of reliable information and the companies that produce it.

ATG: *However, you still do some print publishing. We noticed that Britannica's 250th anniversary collector's edition — your final yearbook — is a print product. In fact, you are listed as the author. Can you tell us about that project?*

TP: We produce an occasional print product, here and there, but for all intents and purposes we're a 100 percent-digital company today. Our special one-volume collector's edition of **Britannica** — *the Encyclopaedia Britannica Anniversary Edition: 250 Years of Excellence, 1768-2018* — was a print product because it was the final edition of the print yearbooks that we've published since 1938. It was a pleasure and an honor to edit the final edition in this hallowed tradition.

ATG: *As you look into the future, what adjustments do you anticipate Encyclopaedia Britannica having to make going forward? Do you envision any new services or products? Where do you see Encyclopaedia Britannica in the next few years?*

TP: **Britannica** is thriving today, with products sold and used in 88 countries and contracts with companies and countries on every continent save Antarctica. And we're moving into the realm of voice-activated games and appliances, powered by artificial intelligence. As **Britannica** has proven over 250 years, it's not the medium (print) that made our products special, but rather our message and manner of producing and delivering reliable, verifiable, expert content. Our methods of publishing may have changed since 1768, but our mission hasn't. 🐾

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taking my dogs out for long walks. I also try to travel abroad as much as possible. Of course, even when traveling I seem to be working!

ATG: *Jason and Yvonne, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us. It's great to see librarians pursuing entrepreneurial efforts like Sidecar Learning. We wish you the best of luck.*

JD: Thank you! We hope that your readers will find our platform useful and we can't wait to hear their feedback.

YM: Thanks so much for the opportunity! 🐾

Collecting to the Core — Gegenwartsromane, Contemporary German-Language Novels

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Column Editor's Note: The "Collecting to the Core" column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the *Resources for College Libraries* bibliography (online at <http://www.rclweb.net>). In each essay, subject specialists introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — **AD**

Building a core collection of contemporary German-language novels, or *Gegenwartsromane*, comes with unique challenges. There is a mismatch between a library's budget and the huge publication output, so libraries often use core author lists as a collection development tool. The term "core" is a value judgement and any claims about the canon are debatable. How can a librarian gain confidence in creating such an author list? This article offers some context unique to German studies, together with a well-reasoned, sample core author list.

One of the first challenges in building a collection profile is defining a time frame. What period is designated as "contemporary"? Some might interpret contemporary literature as all living writers, others as new and emerging authors. The term may also refer to recently published novels on the market. In terms of building a collection profile, contemporary can also represent novels that contextualize our understanding of the present, the *Gegenwart*, and, as the sample list below will show, this means that the author list may extend back in time.

The second challenge in collecting contemporary literature is that it represents 25% of the publishing market in any given year, which makes it difficult to rightsize a library budget for the overall German studies collection. The bestseller list is not useful because both the German literary scene and German studies programs in the United States favor "serious" literature — literature recognized through prestigious literary prizes — over bestselling "entertainment," *Unterhaltungsliteratur*. For example, **Charlotte Roche** (b. 1978) gained

popular attention with her book *Feuchtgebiete / Wetlands* (2008), but she is not (yet) considered a core author. Similarly, **Jenny Erpenbeck** (b. 1967) had international success with *Gehen, ging, gegangen / Go, Went, Gone* (2015), but has not (yet) received the volume of critical attention that suggests a core author. There are many metrics for ranking authors to help sift through the considerable number of candidates and some tools for researching authors and their critical reception are discussed below.

The third challenge is discovery. What tools can librarians use to get an overview of potential works and authors? Catalog searches in **Worldcat** are not helpful in identifying contemporary novels and catalog records certainly do not denote "this is a core author." Take, for example, the translation of **Arno Geiger's** novel *Der alte König in seinem Exil / The Old King in His Exile* (2011); it is cataloged with subjects including *Geiger, Arno; Dementia; Older people — Germany*. The **Worldcat** search *German literature — 21st century — History and criticism* can be used

to find literary histories, but authoritative literary histories, as we know them for established periods, have not yet been written for the contemporary period. Literary historians struggle with the tension between understanding the unfinished, evolving nature of a writer's output and the desire to present an author's oeuvre and its organizing

principles within intellectual genealogies. Another problem with literary histories and dictionaries is that critical reception and appreciation changes over time. The history of the *Kindlers Literatur Lexikon* is a case in point.¹ Its three editions illustrate the difficulty with defining the "canon": the first edition was seven volumes, the second edition was twenty volumes, and the third edition was seventeen volumes. The third edition of the print *Kindler* was published in 2009 and actually contains fewer entries than the second edition because it focused on a canon wherein entries comply with editors' criteria for world literature. The *Kindler* is an essential tool for literary research, but the print publication is now ten years old and while the online version is updated every year, it is not expanded with new entries.

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