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## Book Publishing Trends and the Librarian

ELEANOR BLUM

*College of Journalism and Communications  
University of Illinois*

In the mid-1940's Clint Murchison, the Texas oil magnate, began giving serious consideration to the future of his two sons, John and Clint Jr., both of whom were in college.

He decided he would like one of the two to become a newspaper publisher, and with this in mind called on his friend and financial advisor, Don Carter, to "put together a nice little chain of Texas newspapers" as a graduation present for John.

Carter, casting about for the right papers, was not satisfied. He did, however, learn that a thirteen percent block of Henry Holt common stock had just come on the market. He consulted Murchison, who agreed it was a good buy, although book publishing did not turn out to interest John.

This purchase of Henry Holt stock must have occasioned considerable surprise among business acquaintances of Murchison and Carter. Why would two such astute wheeler-dealers buy into a business like book publishing? This, remember, was 1945. Book publishing stock is now regarded as warm, if no longer hot, property. It was hot about four years ago, but it did not become so until the late 1950's, and it has now rather simmered down, although purchase of publishing stock today is con-

sidered quite sound by Wall Street.

Even so, it isn't big business. For 1964, a peak year, sales came to slightly under two billion dollars. This is nothing when compared with oil or plastics or cars. Even though certain national and international trends indicate that it will grow in years to come, it will probably never be big business.

A primary reason for this lies in the nature of the product. There exists considerable doubt as to just what a book is. At the recent International Publishers Association meeting in Washington, a resolution was passed calling for recognition of a "special status for the book" and requesting UNESCO's aid and support in establishing this "special status" so that books could enjoy certain governmental and legal privileges. A minor example of such a privilege is lowered mailing rates.

What makes a book different from other products? Every product—toothpaste, cigarettes, cars, dog food—is in varying degree the work of the human mind and imagination as well as of the machine. But books, to a greater degree than most, are products of the human mind, and frequently they are products of the human heart as well, although confronted with some of the obviously ghost-written or cut-and-paste nonbooks

which flood the market, we may well grow concerned as to the type of mind and heart that went into the making.

Nevertheless, certain types of books are necessary and special products. For example—technical books and some texts; sound works of fiction and non-fiction which explore and report the world; classics which keep tradition alive. In spite of the enormous bulk of trash that clutters the marketplace, books are the best commodities we have to transmit knowledge and culture from generation to generation.

Thus, the book is special, and the legal and economic ramifications revolving around its nature are intricate. Should it, for example, enjoy government protection as a special product? The United States Supreme Court says no, and refuses to exclude it from the Sherman Antitrust Law. The premise is that to protect the book against price cutting is restraint of trade and makes books less available to the public. The industry claims that the publishers need protection from price cutting if the trade is to reach its full potential. On the other hand, Britain believes the reverse and protects books with the Net Book Agreement forbidding price cutting, while Sweden, which had its Net Book Agreement for years, has this year swept it aside.

Books further differ from other products in their uniqueness. Cigarettes, cars, dog food and toothpaste are produced in bulk and promoted by brand name. In publishing, on the other hand, each book is different. Thousands of separate new items must be marketed each year, with their own distinct char-

acter and sales appeal, or lack of it, in thousands of small, often improvised retail outlets. Nobody knows what makes a book sell, nor do they know how much good advertising and other forms of promotion do, or how many copies to print and distribute without glutting the market with remainders selling far below cost. Pretesting by market research is difficult and its results uncertain. Furthermore, books are made or broken on the marketplace their first year. Unlike toothpaste, et cetera, they are highly perishable, although those which survive can far outlast any tube of toothpaste.

But of the thousands published each year, relatively few do survive. Yet it is necessary to go on publishing duds to keep the machinery of production in operation. More important, by tossing these thousands of titles into the marketplace we cull from them the best sellers and the equally vital steady sellers which make up the backlist.

All in all, it's a strange business and an unlikely one for a Texas oil magnate with no interest in letters to invest in. And if he were bent to buy into publishing, why a middle-sized firm on the downgrade like Henry Holt instead of an up-and-coming giant like McGraw-Hill or Doubleday? In 1866, when Henry Holt, recently graduated from Yale, had started his firm, he became a name to be reckoned with. He brought into the American book publishing of that day a high sense of adventure, introducing readers to Thomas Hardy, Robert Louis Stevenson, the controversial Darwin, and, to Einstein with his theory of relativity. He brought out

John Dewey's *Human Nature and Conduct* and commissioned William James' *Principles of Psychology*, the first textbook ever done on the subject. But as Holt aged, the firm lost its eminence. By 1945, it was mediocre.

Publishing circles were as puzzled as business circles over Murchinson's interest—with one difference. Book publishers were also concerned about what Murchison might do to publishing. Just as we aren't sure what a book is, neither are we sure what book publishing is. Is it a business? Is it a profession? Is it an art? At some times, and for some books, it is a bit of each in varying degree. All books, even those subsidized by universities and foundations and the government printing office, must partially pay their way. (The sole exception is "vanity" publishing.) However, the amount needed by the publisher varies, and commercial publishers must make more profit than subsidized ones.

But for a very high percentage of commercial publishers, profit is not the only motive. Examples of contemporaries who consider publishing a public service and a public responsibility as well as a business are Alfred Knopf of the firm by his name, his son, Pat, who founded Atheneum, William Jovanovich of Harcourt, Brace and World, and, in spite of his buffoonery, Bennet Cerf, who has remarked, "I've tried to compromise between making money and publishing good books. I think I've succeeded at it." These and many other commercial publishers feel a high sense of responsibility to introduce new and serious authors who may not sell well; to introduce provocative ideas that may

not prove popular or easy to comprehend; and to hand down knowledge and cultural tradition.

Although technical and scholarly books help to fulfill this social role, especially with respect to the transmission of knowledge, much of the responsibility for the other functions rests with the trade book segment of publishing—a segment which is large in terms of number of titles but small in terms of sales volume. In 1964, it accounted for only seven percent of sales receipts. Yet, quoting Dan Lacy, managing director of the American Book Publishers Council, "It is the economics of this small segment of the Industry that determines the character of the literature published in the United States." Not that trade books are always serious, or literary. This segment also includes most of the trash and ephemera—the warmed-over magazine articles that appear as coffee table books, the instant anthologies that are cut-and-paste jobs, the ghost-written autobiographies of TV personalities which are nonbooks about non-people. In defense of this trash which litters up the mind of the reader if it touches it at all, it frequently subsidizes losses on more serious works of serious writers. In any case, to many commercial publishers, trade book publishing is the most venturesome and crucial portion of the industry. Without it there would be no paperback reprints, no backlists, no variety of titles for the librarian to select from. Dedicated publishers find it the most fascinating and least profitable part of the business.

Whatsoever interests Murchison had for buying into Holt, they did not lie

in the trade book department. Shortly after Murchison and his associates began to get Holt off the ground he brought in a Wall Street man, Edgar Rigg, as president. Rigg said he intended to run Holt "as a modern business instead of a literary tea party." And he did indeed make some much needed technical innovations like inventory control. "I approach publishing," he said, "just the way I approach any other business. There is much more money in textbooks; it's a much safer proposition. There's a lot of romance but damned little profit in trade books, and I'm not interested in romance. Why are we in trade books at all? Well, I wouldn't say we do it as a public relations front, exactly, but we do feel it builds a desirable corporate image for us."

When Murchinson bought into Holt, there was speculation that he wanted a sounding board for his quite conservative political ideas. But this proved unfounded. Murchison has interfered only once with editorial matters, and in that case his interests were physiological. For some time Murchison had been a disciple of a seventy-eight year-old Vermont doctor named DeForest Clinton Jarvis, who advocated, among other things, honey and apple cider vinegar to aid vitality. Murchison wanted Holt to publish a book on Dr. Jarvis' theories. Against their better judgment the editors brought out *Folk Medicine* in an edition of five thousand. It became a runaway best seller.

Murchison's real reason for buying into Holt was its strong textbook department. He and his financial advisors were somewhat in advance of most of

the book publishers in foreseeing the results of certain trends which were to bring about an upsurge of book sales. I doubt that he, or anyone else, foresaw all the future trends. What I suspect interested Murchison and company most were the population explosion that would create a big market for texts and learning materials, and the increase of leisure time, which was also to have a marked effect on reading.

Textbooks—and this holds true of reference books as well—are a much surer thing financially than trade books. Instead of producing a few copies of many titles, you produce many copies of a few titles. Although these few titles are more expensive than trade books to produce, their sales are more predictable, they are easier to market, and furthermore, they have a captive audience. In short, rational merchandising is possible. Rigg took Holt's textbook responsibilities very seriously. By stock acquisitions and mergers he strengthened and expanded their line, and although he acquired, especially through the merger with Rinehart, a sound backlist of trade books, texts were primary. Some years ago he was asked whether or not he would have published *Peyton Place* and he replied that he would not. "What would teachers and school authorities who buy our textbooks think of a firm that published a book featuring incest and a school principal happily conducting an extramarital affair?" he added.

Today the shape of the textbook industry is changing, but Holt is keeping up with it. It used to be a comfortable industry following definitely structured lines that stuck closely to print. The

change began with World War II when the government conducted learning experiments as to how soldiers might best be taught quickly, and came up with new theories and techniques, including programmed learning. Sputnik—which certainly was not foreseen—has further accelerated the demand for effective learning materials, both print and non-print. Today, a tremendous problem lies in keeping texts up-to-date. Many texts are too expensive to produce to be revised easily. A possible solution lies in the paperback satellite, as it is called—inexpensive paperbacks to keep the main text up-to-date.

In spite of the fact that textbooks sales are steadily climbing, textbook publishers are feeling rather lost. Used to following, they now feel that they must somehow lead—and don't know how. There is dem. in some educational circles that university presses should publish texts, and they are doing a bit of it. Usually, however, they toss out trial balloons in inexpensive forms, and if the learning experiment seems successful, let commercial firms carry on. Nevertheless, commercial text publishers are distinctly nervous, and the American Association of Textbook Publishers is setting up research committees. However, the new-fangled learning materials and methods have not dampened their profits. Many of the mergers which occurred so frequently in the late fifties and early sixties were acquisitions of textbook firms by general tradebook publishers. Holt, itself, is an outstanding example. It is now, of course, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, and has acquired other firms, which, if added to the name,

would make it so impossibly long that it might damage its delicate corporate image. Other classic examples are Harcourt, Brace which has become Harcourt, Brace & World; and Harpers, which through acquisition of Row Peterson has become Harper & Row.

The second trend—toward increased leisure—has been brought about by a number of causes—stronger unionization, automation, and an increasing respect for the rights of the individual, including his right to loaf. No one has proved that the individual has spent this additional time reading. Some men and women use their shortened work week to moonlight. Others, I am sure, sink into an easy chair, prop up their feet, reach for a beer can, and turn on TV. Interestingly enough, studies show that TV tends to cut into light, recreational reading rather than into serious reading.

My personal hunch is that the sales of how-to books have been vastly increased by new leisure. If you are unused to spare time, it isn't easy to know how to spend it. Nonreaders don't automatically become readers just because they now have time to read. They are, however, likely to acquire hobbies, and here books can help. They start bird-watching and want books about birds; they start keeping pets and want to know how to take care of them; they start traveling and want to acquaint themselves with the places they plan to visit.

I suspect that the new leisure, too, is a factor in the rash of cookbooks. In fact, the leisure market—not just for books—is full of contradictions, and

cookbooks are a prime example. These days, Betty Crocker, Stouffer, and any number of firms knock themselves out freezing, pre-packaging and instantizing dishes as delectable and decorative as a debutante at her coming-out ball, yours for the frosting, the setting of the oven thermostat. And what do people do? They buy these goodies, but at the same time, they buy cookbooks full of intricate dishes that take hours, even days, to prepare. A prime example of such a cookbook is the very popular and expensive *Art of French Cooking*.

In short, we don't want leisure to *be*; we want leisure to *do*. We must make something, we must buy something, we must go somewhere, we must entertain. And books help us build and buy and go and give parties. There are books telling us how to prepare food that is bound to put on weight, and books telling us how to lose the weight, books telling us what and how to drink, and books telling us how to get rid of our hangover.

Holt, Rinehardt & Winston have climbed on this bandwagon with their magazines like *Field & Stream* and a number of others which deal with hunting and home building and decoration. These magazines account for thirty percent of company sales. Practically all commercial trade book firms publish for this market; some of the titles are dreamed up by editors who contact authorities or free lance writers. And somewhere in their large leisure-time market, I am afraid that the serious book of fiction or nonfiction—but particularly fiction—is likely to get lost. If the editor doesn't lose it, the public does.

Another, entirely different trend which I doubt that Murchison or many other publishers foresaw in 1945 has been the importance of underdeveloped countries—new and old—as a book market. Our exports to these countries have increased enormously. Technical books are particularly in demand, due somewhat to the use of English everywhere as a second language. Textbooks are also somewhat in demand, but our elementary and social science texts are not always suitable. Science and math texts, however, can be used.

Asian and African publishers in particular need their own texts, no matter in what language. They want to study their history and geography and politics—not ours. They also need trade books, and buy many of ours, especially paperbacks. The university press publishers, under the auspices of the Association of American University Presses, is helping Asian and African countries produce their own books. This can be very involved. They lack trained personnel; they often lack adequate printing facilities; their distribution systems—and frequently their roads and transportation—are poor. The Association of American University Presses has sent some of its leading publishers to help them at least blueprint possibilities for their own publishing houses, and is sponsoring nationals who come here to learn the techniques of book publishing. UNESCO, too, has embarked on a program of assisting the development of indigenous book publishing in Asia and Africa, as has the International Press Association. Many of the firms which emerge will be government—rather than

privately controlled.

In this connection, Franklin Book Programs, too, has been helpful in bringing much needed books to undeveloped areas. A nonprofit organization financed partially by government, partially by foundations, it has done much to erase the image of the ugly American. Its primary aim is to translate English-language books into the native tongues of the countries in which it operates. It works through a small American staff which travels to the various countries contacting nationals to learn what books the people wish translated. These run the gamut from texts and technical to literature, how-to, and children's books. Franklin will go further and help those countries desiring such to set up indigenous printing and publishing operations. Currently it is aiding Egypt and Iran. Thus far it has offices in Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, East and West Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Nigeria, Afghanistan, and, very recently, Kenya. It also has a slightly different arrangement with Argentina and Brazil. The countries in which it operates contribute partial funds.

There is a further trend of an entirely different nature which influences structure rather than trade. By no means peculiar to book publishing, it has manifested itself in trucking, in railroads and in many other areas. It is tied in with the population explosion, with internationalism and with technological developments, including automation. This is the general trend toward bigness, which has brought with it, in book publishing and other fields, public sales of stocks and a rash of new mergers, both of

which now seem to be leveling off to about normal as far as book publishing is concerned.

Mergers and public sale of stock are not new to book publishing, but during the past decade they took on a new intensity. Reasons are many and varied. Some are financial, as in the case of the merger of Macmillan with Crowell-Collier; some are personal, as in the case of the acquisition of Knopf by Random House. Their effects concern us more than their reasons. In the resultant scuffling, what has happened to the quality of the books produced, and particularly to the sensitive trade book segment? More specifically, what is the effect upon serious creative writing? Is bigness badness?

You can make a case either way, which is much easier to do than to give a definitive answer. The remark made by a young Wall Street broker after he had finished work on one of the larger publishing house stock sales in 1960, that blue-ribbon year for merges, seems especially apt. "The sale went real well, and I'm happy about that. But there's something that's been worrying me all week. I just can't see those Wall Street people having any enthusiasm at all for the kind of publisher who wants to put out a book because he thinks it has something to say, regardless of its commercial potential." The rumor is that Bennett Cerf is finding his feeling of social responsibility hard to explain to his stockholders, and that he, having gone public with Random House, would now like to find a way to go back private.

My own guess is that if the more sen-

sitive publishers are astute businessmen as well as book men, they may profit from bigness. Book publishers, whether large or small, need better business methods and innovations. They also need a sense of daring such as Henry Holt had, and enough capital to carry through their ideas. Holt, now a large firm which does little to innovate as far as creative writing is concerned, was doing equally little before Murchison stepped in with his millions. On the other hand, another of the large firms, McGraw-Hill, is placing new and unexpected emphasis on quality in its trade books, and in an effort to achieve it, has recently hired a stable of brilliant young editors. Although it has not yet come up with any startling literary discoveries, this may be somewhat due to the fact that New American Library even more recently, in what must have been a spectacular raid, lured most of the young men away. In any case, McGraw-Hill's trade list will bear watching.

Interesting developments are also occurring at Doubleday, which teamed in September with the *Paris Review* in an effort to brighten its mediocre fiction image. David Dempsey, in a recent *Saturday Review*, quotes Walter Bradbury of Doubleday: "*Paris Review* has a reputation for discovering good, somewhat experimental new authors. We're counting on getting some first novels out of this arrangement—not just ordinary novels, but the kind that carry the imprimatur of a prestige literary publication. To get the attention of book dealers—even to get reviewed—first novels need this sort of special hallmark. We're hoping, too, to get the benefit

of the *Review's* popularity in intellectual circles by using the PR imprint on these jointly produced books."

Turning to a newspaper for an example, the *New York Times* is big without being bad. Everything depends upon the men in control. Big firms have money to take risks. True, they also have a tendency toward conservatism, particularly when they must account to stockholders, but too much caution, when dealing with books, can be poor business.

Big firms are not always ideologically conservative, either, in what they publish. Three interesting books on Red China—all of which praise it and are critical of our attitude—have come out recently. One, Felix Greene's *Curtain of Ignorance: How the American Public Has been Misinformed About China*, was brought out by Doubleday, one of the biggest firms of all and one of the most undistinguished; another, Edgar Snow's *The Other Side of the River: Red China Today*, was published by Random House; a third, the photographer, Cartier-Bresson's *China*, is a paperback published by a large paperback firm, Bantam. Cartier-Bresson's photographs contrast China under Chiang Kai-shek with China today, to the detriment of the old China. Another book on an entirely different subject, *Television and Society: An Inquiry and Agenda for Improvement*, by Harry Skornia, which rips into commercial television with no holds barred, was published by McGraw-Hill this fall. All four of these firms are very big and they have all four taken the unpopular side of controversial issues.

However, I don't think they are championing causes. I think they are merely publishing what they feel will sell. Red China and television are hot subjects, no matter which side the author is on. Both of these subjects, too, are likely to get large library sales. But whether or not these firms would publish a serious first novel—a borderline novel—by a new novelist of promise is another question. Whether or not they would continue to publish his novels even though they did not sell is an even more pertinent question.

This leads to my last trend—the constantly increasing role of government in book publishing. Government's hand has always loomed large, as witness the copyright law, mailing privileges (where magazines fare better than books), the Sherman Antitrust laws which permit price cutting. On another level, the government for over a century has operated the largest publishing house in the United States—the GPO. And for years it has underwritten university presses, many of whose parent institutions are tax supported. It adds to this subsidy by exempting university publishing from taxation. (Commercial presses, incidentally, are trying to make university presses pay taxes.) There is nothing new about the important part our government plays in book publishing.

Today, however, government is taking on another role. All over the world, even in capitalist countries like the United States, there is a growing trend toward socialization. A number of reasons exist for this: better communications, greater literacy, even the Judeo-

Christian ethic, although this socialization is taking place in parts of the world which are neither Jewish nor Christian.

In the United States, the government has extended its role as producer. No longer does it merely publish through the GPO. Within recent years it has also poured millions into research at universities. Results of this research are frequently incorporated in books produced by commercial firms.

More important, however, it has stepped up its role as customer. Through legislation, much of it very recent, it has expanded the buying power of all libraries—public and those in educational institutions—until today libraries are responsible for forty percent to sixty percent of all book sales. This gives the librarian a new power and responsibility.

On this point I would like to quote Dan Lacy once again. Mr. Lacy made these remarks last March before a special subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Affairs in support of legislation to establish National Foundations for the arts and humanities. "Most important of all the various forms of influence which government, at all levels, has upon literature and indeed upon most of the arts, is in its role as a customer. It is startling to realize that, setting aside textbooks, encyclopedias, and reprints—that is, thinking of new general books—well over half the books published in the United States are bought by tax-supported libraries, public schools and colleges together. This is a new situation in our culture.

"Far more than any other single fac-

tor in American life, the resources and purchasing policies of libraries determine the rewards of creative writing. What libraries can and will buy will prosper; what they cannot or will not buy will not prosper and indeed may not be published at all. It has been my experience that libraries are deeply and profoundly committed to research and scholarship; to teaching; to adult education; to self-help; to reference service, in ways that make them one of our finest and most indispensable institutions. But it has also been my experience that, with a few notable exceptions, they feel no such commitment to the processes of creative literature. To be concrete, libraries buy copiously in children's informative non-fiction works; in history and foreign affairs; in books on how to cook, play golf or bridge, or repair homes; and in dozens of similar fields. In all of these fields, it is now possible to publish several times as many titles as could be brought out twenty-five years ago. But libraries generally do not buy new poetry—only anthologies and the collected works of safely established poets. The direct consequence is that the amount of new poetry published in book form, for all our culture boom, is declining, not increasing, and that which is still published is increasingly brought out by university presses or with other subsidy. The economics of publishing poetry is so delicately poised that a very slight change in library acquisition policy could have a dramatic effect. A library could buy all the responsibly published poetry first appearing in book form in

the United States for well under \$500 a year. If a stimulant grant from an arts or humanities foundation enabled as few as ten libraries in each state to do this on a regular basis, the publishing of poetry would be transformed, and poets would find—in however slight degree—a market and, more usefully, an audience. Very similar statements could be made about library purchasing of fiction by new authors not previously published and its relation to the opportunity to develop professional writers in this field."

A case here can be made—and has frequently been made—that novelists are themselves helping to kill the novel. The old-style grand novel of plot has gone. The tendency now is to reflect the world we live in, which to many novelists is confused, disorganized and absurd, demanding confused, disorganized, absurd prose to reflect it. But it takes rare genius to bring this kind of book off properly. Although I may oversimplify the case, the fact remains that, for whatever reason, publication of serious fiction declines each year.

No matter how we, as librarians, may personally feel about new fiction—or, for that matter, about poetry or quality nonfiction of limited interest—today's librarians, because of their tremendous buying power, have a responsibility for book selection that goes deeper than the needs of the community. Publishers will pay us attention they have never paid before. World trends as reflected in book publishing have placed us in a new role as patrons of arts and letters.