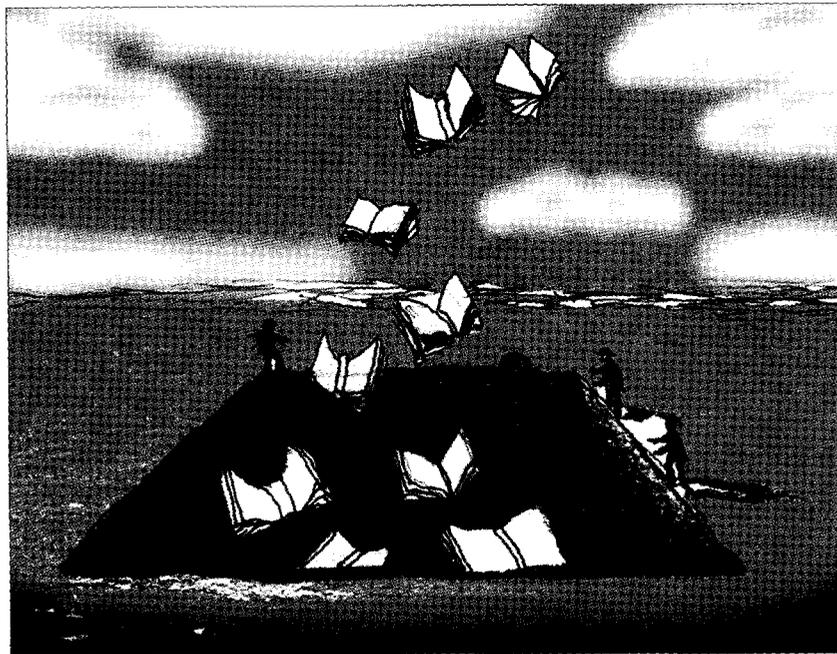


# The Unscholarly World of Scholarly Publishing

by Gregory McNamee



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

University presses are in trouble these days. Beset by a decline (intellectual and numerical) in the specialized academic readership to which they have always catered, encountering rising production and overhead costs, and supported with fewer and fewer dollars from their parent administrations, many of them now face the prospect of closing their doors or re-making themselves so that they no longer publish the work they were created to publish in the first place—namely, scholarly books for scholarly readers.

The days, golden for a certain breed of academic, are long past when university presses served as printers for on-campus scholars—who would, the legend has it, drop off a manuscript on some abstruse subject and return some months later to pick up bound copies of their book. And gone, or rapidly disappearing (and rightly so), are the days when university presses acted mainly as gatekeepers not so much of the general culture but of academic staffing, publication by a reputable press once having been nearly a guarantee of tenure.

Those were the hallmarks of moneyed days, and those days are past. University presses now can take very few risks on meritorious work meant for small audiences. Driven by the need to fund their own operations, given the choice between publishing a second-rate book by an established scholar or a first-rate work by a newcomer, many now must resign themselves to the former, if only to pay the lighting bill.

Viewed in the commercial terms that are now brought to bear on them, university presses have always been in trouble. Specializing in books that almost by definition have tiny audiences, operating on slender margins, most have in the past been satisfied just to break even. Presses with large endowments

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(Stanford, Harvard) and the so-called Bible presses (Oxford, Cambridge) with strong backlists had less to worry about than the little houses attached to land-grant colleges and universities, but even the majors are scrambling these days to tighten their belts and generate greater incomes.

Things were not always so tight. When I went to work for a university press in 1981, it was still customary for large staffs directed by dilettantes or retirees from commercial publishing to lavish inordinate attention on the few titles they published each year. Parent institutions subsidized their presses without complaint, home-campus authors were able to find a home for their work right next door, and young editors were able to undertake a program of leisurely apprenticeship that educated them in all aspects of publishing. Those days were the last gasps of a generation of educational largesse, the golden age of university presses. It is long gone as well, a time, misty in memory for all but a few working members of the university-press community, when the federal government, threatened by Russia's Sputnik I launch, poured millions and millions of dollars into American universities to train scientists and general scholars alike. Textbooks were cheap (I still have a shelf of Harper Torchbooks paperbacks from the early 1970's, thick academic books with cover prices under three dollars), audiences were large, and publishers could issue almost anything they cared to with the knowledge that they could count on selling at least 1,500 copies of most books, even the most specialized monographs, through standing orders to university and research libraries.

Things are much different today. Federal money goes more to research than to general education. Textbooks are so expensive that many instructors prefer to make "course packets" of photocopied materials rather than burden their students with costs that verge on hardship. University presses can count on library standing orders of, on average, no more than 150 copies of a specialized title. And then there is the problem of declin-

ing academic readership. As John Lukacs writes in his memoir *Confessions of an Original Sinner*,

Scholars no longer read much, not even each other's books. They will read *some* books; more often, articles; even more often, reviews; and the latter only in certain publications. . . . We are in the presence of a situation that has few precedents in the past, surely not in the history of the West. . . . Not only have common people lost the time and the inclination for reading; so have many academics.

The result is that the 100-odd university presses in America account for something like 15 percent of the titles published annually here, but for fewer than two percent of the publishing dollars earned. In the face of this discrepancy and of a scholarly world in utter disarray, these presses have had increasingly to question their purpose, and in many instances to change their courses.

Ten years ago Ken Arnold, then the young director of Rutgers University Press, caused a stir by suggesting at a national meeting of university presses that his colleagues follow his lead and stop publishing specialized monographs at all, recognizing that they simply did not sell. Many of his older colleagues were scandalized. One of them, the director of an Ivy League press, grumbled to me, "What about prestige?" He was doubtless thinking of an old standard of a university-press book's success: not sales, but the number of bibliographies in which the book subsequently appeared, a standing that would take years to track. Arthur Rosenthal, the director of Harvard University Press, put it succinctly: "A primary purpose of a university press is to function as a natural outlet for information, theory, speculation, and methodology that will influence human endeavor and enrich understanding in generations to come."

Such leisurely attitudes and measures are no longer current; bottom-line thinking is. Although many press directors would perhaps disavow it, they have in the main followed Arnold's suggestion: the academic monograph is very nearly an artifact, and the monographs that are published are usually issued in specialized, heavily subsidized series edited outside the house. The only money that is to be made in special-interest publishing, even the purest of scholarly editors agrees, is in publishing those fantastically expensive textbooks for captive audiences (in, say, medicine or astrophysics), or in publishing the kinds of books university presses once held in disdain—cookbooks, books of poems by creative-writing faculty, New Age tomes, novels.

They have good reason to think so, for publishing many of these books has indeed paid off. The University of New Mexico Press, for instance, was able to finance many worthy scholarly books in the years after it published Forrest Carter's *Education of Little Tree*, a putative memoir, in the back-to-the-land vein, of life among the Cherokee. The University of California Press similarly bankrolled many projects through the proceeds from worthy if not especially scholarly books like *Ishi, Last of His Tribe*; *Habits of the Heart*; and *The California Wine Atlas*. And university presses such as Hawaii, North Carolina, New England, and Mississippi have engaged in vigorous programs of regional publishing, competing with small commercial houses to produce works of local culture and of fiction set just outside

their door.

Many other university presses are increasingly either turning wholeheartedly to trade publishing, hoping to recruit so-called midlist authors recently, and unceremoniously, downsized from the trade houses after having committed the sin of not writing blockbusters; or they are chasing after academic wills-o'-the-wisp, establishing programs of publishing in fields like "queer studies" and "whiteness studies," which share with the celebrity memoirs and diet guides of the trade world only a guaranteed few weeks in the sun—but which can, the hope goes, stir up enough immediate interest to sell a short run and turn a modest profit.

That those ephemeral fields are intellectual laughingstock seems to bother few editors. New York University physicist Alan Sokal demonstrated the bankruptcy of their approach in May 1996, when the fashionable postmodern journal *Social Text* published a heavily (and inventively) footnoted piece of his arguing that scholars could produce what he called a "liberatory" physics by unifying quantum mechanics and general relativity. The problem was that this unification cannot be accomplished under the laws of physics, at least as they are now understood; Sokal's paper was peppered with mathematical absurdities that would have tipped off the knowing reader, but few readers possessed enough knowledge about science to get the joke. Stung when Sokal's thinly disguised hoax was exposed, the editors nonetheless continued their anti-scientific cant, crying, in the words of one French literary theoretician, that scientists, "deprived of the fat budgets of the Cold War, are seeking a new menace. . . . It is no longer the war against the Soviets, but the one against 'postmodern' intellectuals from overseas." Among the loudest voices decrying Sokal's experiment were the editors and authors of Duke University Press, perhaps the nation's leading outlet of postmodernist theory.

Presses pursuing postmodern lists might do well to study the example of Routledge, a U.K.-based commercial publisher that established a list a few years ago in the then-booming field of "cultural studies." The list grew spectacularly and then collapsed with the decline of interest in that ill-defined field. (Routledge, fighting back from the edge of financial disaster, is now publishing more books in ancient history than in postmodernity.) Those houses, and presses striking out in all directions of the trade list, would also do well to heed the words of retired University of California Press director August Frugé, who warns, "It is not possible to move outside one's area of competence—area of acceptance by the book trade—and get any but second-choice manuscripts." The better authors, that is, will take their work to established publishers who can do the most to further their careers, leaving it to the tenure-seeking and the second-tier to fill the lists of the up-and-comers.

And to publish such authors, with few exceptions, is to court mediocrity, and worse. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn's *Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner* (University of Wisconsin Press) is a prime example. The author, a Sioux feminist, asserts, among other things, that Indian history should be written by Indians alone, and she exhorts her readers to "resist the argument that the American Mother Earth, the native earth, should be legitimized as receptacle for the male colonist's seed." Cook-Lynn dismisses writers like John Updike, "a white, male member of a prosperous and efficient Euro-American (i.e., white) capitalist democracy," and the late Michael Dorris, a mixed-blood, for having written negatively of the alcoholic Sioux mother of his

adopted son. The book is an appalling mess that sounds all the currently fashionable alarms. There are many others like it in current university-press catalogs, diatribes masquerading as scholarship.

Frugé urges publishing smaller but better lists, suggesting that, as a start, presses coldheartedly carve out the bottom ten percent from their current programs—the books that don't sell, the books that no one is especially proud of. He does not say, but I will add as an aside, that as a rule the university presses grounded in the sciences are financially fitter than those grounded in the humanities or social sciences. Although it is certainly susceptible to fads of its own, science is at least based on the empirical and is subject to testing beyond mere opinion; for this reason, as Thomas Kuhn has noted, scientific revolutions are longer in arriving than those in the humanities. This means, if nothing else, that books in the sciences have a longer shelf-life than those in the humanities.

If university presses become trade publishers, Frugé writes in his memoir, *A Skeptic Among Scholars*, they "shall soon be second-rate and expendable. But at our own specialty we can do better than others can, and we need only get the best possible scholarly books"—by which he means, he later adds, "honest research (and teaching) as free as possible from political intent." But the university these days is the most heavily politicized venue in American life, and it seems unlikely that university presses will disavow the culture in which they exist.

Also unlikely, at least for the moment, is the establishment of a golden mean that, to my mind, would be a reasonable solution to the present crisis in scholarly publishing. In this model, university presses would communicate worthwhile and mean-

ingful scholarship to the larger public, connecting for once academic endeavor to the general culture. (Precedents for such a program can be found, but not in the United States; I am thinking of the English Open University and the French *Que sais-je?* series.) Outstanding books in "queer studies" and "whiteness studies" and all the other special-interest studies would certainly be among the books published under this program, provided that they were indeed outstanding. One such book, and one of the more interesting social-science books in recent years, is Philippe Bourgois' *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* (Cambridge University Press), a study of lives brutalized by drug addiction, poverty, crime, and violence. Bourgois spent five years in a Puerto Rican barrio in East Harlem studying the culture of crack cocaine as another anthropologist would an exotic tribe. His thoughts on the theory and practice of anthropological investigation often run counter to the received wisdom of voters and policymakers: "Suffering," he writes, "is usually hideous; it is a solvent of human integrity, and ethnographers never want to make the people they study look ugly. This imperative to sanitize the vulnerable is particularly strong in the United States, where survival-of-the-fittest, blame-the-victim theories of individual action constitute a popular 'common sense.'"

This is controversial work, and sure to offend some sensibilities. It is also meaningful and an example, I think, of the kind of books university presses will want to pursue if they are to fulfill their mission: to publish scholarship well, and to bring that scholarship to the largest possible audience, without going broke in the process.

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# Three Poems by Wendell Berry

## To a Writer of Reputation

Having begun in public anonymity,  
you did not count on this  
literary enterprise by which  
some body becomes a "name"—  
as if you have died and have become  
a part of mere geography. Greet,  
therefore, the roadsigns on the road.

Or perhaps you have become deaf and blind,  
or merely inanimate, and may  
be studied without embarrassment  
by the disinterested, the dispassionate,  
and the merely curious,  
not fearing to be overheard.  
Hello to the grass, then, and to the trees.

Or perhaps you are secretly  
still alert and moving, no longer the one  
they have named, but another,  
named by yourself,  
carrying away this morning's showers  
for your private delectation.  
Hello, river.

## The Rejected Husband

After the storm and the new  
stillness of the snow, he returns  
to the graveyard, as though  
he might turn back the white coverlet,  
slip in beside her as he used to do,  
and again feel, beneath his hand,  
her flesh quicken and turn warm.  
But he is not her husband now.  
To participate in resurrection, one  
first must be dead. And he goes  
back into the whitened world, alive.

## In Art Rowanberry's Barn

In Art Rowanberry's barn, when Art's death  
had become quietly a fact among  
the other facts, Andy Catlett found  
a jacket made of the top half  
of a pair of coveralls after  
the legs wore out, for Art  
never wasted anything.  
Andy found a careful box made  
of woodscraps with a strap  
for a handle; it contained  
a handful of small nails  
wrapped in a piece of newspaper,  
several large nails, several  
rusty bolts with nuts and washers,  
some old harness buckles  
and rings, rusty but usable,  
several small metal boxes, empty,  
and three hickory nuts  
hollowed out by mice.  
And all of these things Andy  
put back where they had been,  
for time and the world and other people  
to dispense with as they might,  
but not by him to be disprized.  
This long putting away  
of things maybe useful was not all  
of Art's care-taking; he cared  
for creatures also, every day  
leaving his tracks in dust, mud  
or snow as he went about  
looking after his stock, or gave  
strength to lighten a neighbor's work.  
Andy found a bridle made  
of several lengths of baling twine  
knotted to a rusty bit,  
an old set of chain harness,  
four horseshoes of different sizes,  
and three hammerstones picked up  
from the opened furrow on days  
now as perfectly forgotten  
as the days when they were lost.  
He found a good farrier's knife,  
an awl, a key to a lock  
that would no longer open.