



Book Business: Publishing: Past, Present, and Future

By Jason Epstein

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Book Business: Publishing: Past, Present, and Future By Jason Epstein

Jason Epstein has led arguably the most creative career in book publishing during the past-century. In 1952 he created Anchor Books, which launched the so-called quality paperback revolution and established the trade paperback format. In the following decade he was co-founder of the New York Review of Books. In the 1980s he created The Library of America and The Reader's Catalog, the precursor of on-line bookselling. In this short book, based on his W. W. Norton Lectures given at the New York Public Library in October 1999, he discusses the severe crisis facing the book business today -- a crisis that affects writers and readers as well as publisher -- and looks ahead to the radically transformed industry that will revolutionize the idea of the book as profoundly as the introduction of movable type did five centuries ago.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

As editor-publisher to some of the 20th-century's greatest writers (Edmund Wilson, Vladimir Nabokov, Jane Jacobs) as well as the virtual inventor of the trade paperback (meaning the "quality" type, as opposed to the drugstore mass-market), Jason Epstein is one of those rare publishing-world types who is as invested in the editorial creation of a good book as in its marketing and sales. It is that dual perspective that has guided his half-century-long publishing career and that makes this compact yet expansive professional memoir such a lively, illuminating read for anyone curious how current trade publishing--basically popular general-interest fiction and nonfiction--became obsessed with a narrow pool of quickie bestsellers to the neglect of the far greater mass of slow-burners (known in the biz as "midlist") or of the perennial sellers from years past ("backlist"). But, Epstein follows up with great enthusiasm, the time is not long before the book biz will morph into a new cyberversion of the quirky, intimate "cottage industry" that it was in its precorporate era.

It was in that era that Epstein came of age as a publisher, first at Doubleday in the 1950s, where he founded the successful Anchor Books, the first line of high-quality paperback reissues of classics. The four succeeding decades he spent at Random House, which in that time grew from a family-type shop into one of the largest and most profitable trade publishing houses in the U.S. (currently owned by the German media titan Bertelsmann). Epstein's chronicle of New York publishing jumps around nimbly in time--at one point, all the way back to the 19th century--but it is in recounting the heady, culturally efflorescent postwar years that he waxes most tender, regaling us with vignettes of Ralph Ellison, Mary McCarthy, John O'Hara, Frank O'Hara, W.H. Auden, Chester Kallman, and John Ashbery. Throughout, his entrepreneurial spirit in the service of good books is evident--first in the founding (along with, among others, his wife Barbara) of the still-extant *New York Review of Books*, then in the thorny 30-year process of publishing the classics imprint Library of America, and in the launching of *The Reader's Catalog*, a mail-order service from which customers could choose from what nearly every book on the planet in print--and which deservedly has been called the hard-copy precursor to the very site you're browsing right now.

Like *The Business of Books*, the recent memoir from former Pantheon Books head Andre Schiffrin (Epstein's longtime colleague within Random House), Epstein's book decries the extent to which superstores like Barnes & Noble have forced the high-stakes (and seldom fruitful) corporatization of book publishing. But Epstein prefers to look past the current situation to an imminent day when writers will sell directly to readers over the Internet, a format that will still demand the services of editors, publicists, and marketers but will cut out the costly middlemen of publishing companies, distributors, and superstores (though not small booksellers, he assures us, which nurture bonds among booklovers that even the Web can't sever). Yes, there's money to be made in trade books, Epstein asserts, but not necessarily overnight. And in this brisk, affable, and forward-looking volume, Epstein's own broad-ranging experience in the book biz seems to bear out his recurring theme: do it for love, not money, and the money (if not necessarily the millions) will eventually follow. --*Timothy Murphy*

From Publishers Weekly

In October 1999, Epstein, former editorial director of Random House, delivered a series of lectures at the New York Public Library that galvanized the publishing world. This book is based on those lectures. A genuine elder statesman of the industry, Epstein has spent about 50 years in publishing, during which he helped create the "paperback revolution," the *New York Review of Books* and the Library of America. Here, short, magisterial chapters describe the recent past of American publishing through the lens of Epstein's

career, and lookDnow fearfully, now hopefullyDat the spirit of book publishing to come. Epstein explains that, in his youth, the book trade was as much vocation as business, bringing to the world the fruits of literary modernism. In more recent decades, by contrast, investors and conglomerates, he says, seeking "name-brand authors" and economies of scale, have treated books as a product like any other. New technologies, however, might reverse these baleful (as seen by Epstein) trends. This forceful if hardly startling analysis introduces Epstein's compact and compelling reminiscences, which form the bulk of the book. Each chapter includes famous names (Auden, Nabokov, Edmund Wilson, Bennett Cerf, cyber-pioneer Norbert Weiner); revealing, amusing anecdotes; and clear accounts of who paid the bills for what, and how, and why. Most strikingly, Epstein looks forward to the "worldwide village green" the digital age might createDone in which books, he says, will keep a place, and publishing will "become once more a cottage industry of diverse, creative, autonomous" work, albeit at the expense of many of the middlemen who stand between author and reader, including today's big publishers. Congenial, erudite, electrifying, this book is a must read for anyone who cares about books and their business. (Jan. 15)

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From Library Journal

Drawing on his W.W. Norton Lectures at the New York Public Library in October 1999, publishing giant Epstein considers what's wrong with the industry today.

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