June 2003

Talk of the Trade

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Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4136

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“remainder” status while in print. Practices differ among publishers and across trade vs academic publishers, but a decision to “remainder” a title is basically an accounting decision based on the fact that there are more copies of a title in the warehouse (or on their way back to the warehouse) than are likely to be sold — potentially forever.

Remainders houses differ as well, but their basic role is to purchase stock that has been substantially written down and redistribute it for sale at drastically lower prices through stores and online. For trade books, remainders houses increasingly play a role in processing returns as well — again, often at drastically lower prices than the original publisher’s list price.

**Out-of-Stock (OS)**

Out-of-Stock means that the title is out-of-stock with the publisher; at the same time or separately, distributors may be out-of-stock as well or may have stock on the title. As Bob Rooney, from Taylor and Francis, noted, the first time this happens to a title, it’s the publisher’s best friend — it means that demand actually exceeded supply, thereby at least partially funding the very large number of titles for which supply exceeded demand (and those that were remained).

Publishers try to monitor demand and supply, but clearly imbalances will happen.Publishers also try to ensure that demand meets — it’s in their best business interest — but practices vary as to how well this gets managed. Typically, titles should be available in print and available in a three to six week period. This gets quickly messy if there are overseas sourcing issues, printing issues, or other multi-party problems.

**Out-of-Stock Indefinitely (OSI)**

OSI is a status that essentially means that a book is not only out of stock, but that there are no plans to put it back in print. OSI is a legal designation as much as a print run decision — it’s the publisher’s method of holding on to the rights to publish a title instead of having those rights revert back to the author(s) by declaring a book out-of-print.

**Out-of-Print**

An official declaration that a title is so far out of the realm of probability of ever creating sufficient demand that a publisher was willing to give the rights back to the author.

**Technologies**

The advent of digital printing and print-on-demand will have impact over time on the number of titles that go OS (and for what period), OSI and OP. That impact has been much smaller than most expected, but other than DVD players such is the course of many recent technology innovations.

The adoption and usage of these new technologies are mitigated by several factors; many of these will be moderated over time, but some will be:

- Not all electronic files are made alike.

Just because there is an electronic copy in some format of a title does not mean it is readily to print; even presence of a PDF file, while a help, doesn’t prepare for all the different potential print methods or (even some of the basics). This will likely change over time, but will be slow and back catalog will present serious questions about level of investment warranted.

- Quality isn’t at offset levels. Particularly for graphically intensive titles, digital print technologies range from adequate to murky. Again, this is in part dependent on the source materials, but also on print quality. This too is likely to improve over time.

- Setup and support costs are not zero. Beyond setting up files, the process of continuing rights management, author management, marketing and distribution are not zero. Thus, publishers have to decide whether it’s worthwhile to continue to invest behind a title even if the print run economies support very short print runs. This issue will always exist.

At the same time, online resource like Alibris have increasingly brought together a wider range of materials (used in print, remainders, OS, OSI, and OP titles from global sources) with a broader range of ways to purchase them (directly shipping from the seller, consolidated with purchase orders and invoices, through major distributors and wholesalers). The technologies here are a lot more straightforward, if challenging once you’re dealing with over 30 million books.

**Choices**

One of the more interesting points of conversation and debate was where different libraries handle the “cutoff” on trying to still acquire a title based on its O/P/OSI status, and how they handle resolution after the cutoff. A wide variety of practices exists regarding when or if to “give up” acquiring a new copy of a title from traditional sources. Some libraries continue to claim OS/OSI titles from distributors/publishers for up to 340 or even 720 days (1.5 to 2 years!). Some libraries immediately assume that O/P/OSI books are essentially unavailable, and decide to cut their losses on those titles more or less right away, and cancel (as there are plenty of other new books to buy). Some other libraries set a decent mourning period of six months or so before trying to acquire any combination of OS, O/SI or OP titles via the relatively new array of reliable secondhand sources.

Practices for acquiring used and/or remaindered products vary as well. Some libraries have staff search across multiple online vendors and manage the purchase, shipping and processing from individual sellers using Websites like Bookfinder or AddAll, or directly on Alibris’ consumer Website, ABE, Amazon.com, Half.com, eBay and other sites. Others use some variety of Alibris Services to manage larger lists themselves or use Alibris’ Library Services staff — some even extract files from their library system monthly and transmit in EDIFACT. Others use partnerships that Blackwell’s, YBP Library Services, Ingram Library Services, Baker & Taylor, Ambassador Books and Media, Franklin Books Company, and Eastern Book Company among others have developed with Alibris to fulfill their needs. Typically, these tradeoffs are made on the basis of availability of staff and desire to minimize systems costs of acquisition (costs such as product, shipping, receiving, processing, invoicing, accounting, and vendor management) versus individual copy costs.

I would invite an activity-based cost approach on an independent basis to the assessment of these alternatives — it would be instructive for all involved.

**Column Editor’s Note:** Comments and feedback (and corrections!) are always welcome. Feel free to reach Brian at (510) 594-4530 or via email at <briane@alibris.com>.

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**Talk of the Trade**

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**LITERARY WORLD SHOCKED, SHOCKED, AS PUBLISHING CEO TELLS THE TRUTH**

When Bertelsmann’s Peter Olson, head of American book publishing (Random House, Knopf, Ballantine and more) fired Ann Godorf, chief of Random House, he did not say she left the company to “pursue other interests” or “spend more time with her family.” Instead, he explained that she had a profit goal of $6 million for 2002, but only made $2 million. The fury descended on Olson, criticizing him for being too obsessive about profits and for taking only a few minutes with Godorf to tell her the bad news. Most strange was the New York Times column by Verlyn Klinkenborg. He writes a charming weekly profile of the comings and goings at his upstate New York farm, his daily chores, the weather, the flora and fauna, the delights and hardships of rural life. In a bizarre departure from his usual country life musings, Klinkenborg lambasted the driving force of profitability in commercial publishing, the ruthless pursuit of money over art, the big bucks paid big time authors, and the consolidation in the publishing industry. He portrayed Godorf as a victim of a greedy system that is spinning out of control. However, the business pages of the Times provided actual facts and continued on page 96

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Talk of the Trade
from page 94

figures, explaining how difficult it is for publishers to prosper and grow these days without the fiscal discipline that all successful businesses must exercise. Meanwhile, within a few days of Klinenberg’s mournful, wishful thinking, Gordin was offered her own imprint at Penguin, where, I’m sure, she will be required to achieve her profit goals.

NEW YORKER EDITOR, DESPITE BIG NOSE ACCUSATION, PURSUES OLD WHITE MEN

In an earlier column I discussed the appointment of Deborah Treisman to the influential position of fiction editor at the New Yorker magazine. Noting that the number of female authors had declined during the tenure of her predecessor, Treisman recently said that she is trying hard to achieve a 50/50 gender record, but eight out of ten submissions, whether from established authors or neophytes, are from men.

The appointment of Treisman has generated much envy among the local literati, and she says, amusingly, that she stopped reading email gossip about her when someone admitted she was “very jealous” of Treisman and accused her of having “a big nose.” She went on to describe the publicity surrounding her appointment, which seemed to indicate that “I was only going to publish, like, young Vietnamese women.” However, she wants to continue to reassure “older white men....It’s alright, you still have a place.” And the envious big-nose-accuser added her comment, stating that “Treisman doesn’t really (have a big nose), I’m clutching at straws here.” Ah, the genteel world of true literary publishing for art’s sake.

LOVE STORY

Among the five finalists for Britain’s prestigious Whitbread Prize were a 69-year-old husband and wife. Claire Tomalin was honored for her excellent biography (which I’ve read and thoroughly enjoyed) Samuel Pepys: The Unequalled Life. Her husband, Michael Frayn, the playwright famed for Noises Off and Copenhagen—I fell asleep during this drama about Nazi nuclear bomb intrigue—was honored for his World War II espionage novel, Spies. This is the first time in the 33-year history of the Whitbread that a married couple has competed for the prize. As the award was announced at a black tie dinner in London, Mr. Frayn gallantly rose and kissed his wife as her name was added to the pantheon of past winners. Ms. Tomalin thanked the committee and said, “I spent most of the evening praying I wouldn’t win so I wouldn’t have to get up here and say anything.” Later, her husband told the press that his wife’s triumph over him gave him an opportunity to “feel rather noble. It gives me tremendous moral advantage....” Every time they argued he would have the opportunity to say, “But darling, I behaved so well over the Whitbread.”

ANOTHER GUN NUT EXPOSED

Readers of this column will remember I have written twice about the since-resigned Emory University professor who apparently faked his research “proving” that America’s early settlers rarely owned guns. Now a pro-gun “scholar,” working for the American Enterprise Institute (sometimes referred to as a right wing think tank) has been caught in a triple whammy of fabrication and suspicion. John R Lott, Jr. has been posing as Mary Rosh, writing fawning reviews of his book More Guns, Less Crime on various Internet book review sites. Dear sweet “Mary” has defended the research in the book, including the assertion that merely branding a weapon has prevented crimes in 97% of reported incidents where the potential victim owned a gun. Amazon posted a glowing review signed by maryrosly, who turned out to be Lott’s 13 year old son. So only has Lott faked reviews on his own, and with the help of his family, it turns out no one can discover where Lott got his 97% foiled robbery figure. Lott can’t help locate the sources for this assertion either, claiming a bookshelf fell on his computer, destroying the research trail on his hard drive. Another guy named Lott getting himself in trouble.

IF YOU WORK IN THE BOOK BUSINESS AND ARE HAPPY, YOU’RE WRONG

Writing his weekly business column in New York Magazine, Michael Wolff recently asked: “Why, for God’s sake, would anyone want to work in the book business?” He went on to contend that publishing and other bookish pursuits are a “liberating, feminist redoubt, but in some kind of retrograde inversion, the economic model requires that women mostly do the job because they have husbands who support them....” Continuing, “Virtually any other business, save for the more bureaucratic and regimented, has more day to day comforts, more joie de vivre and personality than book publishing.” Wolff acknowledges that he has many friends in the business, who “against all evidence don’t agree with me,” but “this isn’t where a kid with heart and imagination is going to end up. Rather, the book business is logically getting a dimmer bath.” One has to wonder how many friends in publishing he has left after this column.

Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Decisions, Decisions

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The classic vendor gripe about libraries is that they take too long to make decisions. Why, vendors ask, must it take weeks, months, years to move on anything? Is there a library in the world, they wonder, without a host of committees and sub-committees, councils, circles, groups, task forces, teams, and who knows what else to study and usually stymie any proposal put to them, small or large? Not in my territory there isn’t, every vendor rep has sometimes muttered. Why can’t libraries make decisions like we do?

Of course, this griping is highly selective, always focused on un-made vending decisions where the rep’s company has something to gain. And on made decisions going the wrong way. Clear opportunity, these instances, to cite flawed process. When they gain or hold business, on the other hand, reps are always forgiving on process, no matter how long a library took to decide. Likewise, quick library decisions that went badly are immediately forgotten. It’s the hangovers, instead, that haunt the minds of reps.

Librarians might forgive reps their impatience here, because a long-hanging decision is a truly painful experience. For those old enough to remember a past era in social behavior, it’s not unlike asking for a date... and then waiting, and waiting some more, and then longer again, for the word yes or no and maybe a little reciprocal interest from someone who held every card. “I’m not sure I’ll be here that day.” “My cousin might be visiting.” You know how it was. “The task force just scheduled its first meeting,” feels about the same.

Naturally, it’s none of a rep’s business how long a library takes to make a decision. The task force has every right to hold whatever meetings it wants, whenever it wants, for as long as it wants. Anyone who needs to get an A on every test should find another line of work than selling to libraries. In this course they give out only two grades—A and F. Strictly pass-fail. Ever a very good library sales rep, used to straight As on the other report cards of life, will see some Fs on this one, and even harder to bear, some incompletes.

Reps always believe that a library’s decision