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Where, Oh Where Have the Publishers Gone: Changes in the Children's Publishing Industry and Their Effect on Public Libraries

by Rachel Wadham

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A great chain of people and organizations in our society create, produce, and distribute information. Worthwhile end-products require a somewhat symbiotic relationship between related organizations. One such relationship existed between the children's publishing industry and public library children's departments until recent changes in the children's publishing industry undermined this delicate relationship. The publishers' increasing interest in the retail market has caused publishers to breed familiarity with the public market, print lavish illustrations, and change book formats, creating many difficulties that libraries must now confront.

The first specialized children's book publishers were formed prior to 1920. The editors hired to spearhead these new departments came mostly from library and education backgrounds. Because the books were shaped by librarians, they were designed to attract a library market. Librarians provided input on what children should and should not read (Elleman 1987), and their advice was well-marked by publishers, who knew that if a book was well received by librarians it would be assured a long and steady life (McElderry 1988). These close publisher-librarian relationships gradually changed as new personnel entered the field, but the established patterns remained in place for decades.

The first major change in the children's publishing industry came in the aftermath of Sputnik, when millions of dollars were being pumped into educational institutions through the NDEA grants. With nearly unlimited funds, librarians sought a variety of materials, and publishers quickly stepped in to meet the need. As sales soared, a new influence, finance, entered children's book publishing. Publishing companies became part of big business and expanded their

staffs to handle budgets, five-year plans, cost ratios, and bottom lines. Liberal arts and journalism graduates with an interest in publishing were sought after.

The library was still a powerful buying force; however, this power was soon to change. In the 1970s, federal funding began to dwindle, and with it libraries' buying power declined. Publishers, now encumbered by heavily staffed departments and a large assortment of authors and illustrators, went looking for alternative markets. They turned to the retail markets and to the newly emerging children's-only bookstores (Elleman 1987). During the 1950s and 1960s the bookstores that specialized in children's books were few and far between. Larger stores carried some children's books, but did not pay much attention to them. But beginning in the 1970s, children's books-only bookstores began to spring up everywhere (Marcus 1995). Because of the great decrease in library funding and the proliferation and success of children's bookstores the time was ripe for publishers to replace their focus on library markets to the retail markets (McElderry 1988). As the focus shifted from libraries to bookstores, library services directors in publishing houses became marketing directors. Designing floor displays outweighed mailing review copies, and publicists with media contacts were recruited (Epstien 1986). Patterned after the bond that had developed between libraries and publishers when the children's book business was in its infancy, the bond between booksellers and publishers became a very strong one (Meeker 1987).

This new focus on retail markets created a number of significant changes in the publishing industry. The library business is rather passive; reviews are really what sell books. The retail market is more aggressive, (Meeker 1987), so

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publishers began to combine creativity and independence with strong marketing and intensive sales coverage (Retan 1982). Books became products to be promoted to a consumer market. Publishers, realizing that book buyers had neither the expertise in book selection nor the inclination to study the field, began implementing strong marketing tactics to attract consumers (Elleman 1987). The library market was left farther and farther behind as publishers poured their resources into courting the bookstores and the consumer. In the retail sector the need to breed familiarity, publish lavish pictures, and create new book formats were all necessary to draw in buyers. These elements, indispensable in the retail market, do not necessarily carry over to the library market. Libraries must now deal with the problems caused by this commercialization of books (Epstien 1986).

To foster the public's need for familiarity, publishers began providing a wide variety of old titles in new formats. Modernized cover art, new glossy packaging, and heavy promotion gave new life to the classics. Publishers began to offer books with instant purchase appeal, such as those based on motion pictures and television programs (Elleman 1987). Series books also began to saturate the market. These "novels by brand-name authors" provided titles that consumers identified with and minimized the need for reviews (Epstien 1986). However, familiarity has produced some negative repercussions. Series books and books based on movies and television do have their place; such books often give confidence to reluctant readers. They also have the ability to keep children reading. However, when books are turned out quickly with formulaic plot lines, there is little time to foster quality. This trend not only affects libraries and librarians, but schools and teachers as well. Quality books are very important to all of those who are actively trying to encourage children to read. This trend impairs the ability of librarians and teachers to provide children with high caliber literature.

Since retail customers are drawn visually to books, the overall design and lavish illustrations of book became of paramount importance

(Epstien 1986). Brilliant cover art and extravagant pictures communicate instantly to the consumer. This type of visual communication requires no special knowledge on the part of customers to identify the kind of book they need or want (Schulman 1982). Responding to this visual appeal, publishers commissioned new artists to give books a contemporary "retail" look (Meeker 1987). Vast eye-catching displays to house books and books packaged in spiffy dust jackets with inviting titles were readily provided to bookstores by publishers. An example of this new visual emphasis is the changing format and appearance of nonfiction children's books. Illustrations are no longer simply decorative matter; they have become an integral part in the presentation of the entire book. Full-color photographs are extensively incorporated in nonfiction books, especially in books for older children. When drawings are used they must have expert draftsmanship and attractiveness. When earlier nonfiction works are revised, drawings are replaced by photographs or art is updated to reflect contemporary times.

Another important component of the visual aspect of book production is the overall design of the book. All elements of a book, including book size, end papers, front matter, amount of white space, paper quality, and type size, are carefully manipulated to present an overall aesthetic tone to the presentation (Elleman 1987). With this emphasis on design, the information within the book at times becomes secondary. Children's books have become commercialized objects to be bought and sold. As with the need to breed familiarity, this sublimation of information also hampers librarians and teachers. Educators use books as tools of learning. When extreme emphasis is placed on illustrations and design, the work of educators to attract children to the words and thus the information the books contain may fail.

In another response to the needs of the retail market, publishers actively searched for and created new formats for books. These "imaginative merchandise books" come in a variety of shapes and sizes (Epstien 1986).

Pop-ups with dramatic paper sculptures and movable parts and jack-in-the-box surprises; books cut out in the shape of a truck or a puppy, a clock, or a house; miniature books designed to fit in a child's hand; books with pieces of fur or sandpaper to feel, or fragrance patches to scratch and sniff; panorama books with three-dimensional settings that sometimes include little punch-out characters to "play-act" with; books with mix-or-match flaps that create endless nonsense stories; punch-out and put-together models of dinosaurs or Star Wars planes; books made of cloth with real buttons, zippers or shoelaces (Schulman 1982).

No matter the format, these books provide more than words and pictures; this unusual format provides "utility or play value" as well (Schulman 1982). Such books provide children an introduction to the world of reading in an interesting and unique way. These books, however, present a number of problems for libraries. Books containing paper engineering are too fragile to be used successfully in regular library service (Schulman 1982). Consumable books that can only be used by one child are not appropriate for public libraries.

Publishers also court the new market with board, bathtub, cloth, and other toy books. Termed "Baby-lit," these books were created to attract very young children to reading (Elleman 1987). This is a noble objective, but these books have little utility in a library setting. The difficulties faced by libraries with respect to "baby-lit" encompass some very practical concerns. Unlike traditional books, which have a cover and blank pages around the text, the illustrations and text of "baby-lit" normally encompass every single page of the book. Because of this, librarians face the problem of where to place the bar code as well as the date due stamps. Because babies discover things with their mouths, it is logical for them to "taste" books, thus spreading germs and presenting librarians with the unique challenge of keeping the books sanitary. Publishers have developed many new book

formats that make a book become a toy. For books that could not be made into toys themselves, publishers have created toys and other accessories to accompany them. A visit to a children's bookstore will reveal a host of familiar characters in a variety of incarnations. Dolls, stuffed animals, and cassette tapes are ubiquitous. More than merely additional products with their own revenues, such items are highly effective in increasing a character's visibility and generating greater book sales (Meeker 1987). Traditionally, it has not been the role of libraries to function as toy stores. However, as more and more books become or have accompanying toys, librarians face a big question: should they become toy, as well as book, depositories or not? There are valid concerns of sanitation, theft, and life span of an item. It is difficult to say how librarians will decide this issue. Some libraries use accessory items for display only, others check them out, and others do not carry them at all.

As we have seen, the changing focus of publishers to retail markets has created many problems that librarians must now face. From practical concerns, such as where to put the bar code, to a declining emphasis on quality, children's library collections have been greatly impacted. As time passes, and with the possibilities of increases in library budgets, it is difficult to say whether the problems libraries now face will reverse themselves. Professional librarians must be aware of the effects of other information industries on them. If we are to reestablish the link that publishers and libraries previously enjoyed, we must be familiar with the work that publishers do. Many things have changed during the past twenty years; nonetheless, there is one thing that has not changed: you still can't judge a book by its cover.

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