September 2002

Talk of the Trade

Barry Fast
Deltabooks, barry0112@aol.com

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Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.5470

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Talk of the Trade

by Barry Fast (Deltabooks, 186 Cross St., City Island, NY 10464; Phone: 718-885-9563) <arry0112@aol.com>

The book trade is not as glitzy as The Industry (Hollywood), but there is more than enough gossip to share. Here's the latest book world buzz, some serious, some frivolous, all true.

But They Still Won't Sell Wheaties

Borders, the second largest retail bookstore chain, will overhaul the way it selects and merchandises books. Gregory Josecowicz, the Chairman and CEO of Borders, says his stores will adopt "category management" to buy and promote books. First pioneered in the grocery business (Josecowicz rose from bagger to president over 22 years at Albertson's), category management relies upon manufacturers and distributors to stock shelves and determine placement. Borders will modify category management by choosing publishers to co-manage 250 different book categories. These co-managers will determine which titles will be bought, and how they will be arranged and displayed in the stores. Borders will have the final say, but will rely on these publishers, based on their expertise in each category. According to the Wall Street Journal, three examples have already been set up: HarperCollins will co-manage the Cooking and Romance categories, and Random House will co-manage the Young Readers category.

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<http://www.against-the-grain.com>
category. Can publishers be relied upon to be fair to competitors’ titles in the category they co-manage? This remains to be seen, but there will be a strong incentive to keep Borders happy with the selections. Time, and sales within categories, will tell.

Slammin’ Sammy Snead Was Dead and Tiger Cost Too Much

The Boston Globe reports that John Updike scored 99, beating Chip McGrath and Ward Just in a tourney to promote The Ultimate Golf Book.

Next Time Try Jerry Springer

“It’s shocking” said a Powells (of Portland, Oregon) Bookstore manager, after the store sold only four copies of the book.

“You’re not even making them feel good!” This season’s biggest publishing disaster seems to be Sylvia Ann Hewlett’s Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children. Not that Talk/ Miramax’s Tina Brown didn’t try. In addition to Oprah, Hewlett garnered appearances on 60 Minutes, The Today Show with a long Katie interview, Good Morning America and a Nightly News sit down with Tom. The LA and New York Times editorialized, and The Nation added its intellectual weight to the discussion of the conflicts between career demands and baby-making. The book had every opportunity to lead the bestseller list, but it is not even in the top fifty. What happened?

No one knows for sure, but there are lots of theories. The media didn’t get it, and focused mostly on the difficulties of getting pregnant if a woman waits until her forties. (New York Magazine cover “Baby Panic!”)

The title was off-putting, and the cover photo was dreamy. Originally entitled Baby Hunter (still the title of the poorly selling British edition), the editorial and promotional team involved with the book found that “offensive” and insisted on the present title. Too much of the book reads like a long magazine article, say some critics. Others believe that most women already understand the trade-offs between careers and babies, have made their choices, and as with all difficult life decisions, don’t need to revisit the issues. Whatever the reasons, author Hewlett is among the baffled: “I don’t know what to make of this absence of huge sales” she said recently to the New York Times.

My Novel Is Bigger Than Your Novel

We have the National Book Award and Great Britain has the Booker, and never the twain shall meet—or so we thought. Few Americans know that the Booker Prize for Fiction has been sponsored by an English food retailer (here we go again with books and groceries). But this year the Man Group, a British money management firm, donated $3.5 million to the Booker committee, and hopes to use the prestige that leaks from the prize to enter the American market. And this means that the Booker committee, who selects the winner, may have to allow American writers to contend for the prize. Indeed, the committee chairwoman recently opined that American writers exist in a “different (meaning higher) league” than their British counterparts. “The American novels paint on a much bigger canvas,” said the Booker judge, Lisa Jardine. She drew a flurry of outraged reaction from the literary elite clustered between Oxford and London: Ian McEwan, winner of the 1998 Booker, said this remark reflected a “certain strain of British self-congratulation—(the notion) is fatuous, cringing.” This concept of British inadequacy is, according to The Observer’s literary critic, “quasi-philistine, provincial and rather embarrassing.”

The Guardian published a cartoon showing a B-52 bomber dropping novels instead of explosives on the British countryside. But the Brits hold firmly to the concept of fair play, which they invented and perfected. According to The Bookseller, a number of authors and publishers welcome the possible inclusion of American authors, which may happen in 2004.

Even Tom Clancy Loves New York Now

The famously New York-avoiding author of The Sum of All Fears and many other doomsday scenarios, says he never could have dreamed up the September 11 attack. In the past, publishers and agents would trek to Clancy’s 24-room Maryland estate for meetings, surrounded by over 400 acres of land with a grand view of the Chesapeake Bay and a Sherman tank parked on the front lawn (presumably unloaded). His sentiments about the city have changed slightly after watching us deal with the tragedy. Quoted in The New York Observer, Clancy admired the fortitude and good humor of ordinary citizens of the Big Apple “I didn’t think New Yorkers had this in them, but I was wrong about that” he said. “I’m sure they’ll be back to their ass**** selves in a few weeks.” Despite his prediction, he has purchased a modest city abode on East 76th Street for over $2.5 million, a corner duplex with three bedrooms and four and a half bathrooms, herring-bone oak floors, an English roof garden and pool, just in time for summer swimming. We appreciate his vote of confidence.

Will U.S. Retaliate, Banning Cold Weather Fronts and Hockey Players?

Warning that their business will be devastated, Canadian booksellers are urging their government to block Amazon.com’s expansion into our NAFTA partner to the north.

Amazon has to collaborate with an existing Canadian book distributor in order to physically enter the market, in accord with government rules (of course Amazon already sells millions of American books to Canadian publishers over the borderless Internet). These rules require foreign booksellers to form a Canadian controlled partnership in order to sell Canadian books to Canadian consumers from a store or warehouse on Canadian soil. Yet the bookseller’s association is complaining that Amazon would be entering their market under “the false guise of Canadian partnership.” In other words, adhering to protectionist regulations results in accusations of deception. Joseph Heller, where are you when we need you? The association further argues that an Amazon physical presence in Canada would “devastate an important Canadian industry employing real book lovers in every community across Canada.” There are contrasting viewpoints, however. Amazon in Canada would employ local people — some of whom might be real book lovers — and sell Canadian rather than American editions, benefitting the publishing industry in Canada. Canadian distributor Raincoast tells the Financial Post that they are not the rumored Amazon partner, as Amazon announces a summer opening for their Canadian foray. The Amazon partner is BookExpress, which is owned by Raincoast. Canadian book retailers tremble, awaiting the blizzard from the south.

Nancy Drew Mystery Solved: She Isn’t, and Has Never Been, a Lesbian

She pounded away on her typewriter for three quarters of a century, writing 130 books and 23 of the Nancy Drew series, including the first one, The Secret of the Old Clock, in 1930. At the age of 96, Mildred Wirt Benson passed away in May. As Carolyn Keene, she was paid $125 for each of the popular adolescent detective novels, and prohibited by the publisher from revealing herself as the author. In one particularly productive year she wrote 13 Nancy Drew books.

Benson, in two interviews with Salon and the New York Times in 1999, said that girls were ripe for a change in the way young women were portrayed in literature. “I think Nancy was the character girls were waiting for—not her sex appeal, but how tough and smart and adventurous she is.” But the success of the series also confined her in ways she resented. “I’m so sick of Nancy Drew I could vomit,” she told a New York Times reporter at a Nancy Drew symposium at the University of Iowa in 1993, where Benson was the first person to earn a Master’s degree in Journalism in 1927. Scholars who study the Nancy Drew series have published learned treatises on the role of these novels.
librarians! If we become overwhelmed and paralyzed, if we cease selecting good books to read, and finally cease reading ourselves, we are frauds. In my pamphlet, I explore the problem and offer some approaches to deal with it (provided one isn’t lazy) including this advice from Lawrence Clark Powell: “How does the librarian find time for books? I want you to listen carefully while I give the answer, for it is a precious secret I am about to disclose. One finds time for books by taking it.”

BN: One of the ways librarians have been able to deal with the number of books published today, of course, is to have an approval plan. If an approval plan profile is accurate enough — and I know a lot of librarians and vendor reps who work pretty hard at that — that frees time for librarians to deal with other things. Sometimes librarians don’t spend much time anymore with the approval books. So approval plans — a way to handle the great quantity of books out there to buy — has distanced some librarians from books. I’m beginning to feel a little guilty.

PB: I only wish librarians felt the same way — a little guilty, for not reviewing the weekly approval plan shipments. Many have decided “why bother?” The flow of books seems good, the coverage seems good, the approval profiles are working. Why not just fly on automatic pilot? After all, we’re all very busy. Anybody who thinks this way, of course, should not be working in collection development. A collection development librarian delights in looking at new books. It’s the best part of the job, and an indispensable source of knowledge. When a particularly good title appears, it triggers a series of questions: What other books has the author written? Does the library own them? In general, what are our holdings on this subject? Are we lacking any key works? Noticing that the title is a translation, does the library have the original foreign language edition? Noticing that the title is part of a series, what other volumes might be useful? This kind of inquiry leads to real collection development as distinguished from mere book selection. Occasionally one discovers that a part of the collection is in need of an overhaul, and then the fun really begins.

Furthermore, one must monitor approval plans to know what is not coming in. Many small independent publishers despair at how few orders they receive after sending out announcements and advertising to libraries. I am referring to publishers of excellent literary titles, not silly pop stuff. For example, small publishers will risk publishing foreign literature in translation, which is quite appropriate for college and research libraries. Yet sales are dismal. Why? Probably because some inattentive, lazy selector assumes that the title will come in on approval, and so simply dismisses the announcement.

BN: Well, I’m once again feeling some guilt, since I will confess that we vendors could do a better job than we sometimes do in covering those small publishers. And yet if we were perfect, and were able to track down everything, the trend you describe, Peter, might just accelerate. Years ago, vendors would promote approval plans as a way to cover the “core” — basically university presses and the major commercial publishers. But librarians asked for more, and sometimes made “more” a condition of keeping or winning their business. So we did cover more and went well beyond anyone’s “core,” to the point that some librarians may think that we cover about everything on approval. Which we never did and I’m sure never will. Maybe we need to be clearer about that, that approval plans are about covering a certain core of material — wide as that “core” has grown to be — and that they are not the complete answer to collection development.

PB: Approval plan vendors do a remarkable job of providing a wide, solid core (and beyond) but there will always be off-beat, small, regional, ethnic, independent, and branch new presses that escape the net. For example (and this is only one of a hundred different examples), books on Hispanic genealogy are almost always published by independent researchers, who are very hard to track down. We purchase them from a specialist bookseller, who is constantly scanning for off-beat titles of potential importance to research libraries. Selectors must be able to spot these warts amidst the mass of publishers’ advertising made redundant by approval plans. If they just play the percentages, they will never build truly distinguished collections.

BN: Maybe we could end just where we began, then. Let’s help librarians obtain one particular title of value from a small and independent press. What are the details for buying your Reading the Map of Knowledge?

PB: My pleasure, Bob. The full citation is: Peter Briscoe, Reading the Map of Knowledge: The Art of Being a Librarian. Grand Terrace, CA: Palo Verde Press, 2001. Librarians may order it from their preferred vendor. For individuals, the easiest way to obtain a copy is to send a $5.00 check payable to Peter Briscoe, 18608 Oak Park Drive, Riverside, CA 92504.