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A Bookseller Views the Future of the Book

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This article will share a captivating bibliodote, discuss points of probable change in the book trade and identify points that probably won’t change. It is important to know that the author speaks only from experience (catalogs issued since 1972) and not for any group. Readers are invited to supply additional ideas, take issue, extend congratulations or buy books, as listed at the end of the article.

Bibliodote: At 4:30 a.m. one recent August day a bulldozer finished covering some 200,000 books consigned to the landfill to clear their former home for a new purchaser. The former school had closed after the death of its founder, and the board had given the library to a new college and held it for two years, pending the new college’s logistics, only to be told weeks before delivery of possession of the building, “We don’t have space, and we don’t have money to rent storage until we can build.” Board members called the writer who salvaged many of the better titles, but the rest were overcovered that August day. Crime? Well, the destroyed material did include many multi-volume serials (most now on CD-ROM or fiche), superceded editions, broken sets, etc. Crime? Well, who should be convicted? Board of the new school?

Technologists who invented micro-compressive techniques? Board of the closed school? Publishers who began new editions before the previous edition has been shipped from the warehouse? Or was it one of those inevitables like the collapse of the WYE OAK?

I. Changes in the out-of-print Bookellers’ World, sometimes

looked some source that would yield an answer to this conundrum and could indeed prove that the Web pages are correct. Any reader of this article has some insight into this question. I would invite any leads. Nevertheless, I do stand by my assertions about the fundamental differences between the nature of print and the Internet as institutions of research. The labyrinth of print sources may be daunting to even experienced researchers, but it rests on a solid foundation that the ephemeral labyrinth of the Internet as yet cannot replicate.

D. The book source pool change reflects the Internet, also. A good friend now sells on (shhh!) E-Bay many books that once would have been available to the writer. Many private sellers will check this site for current prices and scramble the name of the dealer who will not offer three quarters of the “average” price. Happily for the book-source pool, some institutions will be divesting low circulation, high maintenance or non-germane titles. Unfortunately, income from these sales will not flow to the bookseller; instead, these funds will go to escalating periodical costs, well-deserved salary increases and to repair the ravages of damned-fool shrink-funded booming car-tax cuts.

E. Book format innovations see the generation of more titles in CD-ROMs (storage), talking screens (visual substitute), etc. For systems that cost the writer over 1000 miles per year—don’t mess with my tapes! Internet magazines, eBooks and desk-top publishing (the writer has re-published over twenty titles). And the writer now offers a Web page catalog posting which created a 40 percent savings in catalog distribution costs. Take hope, however, for...books on paper best fill the needs of people who read them, store them, manufacture them, and sell them. And there is no evidence that proves there will be any change in the needs of the people who make and use books. Other forms have been tried and most have failed. “Next,” “new,” and “futuristic” technologies that meet the requirements of readers may surface in the future, but for now, books on paper do the job nicely, whether the book is being read at the beach, in a library, in school, or on a subway. It is not the publishers and scientists who will change the future of the book—it is the readers and users of books. And so far, they are not inclined to any change.

F. Bookseller procedure changes are seen in the reduction of the number of catalogs issued by a dealer, a reduction in the number of dealers who issue catalogs and a reduction in the number of dealers with walk-in premises. Even auction houses are now paying consignors only 2/3 of the buyer’s cost (when a 20 percent buyer’s penalty is added to a $100 hammer price and the seller gets only $80, that $80 is clearly only 2/3 of the $120 paid by the buyer). Wouldn’t it be nice for dealers if they could charge something per sale to recover the cost of a $3,500 booth at a national fair? More and more bookfair exhibitors report success is achieved only through sales to other dealers. “Coattail” fairs will become more prevalent (such as the Garage Fair and the Boston ABAA Fair).

II. Perhaps of equal interest to the changes seen in the book trade’s future would be things that will probably remain the same, such as enemies of books, service to customers, pricing vectors, professional standards, legacy as tragedy, nomenclatural escalation and the need for appraisals.

A. Continuing enemies of books may include using them as furnishing tools, as a source for prints and maps, and revenge, as well as those who are ignorant and college development officers. The use of books as furniture has, does continued on page 30

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The writer used to help uninstructed customers understand that a dealer's membership in the Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America (ABAA) was akin to being a CPA; the writer doesn't use this comparison as freely now. As a former member of the Board of Governors the writer would add, that also as with other organizations, nothing happens as fast as those who introduce an idea would wish.

E. Legacy as tragedy sounds foreboding, and indeed it is, all the more so for being an area which the writer sees as a constant, not an area of change. Briefly, most booksellers are sole proprietors. Those with more than one person on staff are considerably fewer, but those that are second or third generation are even fewer. A quick scan of the ABAA directory suggests that less than ten percent of those listed are second generation. What will happen as the other 90 percent retire or die? Flash, where does the reader think that other dealers find some of their books? No generalizations, but certainly a shared sadness—and no major change foreseen.

F. The practice of nomenclatural escalation will continue to kaleidoscope, sometimes for cosmetic purposes ("near very good" and "else fine" are two recent examples) and sometimes for administrative survival (Deans of Library Services become Deans of Information Resources).

G. Finally, need for appraisals will not go away. People inherit, people donate, people sell and they all need good information.

Qualified appraisers are few and far between, with even fewer having participated in the only IRS workshop (Feb. 1993). And variety of material will remain constant. In the current year the writer has worked with 14 linear feet of family/business records 1780-1930, Romlyn Hough's American Trees (a real joy, that one!) and a copy of the Declaration of Independence (destined to cover care-center expenses for the owner's aged parent, this copy was found to be an 1876 printing).

These, then, are some of the changes and some of the constants the writer envisions in the antiquarian book trade. For further information, reading, or challenge the reader might wish to consider one or more of these options:

- ABAA directories (with code of ethics) can be obtained from:
  - ABAA, 20 West 44th St., New York, NY, 10036-6604. Email: <abaa@panix.com>
  - Dealer's best friend? Pencil for marking up the price.
  - Herring, Mark. 10 Reasons Why the Internet Is No Substitute For A Library. Poster. Approx. 30 x 20'. Available by writing to Dr. Mark Herring, Director of Library Services, Winthrop College, Rock Hill, SC, 29733 or by emailing <herrimg@winthrop.edu>. Cost: $10.00 includes shipping.
  - Rare Book School, University of Virginia. 114 Aldeman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, 22903-2498. Phone: 434-924-8851. Fax: 434-924-8824. Website: <www.virginia.edu/oldbooks>.
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Endnotes

The Future of Books and Libraries

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In a conference on Information, Technology and the Humanities in California, the call for papers said that one of the interests of the conference was "The History of the Book"—with the word "book" in quotation marks, implying that in the future, with Technology what it is and what it is becoming, the book as we know it will have evolved in some way. The further implication is that the evolution will be to some electronic medium (or to several), and the book as we now know it will be a thing of the past.

This has been the prediction of the technocrats who push for post-state-of-the-art hardware and software in our academic institutions and libraries, assuming that the hardwagen they are on represents the wave of the future and that this wave is good.

* * *

About seven years ago, when Fort Ord military base closed, the California State University system decided not to waste the military

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