

Jason Epstein Book Business:  
Publishing Past Present &  
Future  
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than Donald and Bennett, and his son Pat had recently left the firm to start a business of his own. Alfred's wife, Blanche—his partner and most brilliant editor—was not well, and Alfred's decision to sell, which was shocking at the time, was in retrospect inevitable. When Blanche's condition worsened a few years later and she had only a day or so to live, she left a note for Alfred to read at Frank Campbell's on Madison Avenue, where a string quartet in black skirts and white blouses on a stage banked with camelias awaited her friends and family. She thanked everyone for taking the trouble to attend, apologized for disturbing them on a busy Monday morning, and hoped they would enjoy some music that she and Alfred liked. It was a fine publisher's characteristically stylish goodbye. So was Bennett's several years later when his friend Phyllis Newman sang show tunes at St. Paul's Chapel on the Columbia campus, where Bennett had been a friend and classmate of Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart and become addicted to the Broadway theater. Dozens of writers, publishers, and agents attended, and as we chatted afterward on that raw rain-swept morning in the shadow of Low Library I knew that we had said goodbye to more than a single great publisher and dear friend.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# Goodbye to All That

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by JASON EPSTEIN  
(his 2001 predictions)

**T**he talented young men and women who had started their firms in the 1920s and introduced the literature of modernism to American readers by risking their fortunes and their destiny on Faulkner and Joyce, Proust, Gide, Lawrence, Stein, Stevens, and Pound would soon be gone, and so would their highly personal, hand-crafted publishing styles. They were not, of course, the only distinguished publishers who flourished during the interwar years. There were also Harper and Scribner, whose list included Hemingway and Fitzgerald; Harcourt,

Brace, which published Eliot and several Bloomsbury writers; Macmillan and the Boston firms Houghton Mifflin and Little, Brown; and W. W. Norton with its translations of Freud and its fine music list. But these long established firms would also be caught up in the transformation already begun when I joined Random House in 1958. At first the changes were imperceptible. Like my colleagues I assumed that Random House in the early 1960s was a fixed star within its universe. Only gradually did I see that its universe was itself in flux.

From its origins nearly two centuries ago until the 1960s, when the suburban migration and the hegemony of the shopping mall radically altered the retail market for books, the American publishing industry had followed an historic pattern. Manuscripts were sent by publishers to a compositor to be set in type—by hand until the invention in 1884 of linotype machines and three years later of monotype, which melted lead, cast it as type, and set copy mechanically. The type, fitted into a form, was given to a printer and placed on a press, which produced printed sheets that were then folded and gathered into signatures, sewn together, and bound: essentially the same procedure that had prevailed since Gutenberg. The smell of ink and hot metal that permeated the printing houses on

Varick Street where Random House printed some of its titles in the early 1960s would probably have been familiar to the Renaissance printers of Verona. By the early nineteenth century a few innovations had been introduced. Steam presses were invented in 1810 and in 1846 stereotype plates made it possible to produce longer runs at less cost per copy. Books were sent from the printer to the publisher's warehouse and from there shipped to retailers from whom the publisher's travelers had previously solicited orders. Some books—sets, for example, and expensive illustrated editions such as Audubon's *Birds of America*—were sold by subscription. But most books were sold in bookshops, which by the turn of the century were established in hundreds of cities and towns throughout the country.

A peculiarity of the trade has been the custom, established during the Depression of the 1930s, that unsold copies can be returned for full credit to the publishers. In effect, books are sold on consignment. Because it was usually impossible to know in advance whether a book would sell, booksellers could not afford to risk their precious capital on unknown authors without a publisher's indemnity. Rather than lose their customers to bankruptcy, publishers, following the practice introduced by Simon & Schuster, agreed to take unsold copies

back for credit against future orders. "Gone today. Here tomorrow" was Alfred Knopf's comment on this grim condition of sale. Publishers have since learned to cover the cost of returns by inflating the retail price of books, so that book buyers pay not only for the copies they buy but a proportionate share of copies returned to publishers' warehouses to be destroyed and recycled. In the technological future, the problem of returns will be eliminated to the extent that books are printed on demand in response to customers' orders rather than printed in quantity and consigned to retail bookstores awaiting buyers who may or may not want them.

Harper Bros., one of the earliest American publishers, began as a New York printer in 1817. Soon the firm was competing with other New York printers to ship books, including pirated editions of British authors, via the Erie Canal to the hinterland, where local printers could not match New York prices. The canal gave the New York printers an advantage over their competitors in Boston and Philadelphia, which helps explain New York's preeminence as a book publishing center. There were, of course, other reasons. Boston was a Congregationalist theocracy with strong Puritan overtones, Philadelphia was a Quaker aristocracy. But New

York was polyglot, cosmopolitan, open to anyone with talent and ambition. John Jacob Astor, a fur trader, might have scraped by in Boston or Philadelphia. In New York he became, despite his lowly origins, his accent, and his foreign birth, the richest man in the United States and the founder of a dynasty. By the Civil War, New York's preeminence as a publishing center was well established.

The United States, with few writers of its own to protect and a printing industry to nurture, ignored international copyright throughout most of the nineteenth century. By 1853, Harper Bros., with a staff of five hundred, had become New York City's largest employer and the world's leading book publisher, having added Bibles and schoolbooks as well as books by American writers to its line of pirated works by Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontës, and others. According to Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace in *Gotham*, their magisterial history of New York to 1898, surely the greatest and at nearly five pounds the most unwieldy history of a city ever written, Thomas Babbington Macaulay was the most successful of Harper's pirated authors. His *History of England from the Accession of James II* sold, according to Burrows and Wallace, an amazing 400,000 copies, a performance comparable to

that of a major nonfiction best-seller today in a much larger America, to readers eager to outdo England's rise to world power.

By the 1840s the American market had become important enough for Charles Dickens to cross the Atlantic to protest the theft of his property. New York literary society held a ball in his honor for 2,500 guests at the Park Theatre, and Washington Irving was host at another dinner for a more select group at the City Hotel. But Dickens's plea for copyright protection was ignored, and by the time he left for Canada he had seen enough of the United States to be depressed by its rough edges. He recorded his disappointment in a short and uncharacteristically glum book—*American Notes*—which Harper immediately pirated and sold for 12½ cents a copy. *American Notes* is worth reading if only for its account of Dickens's journey by train from Washington to Philadelphia through what he thought was a storm of feathers but proved to be spit from the passengers in the forward coaches. American spitting offended Dickens. When he visited the Senate he complained that the senators spat so wide of the cuspidors that the carpets were like swamps. Soon after Dickens's unsuccessful appeal, American authors asked for protection for their

own works in foreign editions, and by the end of the century Congress passed an International Copyright Act, to the benefit of publishers, who could now contract for exclusive rights to the works of British and other foreign writers and earn a normal profit from them.

By the mid-1850s, New York publishers were shipping millions of books to the hinterland. The most popular novel of the day, according to Burrows and Wallace, was *The Wide, Wide World*, written by an impoverished gentlewoman named Susan Warner. Harper rejected this "pious and sentimental" manuscript, calling it "fudge," but G. P. Putnam, alert to the genre then as now, picked it up and sold fourteen editions. In the decade before the Civil War there were 112 publishers in New York and others in Boston, Philadelphia, and other cities. New York had the advantage over these other cities, according to Burrows and Wallace, of a relatively carefree attitude toward "blood and thunder adventures, sado-masochistic romances laced with sex, horror and lurid accounts of patrician villainy and plebeian mischief," staples of the trade then as now. New York houses dominated the market for the genre until, in the 1870s, Anthony Comstock, a self-confessed former devotee of the solitary vice,

convinced the city's leaders that for the sake of respectable appearances, a hypocritical electorate would not object to the suppression of its shameful fantasies. Major publishers thereafter catered to the genteel pretensions of readers who bowed to an idealized assumption of feminine modesty. It was not until the 1920s when publishers introduced the literature of modernism and its critique of all assumptions, that American publishing, to use Van Wyck Brooks's term, came of age along with the nation itself.

The 1920s were the golden age of American publishing, an age whose aura still glowed, if dimly, when I went to work for Doubleday. In 1950, the firms that were launched in the twenties were still small. When I joined Random House in 1958, its sales were just under \$5 million, probably equal to Simon & Schuster's. Knopf and Viking were smaller. These houses were still run by their founders, and each had its own personality. From our perspective at Random House, Knopf and Viking had aged more than ourselves, while Simon & Schuster remained in a state of ageless adolescence. There were still thousands of privately owned bookshops in cities and towns everywhere. Most were barely as wide as a hallway, with such

names as Smile-a-While and Book Nook and Bide-a-Wee, but many were dense with titles of all kinds, including regional and other special collections reflecting the interests of the owners. To linger in these shops for an hour or two was a bibliographic adventure amid the scent of bindings, where the accrued wisdom of the species was for sale, lined up on shelves alphabetically within the categories of thought. For the publishers and booksellers of the 1920s and after there were more than enough challenging new writers to make publishing a constant adventure. Irving, Cooper, and Twain had been celebrities in their day, but nothing like the writers who emerged in the interwar years and the postwar decades. When the proud publisher of *Forever Amber*, Kathleen Windsor's great best-seller of 1944, promoted her book with a glamorous portrait of its good-looking author, Bennett Cerf responded by taking an ad in the *Times* for Random House author Gertrude Stein, featuring a photograph of Miss Stein and Alice Toklas under the headline "We have glamour girls too."

When I entered the publishing business the postwar generation of promising American and European writers had begun to appear, and the retail marketplace of several thousand independent

booksellers was well suited to the great variety of titles being published. I had no idea that this marketplace would soon crumble and collapse in a demographic shift whose premonitory rumblings could even then be heard if one's ears were better tuned than mine. In 1960 I edited for Random House *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs's classic defense of urbanism against the powerful forces that threatened it, including the proponents of suburbia as a more wholesome environment than dense cities, but I failed to see the meaning of these forces for writers and publishers.

By the time I joined Random House the suburban migration was well advanced, but in New York readers could still buy current best-sellers and expensive sets at Macy's or at Scribner and Brentano's on Fifth Avenue, while in Greenwich Village and along upper Broadway near Columbia or on Fourth Avenue, as Park Avenue South was then called, booksellers stocked and readers from all over the city could choose from an infinite variety of more specialized titles, new and used. The pattern was the same in other cities. In New York and other cities many booksellers financed their slow-moving inventories by operating from premises they owned themselves, charging themselves no rent. Others set up shop in low-rent side streets and depended less

on expensive, high-traffic locations than on customers who sought them out or who could be alerted by postal card or telephone to titles of interest. But as customers left for the suburbs, the owners abandoned these stores, at first by the score and then by the hundreds. Only a handful reopened in the suburbs, where the population was dispersed and shopping-mall rents were too high to sustain such eccentric, marginally profitable businesses with their large, often recondite backlist inventories and their perilously low rates of turnover. In bookselling as in any retail business, inventory and rent are a trade-off. The more you pay for one, the less you can spend on the other. Shopping-mall rents precluded the retail structure that had evolved hand in hand with the American publishing industry for nearly two centuries.

For publishers, the informal network of independent bookstores had been a sensitive gauge of an undulant and diverse literary marketplace, a primitive Internet that connected us intimately to the various communities of readers. This is not to say that publishers depended on the marketplace to shape their lists as film producers and politicians depend on focus groups and polls. But with the disappearance of the independent booksellers, publishers suffered a kind of sensory deprivation, a loss of contact

with the external world. The result was a mild paranoia, a typical response to disorientation, as the retail marketplace, now concentrated in a new kind of bookstore adapted to the suburban malls, became mechanized and faceless, an undifferentiated force for which books were not precious or curious artifacts but stock-keeping units. By the 1970s my habitual daily calls to booksellers in various cities became less frequent and eventually came to an end.

Traditionally, department stores had subsidized their book departments as a convenience to attract customers. But when they moved to the malls, most department stores abandoned their unprofitable bookshops, counting on the mall itself to generate traffic. However, in 1969 two large Midwestern department store chains—Carter, Hawley, Hale and Dayton, Hudson—set their book departments up as freestanding chains, one called Waldenbooks and the other B. Dalton. These chains soon opened hundreds of uniform, centrally managed outlets, which greatly expanded, democratized, and soon dominated the market for books. But for this welcome expansion of the marketplace, publishers paid a high price. The mall stores radically altered the nature of publishing, for the iron rule by which inventory and rent are inverse reciprocals de-

manded high volume and high turnover. The mall bookstores were now paying the same rent as the shoe store next door and were bound by the same fiscal rules. They needed recognizable products that sold on impulse. This meant books by brand-name authors with their armies of loyal readers or by celebrities who pitched their books on the morning television shows and later on *Oprah*: royal princesses, health faddists, reformed mafiosi, discoverers of the twelve secrets of financial or romantic success, politicians, Eastern mystics, wrestlers, inspirational football coaches, body builders, diet doctors, gossips, evangelists, basketball stars, and so on. Meanwhile, publishers who for years had cultivated their backlists now found fewer accounts able to stock them.\* The migration to the suburbs was splitting the industry into two quite different and incompatible businesses—a dominant one producing mass merchandise for the malls and another committed to the traditional search for backlist candidates.

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\* A change in the tax law affecting inventory valuation made it still more difficult for publishers to maintain extensive backlist inventories.

The model for mass-market publishing had been established in the 1930s and 1940s by the paperback houses—Pocket Books and its imitators—which distributed their titles monthly through magazine wholesalers primarily to newsstands and eventually to supermarkets and other mass outlets. Originally these wholesalers were national news distributors with branches in major cities. By the 1950s, independent distributors covering major suburban markets had replaced the city-based national wholesalers, and they too treated books as an adjunct to their magazine business. Since these paperbacks were usually cheap reprints of the previous year's best-sellers, the mass-market paperback publisher's editorial function was minimal, mainly a matter of selection and acquisition of published titles. Marketing was now the essential function and the editors at paperback houses were its servants, an inversion of the traditional relationship.

Since the supply of last year's best-sellers available for reprint was limited and increasingly expensive to acquire, the smaller mass-market houses solicited outside manuscripts directly from authors and marketed them as paperback originals in standard categories—westerns, mysteries, romances, and so on. Some of these authors attracted their

own loyal readers and were eventually sought out by hardcover houses. These writers, now marketed in hardcover editions, together with traditional hardcover brand-name writers, paid the rent for the mall stores and would eventually do the same for the so-called superstores that succeeded them. Inevitably the more commercially oriented hardcover houses assumed the characteristics of paperback mass marketers. While their editors remained generally loyal to their traditional function, marketing considerations now dominated the publishing operations at these firms, to the disadvantage of the wide range of titles too specialized or speculative to be promoted and sold to the chains. These titles were—and are—often left to fend for themselves.

Many find their way nevertheless, especially those that can be assigned in university courses or that attract their own groups of specialized readers. The dominance within today's publishing houses of marketing specialists and the chains they cater to is not absolute. Some so-called midlist books become great best-sellers in mysterious ways without the support of the chains in the first instance, for example, John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, whose perceptive editor published it with flair, and its sales expanded outward from the independ-



ent stores as if by nuclear fission as readers recommended it to their friends. Eventually the chains stocked it and it became a historic best-seller. *Midnight* sold more than two million copies, while many other midlist books sell in the hundreds of thousands despite the limitations of the overconcentrated retail marketplace. In the technological future, readership of such books will expand as authors, with the help of editors and publicists, and no longer constrained by the turnover requirements of a physical marketplace, present their work directly to readers over the World Wide Web, where word of mouth is instantaneous, credible, and widespread. Publishers had welcomed television as a powerful tool to promote their titles to the mass market created by the malls. But television is a one-way medium addressed to an undifferentiated audience to which access is at the discretion of the broadcaster. The Internet, by connecting readers and writers one on one, offers the possibility of almost limitless choice and foreshadows a literary culture thrilling if also alarming in its potential diversity.

Storytelling—transmitting the wisdom and history of the tribe through word, gesture, and song—is an innate human function that flourished long before the modern publishing industry existed and

will flourish long after it is gone. The publishing industry, constrained by obsolete technologies and a constricted marketplace, now implements the transmission from writer to reader poorly. But prospective new technologies foreshadow the possibility of a reconstructed industry, one that will, I believe, perform its historic task with unprecedented scope and unimaginable consequences. Given the mottled history of our species, one should not assume a future of unmixed joy, but there are grounds for optimism nonetheless.