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Notes from Mosier-Back to the Future, Part 1

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Anyone who’s been around libraries or in the book trade over the past three decades will have heard the many predictions of the death of the book ad nauseam. I’ve never believed a word of it, and I still don’t. Books offer a tactile satisfaction not readily replaced by much of anything, including eBooks — regardless of whether we’re talking about Web access or the current generation of reader devices.

The book arts are also alive and well. The Oberlin College Libraries are in the process of creating a letterpress studio, and for their 2011 Winter Term, students will produce a book using period equipment. Ed Vermue, Head of Special Collections at Oberlin, reports strong interest in the program. Today’s students are digital natives, to be sure, but their enthusiasm for the world of print would seem to bespeak more than mere curiosity.

For the moment, then, I think it’s safe to say the future of the book looks reasonably secure. What’s less certain is how libraries are general, and academic libraries in particular, will continue to develop collections that include print as well as an ever-expanding range of digital products. What’s pretty clear is that print book sales are in decline in academic libraries, and this trend is only likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

One consequence of this trend has already manifested itself in the ongoing decline of publishers’ print runs, especially academic publishers. Fewer print copies will mean those libraries pursuing a “just in time” approach to collection development will find this strategy less and less successful. Used book sales will be affected, as fewer used books come back onto the market. Moving forward this will translate into ever-growing demand for print on demand. And this, of course, can lead to a discussion of eBooks — but we’ll come back to that shortly.

For the moment, though, I want to stay with print, and to consider new books. Specifically, I want to talk about approval plans.

Although their use has ebbed and flowed a bit over the years, generally reflecting funding levels, approval plans have been used as a primary means of acquiring current-imprint, English language titles by academic libraries in North America, Australia, and Hong Kong. (I’m not going to discuss foreign-language plans in this article — they serve a very important but somewhat different role. Also, I’m not including notification programs in this definition of approval plans — i.e., slips plans or forms plans. For this discussion, an approval plan is an arrangement wherein newly-published books are sent automatically to participating libraries, based on a profile of interests maintained by the vendor. Books judged unsuitable for the collection may be returned without prior authorization.) There are a few mainstream approval plans elsewhere in the world — I set one up a few years ago for the British Library to deliver U.S. and Canadian titles not supplied on deposit — but generally speaking they’re not widely used outside the aforementioned markets.

What’s ebbed far more than flowed, though, in recent years is the number of approval vendors. There aren’t many left, and they serve, inevitably, a declining market. Increasingly libraries have fine-tuned their profiles to receive fewer books, or have gone “virtual” — that is, they ask their vendors to identify what titles would have been supplied as approval books or slips in the past, but make more title-by-title decisions about what actually to have sent. This sustains the discovery value of the profiling mechanism, but dilutes the workflow efficiencies traditional approval plans have offered.

Back in the 1970s and 1980s, when there were more domestic vendors period, and more offering approval plans, vendors sought to differentiate themselves from one another in a couple of major ways. Some endeavored to present themselves as specialists, either by subject or type of publisher — so we had sci-tech vendors, or bookdealers identifying themselves as university press agents. This made sense to vendors in the post-Richard Abel era, when the “not all the eggs in one basket” mantra was invoked by libraries. If you were reasonably sure you couldn’t get all of a library’s business anyway, then why not try to get the most profitable (sci-tech) or readily defined (university press) slice of the pie?

Other vendors aimed to provide as comprehensive a slice as possible by offering approval plans that included titles for other types of libraries — for example, they might have included government documents, medical literature, and others. This made sense for libraries in the U.S. and Canada, as well as for libraries in Latin America, Australia, and Hong Kong. (I’m not going to discuss foreign-language plans in this article — they serve a very important but somewhat different role. Also, I’m not including notification programs in this definition of approval plans — i.e., slips plans or forms plans. For this discussion, an approval plan is an arrangement wherein newly-published books are sent automatically to participating libraries, based on a profile of interests maintained by the vendor. Books judged unsuitable for the collection may be returned without prior authorization.) There are a few mainstream approval plans elsewhere in the world — I set one up a few years ago for the British Library to deliver U.S. and Canadian titles not supplied on deposit — but generally speaking they’re not widely used outside the aforementioned markets.
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Column Editor: Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

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WRITING FOR PLEASURE ALONE
by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

Literary agents and authors are reeling from the dinky advances for new fiction. Lower eBook revenues mean fewer book deals and less money for the aspiring author. eBook income for the author is half that of a hardback, and advances for the tyros run in the $1,000-$5,000 range. And the agent gets the 15% cut out of that.

Publishers are not going to wait through two or three piddling books hoping for the writer’s evolution into the big break-out. This means that writers like Anne Tyler and Elmore Leonard would not get published. Nan Talese of the Talese/Doubleday imprint warns the aspiring author to keep that day job.

The monster best-sellers have been driving the industry for a long time. And these are the books most read as eBooks. So what will become of those authors? See — Jeffrey Trachtenberg, “Authors Feel Pinch In Age of E-Books,” The Wall Street Journal, Sept. 28, 2010, p.A1.

AND YOU CAN BET THE FRENCH ARE UNHAPPY
by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

French law bars heavy discounting of books, keeping the small shops in business. But eBooks are not covered by the law which refers to “printed volumes.” So the French now have to figure out how to stop the juggernauts of Amazon and Apple. Because, of course, the French regard a book as not so much business as a cultural identity.


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