

Richard Saunders

## Editor's Note

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In my college years I took a folklore class from Barre Toelken, one of the modern giants of folk studies. Along the way I gained a personal appreciation for *aphorisms* and *idioms*—short sayings commenting on a situation by comparing it to something else, usually unfavorably. Dictionaries boil down an aphorism to “a pithy observation that contains a general truth.” An idiom is an aphorism with cleverness thrown in for good measure. Anyone who has sworn “when hell freezes over” has used an idiom. The seafaring people of northern Europe occasionally invoke a folkish comment describing a futile effort. “That Jan,” someone might say, “he’s sweeping back the tide with a broom.”

Editors of scholarly journals in the digital age face an ocean with a broom, but sort of in reverse. A little more than 20 years ago I left academia to work as a project manager for a prepress company—what used to be called a typesetter. In 1995 the 345 pounds of printed Mylar film from one of my books was the last film output our firm generated for a printer. Two or three years later on a contact frame, I personally burned the last manual color-separation F&T (fold and trim) blueline proofs our company shipped. As it turned out, the publishing industry was in the throes of a major technology change. Everything moved to a digital workflow: digital proof files and corrections rather than collating marks from duplicate proof sets, digital pages rather than those F&T blues, and disk-to-plate raster files via FTP site rather than film negatives for burning offset plates. Just during my short career in publishing, our rough-manuscript-to-printer production time for a book shrank from about 14 months to less than 9.

What do you do with the rest of your available production time?

Creation of digital production and distribution platforms in the 1990s made possible an explosion in book publishing. Because it became easier to produce a book, it also became cheaper to produce a book. Because it was cheaper, there was room for more books in the market. That was even before on-demand printing became a reality. We have entered the age of the *long-tail publication*, or a time where the cost of publishing has dropped to the point that it is now cost effective to produce and distribute a few score copies of very specialized books for a few dozen special-

ist readers. Yes, the price of individual works increases as well, but we are living the dream of prior generations. Far from the “death of the book” prophesied in the late 1990s, the sheer *number* of new books in the world has exploded across the digital landscape.

For our discipline, there are scores of books on aspects of librarianship, museum work, and cultural heritage published annually. Traditionally, professionals sit in judgment on behalf of others in the field, providing professional assessments of new publications. The problem now confronting scholarly editors is that the page count of their publication likely has not increased, so the time-honored mechanism of book reviewing is stuck: there are more books meriting formal review, but a finite amount of space inside a journal in which to publish those reviews. The current issue of *RBM* publishes three book reviews. The spring issue published six. Last fall it presented two. I’m sure you see the problem—the current form of the book-reviews engine is no longer adequately responsive to developments in the field. Even if we printed bare-bones book notices, the journal would be hard-pressed to keep up with publication.

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Early this spring, the *RBM* editorial board, incoming reviews editor Dr. Jennifer Sheehan, and I discussed the challenges that reviewing involves. We began wondering if there was a means of expanding the platform for book reviews. ACRL's staff liaisons suggested that the journal really has to abide by its page count and budget. Given those limits, Dr. Sheehan and I went looking for alternatives. We think we've found a workable alternative to journal-only publication. Early this next year the *RBM* site, <http://rbm.acrl.org>, will begin publishing book reviews singly through a new digital review portal. Single reviews may be read online or downloaded at will. Unlike the journal issued twice annually, new reviews will be uploaded through the year as they are completed and the editors agree to publication.

Don't get too anxious to see it. The journal and ACRL staff are still at work on the content and links. We hope that the new reviews will be available before the spring issue appears. Keep watching the *RBM* portal for the new reviews link. The journal will continue publishing a small number of extended reviews, but establishing a digital review portal accomplishes several key purposes. First, it provides a platform that can make available a larger number of reviews to readers at a very low cost to ACRL. This allows the journal to be more responsive to publishing in the field within the limited budget ALA has established for the journal. Second, the larger number of reviews opens space for greater opportunities for emerging professionals to engage with their field in a professionally recognized way. Third, it provides a platform for easily locating book reviews in special collections librarianship and cultural heritage.

Sure, the ocean of relevant material is growing, but, as your professional journal tries to keep up with publication, the reviews portal gives us just a little bit bigger broom.