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ATG Interviews Fred Gullette, Publisher, Book News, Inc.

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Irv, only a
and
provided a service that would
— great connections that opened many doors.

FG: Changes — oh, woe. M&As, which
I regard as “Mess-ups & Anguish,” have often
corrupted scholarship while charming investors
and afflicting those dealing with the resulting
leviathans. Digitization has put many works
out of our range — for now; it has been a piv-
otal benefit in giving us a massive increase in
circulation. Book production has deteriorated
with the adoption of cheaper manufacturing
methods and materials [glued pages; ugly and
ill-feeling plastic-over-boards instead of time-
honored book cloth; offset printing instead of,
admittedly infrequent, letterpress printing — in
a word, business school ideals: profit, quick and
abundant, over quality.

Adapting, thus far, hasn’t been all that dif-
licult largely because we’re one of the very
abundant, over quality.

AGT: What are the most substantial
changes you have seen over these last 36 years?
How have you adapted so well?

FG: Our writers all have a subject expertise,
but they’re all capable of writing about a wide
range of related subjects. They’re all required
to cover the six days (we are not open Sat-
urday in the summer).

AGT: Do you not publish a few other
titles?

FG: Spring 1986 saw the first issue of
Reference & Research Book News (R&R). I’d
been selecting likely titles for SciTech from
MARc proof slips. There I encountered a lot of
interesting titles that could, under no pretense,
be included among STM books; R&R was the
answer. In the period 1989 through ‘92 we
published University Press Book News and
terminated it when too many presses declined to
participate. We rolled those reviews into R&R.
Art Book News pleased the art-loving editor but
failed to ingratiate the treasurer.

AGT: Who does your reviews? Are they
scholars with related subject expertise? Librar-
ian/bibliographers? Do you require certain
credentials before someone is permitted to
review for Book News?

FG: Our major (sagacious) houses send
their scholarly titles upon publication. We
continue to read MARC tapes to capture LC’s
bibliographic descriptions and to pick up the due
dates from the CiP records. We solicit books
from experienced publishers; from those houses
publishing so broadly that a blanket order is
unrealistic (we review neither those books you
once succinctly denominated “works of the
imagination” nor the mass of un-scholarly
dross); from new publishers; and we query those
publishers to fact-check reviews prepublication.
Because our objective is to provide a concise
overview of the contents of a book rather than a
critical analysis, our writers are asked to refrain
from expressing any personal bias unless the
level of research is obviously deficient, and we
do mention defects in book preparation or
production. To minimize error we allow
publishers to fact-check reviews prepublication.

AGT: Do you get much “dross”?

FG: The major (sagacious) houses send
their scholarly titles upon publication. We
continue to read MARC tapes to capture LC’s
bibliographic descriptions and to pick up the due
dates from the CiP records. We solicit books
from experienced publishers; from those houses
publishing so broadly that a blanket order is
unrealistic (we review neither those books you
once succinctly denominated “works of the
imagination” nor the mass of un-scholarly
dross); from new publishers; and we query those
books that seem overdue. Eager self-published
authors do sometimes bother us with their (gen-
erally) regrettable offerings.

AGT: What do you mean by syndication
exactly? In any case, it sounds like your
business is moving online. Do you have any
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projections as to how this will impact your bottom line? Do you see a time when you will forgo print altogether?

FG: Syndication — selling … to other media for regular inclusion in their periodicals. Yes, digital is where our growth has been for a decade. The Book News syndicate comprises 50 entities with more on the way. (Don’t you think “syndicate” lends a compelling touch of dash and brigandage?) On the future of our paper edition — much as I personally hate screen-reading, the paper version of Book News is under assault. Ask in a year.

ATG: What’s your turnaround time?

FG: Until the end of 2010 it ran from (rarely) four weeks from the book’s receipt to sixteen weeks for the review that just missed a deadline. To shorten the maximum lag we’ve just rolled both review journals together under the R&R title and publish bimonthly, so, presently, four to twelve weeks.

ATG: And the volume of reviews?

FG: Eighteen to twenty thousand annually. The current year will comprise 18,500 reviews (at the present rate). My goal is to double the title count and put us in the league with ELAPs.

(Recall our initialism for English Language Approval Plan? Remember the wog that urged that we offer the Foreign University & College Unlimited Plan? Probably Al May.) We are already around three times the coverage of each of the main alternatives — Booklist, CHOICE, Doody’s, LJ, PW (in Book News there are no overlaps). On 1 September ’11 we’ve checked in our 379,000th review copy.

ATG: These are all scholarly books?

FG: None of the books we’ve covered would embarrass a university librarian; probably 10% would attract some use in a respectable secondary school library. Our migration to licensing (as against paper subscriptions) has encouraged enabled review of more books for the serious lay reader. We know public library selection offices are now reading Book News content.

ATG: You organize reviews by LC class?

FG: Right; we sort by LC class to the decimal point and appreciate LC’s MARC and CIP services to establish these classes. Many books reach us without pre-pub bibliographic data, requiring us to assign classes and author citations. (Remember the avalanche of catalogs from which you excavated books for the Reed Co-op back in the late ’50s?) We are getting more review copies without cataloging as we pursue more English-language books from foreign countries — more work, but it makes a notable contribution to the selectors’ fodder.

ATG: How are your subscriptions holding up?

FG: Years ago we gave over hustling conventional subscriptions in favor of licensing reviews to entities needing online content. Large users are Books in Print With Book Reviews Online, Majors (medical), Title Source (B&T), EBSCO. [I’ve sent Amazon packing “cause they wanted perpetual use upon licensing the database for a single year” — told ‘em I didn’t have to go all the way to Seattle if I wanted to be mugged.] We do have a few hundred subscriptions. Our recent issues are free at www.booknews.com. Syndication is our future: vastly wider dissemination than one could dream of with a literal journal; one needs not deal with the USPS; renewal and collection are limited and more likely; and the growth in numbers and geographical origins of reviewed books attracts libraries (always our idealized clientele) whence the interest of the aggregators.

ATG: Any other?

FG: Only that annotating books and assembling bibliographies are almost as old as writing itself. It is a crucial service to scholarship. I expect the sort of work Book News has done for decades will remain valuable in whatever form information and wisdom may be transmitted.

ATG Interviews Sven Fund and Michiel Klein Swormink

De Gruyter, www.degruyter.com

by John Long (John Long Associates) <JohnLong429@gmail.com>

and Katina Strauch (Editor, Against the Grain) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

To follow is a conversation (by phone and email) between John Long and Sven Fund and Michiel Klein Swormink of De Gruyter.

JL: De Gruyter encompasses a remarkable span of history beginning in 1749 to our contemporary e-everything environment (De Gruyter’s innovative one platform, 500 paid and open access journals, 800 new eBooks published each year, 40 large d-bases). Could you take a few moments to comment on that?

SF: It’s true, De Gruyter and its preceding publishers have an impressive legacy. Today, we strive to live up to this tradition and work hard to transform our traditional strengths into the digital age. Even if the medium changes more and more from print to electronic, values like quality of content, the ability to discover and broaden trends in research, and the international span of a publishing program prevail.

JL: I am fascinated by the scope of your publishing program and, of course, you are a truly international publisher: humanities & natural sciences, theology & philosophy, biology & chemistry, linguistics, literature, mathematics, physics, history, archaeology, law and medicine — it all began in the humanities!

SF: Yes, still today, De Gruyter is a universal academic publishing house. We virtually publish in all fields — from Algebra to Zoology — in three product types: journals, books, and reference works. The breadth of our portfolio is not without the risk of overexpansion, and we constantly and carefully evaluate our publishing programs. Today we focus even more on what we feel makes most sense to support science and research: important monographs and series, authoritative and state-of-the-art reference content, and high-quality journals. And we have just added open access as an important publishing model.

JL: I understand you have exciting news for our ATG readers regarding De Gruyter and Harvard University Press; in addition, could you talk about your partner, TriLiteral, and its 155K sq. ft. distribution center?

MKS: Yes, exciting news, indeed. Beginning this year, De Gruyter will distribute Harvard University Press’ eBooks to the institutional market worldwide. Our programs cover the same subject areas and are complementary in terms of content. We believe that the combined offering of both our lists on one and the same platform through De Gruyter’s library-friendly and proven business model for eBooks will be a very attractive proposition to the market. We like to call this partnership an “alliance” the sum of which is larger than its parts; for libraries, end-users, authors, and De Gruyter and HUP. At the same time, we are moving our physical distribution and the invoicing of all our continued on page 44