Editing RBML

I am writing this little piece in commemoration of ACRL’s 75th anniversary. This organization has set trends, been a role model of innovation and insight into the profession, and brought us to a high level of professionalism. One of the ways it has done these things is in the publications it has sponsored over the decades, including C&RL, C&RL News, Choice, and RBML/RBM. These publications speak to thousands of librarians and others, keeping them up to date on all kinds of matters, including scholarship in their designated fields and issues and happenings in the library world.

For me, I was fortunate to be involved with the last of these publications as board member and then editor of Rare Books & Manuscripts Librarianship. There were great rewards, not the least of which had to do with working with the wonderful people at ACRL who shepherded the journal into print. Mary Ellen Davis and Hugh Thompson were superb editors and mentors—deeply versed in the publishing world, knowledgeable about their profession, filled with much practical advice and insight, and just great people to work with and to know. They listened to my issues and helped me edit RBML for six years. Together we put out a fine product. Some of the history of this publication has never been written about, and I believe the following account might be of interest to our readers and to scholars of publishing history sometime in the future.

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Rare Books & Manuscripts Librarianship had a good start, with some dynamic editors (Anna Lou Ashby, Ann S. Gwyn, and Alice Schreyer), lots of enthusiasm, and the support of ACRL, ALA, and a number of excellent authors. I needn’t go into the details here. From my perspective, as the fourth editor of the journal, it had one serious problem: subscriptions were not part of anyone’s RBMS dues; they were a separate cash outlay, and since the publication came out only twice a year, many potential subscribers didn’t think it worth their investment. When I took over the journal, it was languishing, despite the superb, insightful, and careful editing of my predecessors. Also, Jim Green had done an admirable job with book reviews and “Books Received,” which I thought was a valuable addition to each issue.

As I stepped in, the journal had no articles in the hopper—that is, submitted and waiting to be edited and published—and its subscriber base was low, somewhere in the upper 300s. To be financially stable it needed about 100 more subscribers, and it needed about 18 pages of advertisements per issue, of which it was often far short. I was told by ACRL that the journal was close to being discontinued.
The situation called for an attack on three fronts: subscribers, advertisers, authors. And it also called for a rethinking of the journal. My first “Editor’s Note” thanked Alice for her superb stewardship of the journal for the previous 2.5 years (a courtesy not followed by the editors who succeeded me) and a statement that the scope of the journal was being expanded, in terms of the topics to be covered and the authors themselves. I mentioned that I would be encouraging authorship “from conservators, booksellers, and collectors, as well as librarians in various fields.” I eventually achieved this goal, and over the next six years had submissions from all of these constituents and others.

The first issue under my editorship had only 13 pages of advertisements, clearly insufficient. ACRL had said we needed 18 pages or the journal would be running on a deficit, and that spelled its doom. I made a lot of phone calls to dealers and in the next issue (8.2) we had 17 pages, with slightly more in the following issue (9.1).

Thanks to Nicholson Baker, whose New Yorker article on “Discards” raised the hackles of many librarians, I was able to commission Nancy Douglas, Head of Cataloging at the Rivera Library at the University of California, Riverside, to write an article in response. The controversy, with Nancy’s excellent response, may have been the catalyst for people to subscribe to RBML, for the subscriptions began to climb.

One other thing that I did as the new editor was to bring on Sid Huttner, at the time the Curator of Special Collections in the McFarlin Library at the University of Tulsa, as book reviews editor. I would like to take full credit for Sid’s accomplishments, but in truth it was his assiduous work that improved RBML immeasurably. He was able to get many books submitted for review, many excellent reviewers, and many fine reviews. I always felt that RBML’s responsibility entailed not only presenting important, well-written articles about current issues in the field, but also—in the spirit of keeping our readers abreast of new scholarship—letting them know of important publications in our area. The acquisition of books and reviews was a difficult and time-consuming task, but Sid did it with aplomb for the six years that we co-edited the journal. I understood why subsequent editors jettisoned this feature—it was labor-intensive work—but I think it was a disservice to our readership to have done so. When Beth Whittaker reinstated the reviews much later on, she understood their importance, and RBML was improved significantly when she did it.

3. At the time, we could boast that RBML was the only journal in the world edited by two Sids.
4. Over the years since I stepped down from editing RBML, several people told me they dropped their subscriptions, partly because the journal no longer had these reviews. I cannot say that the decline in readership (measured in number of active subscriptions) over the years is directly because of the loss of the book reviews, but the loss of that feature could be behind the reduction in subscriptions.
At the start of my second year of editorship, I wrote, designed, and had ACRL print a three-panel, two-color flyer about the journal, "An Invitation to Subscribe," which I handed out by the hundreds at RBMS Preconferences and ALA Annual and Midwinter. I do not presently have the figures, but when my third year of editorship arrived, I believe the number of subscribers topped 500, possibly a record for the journal.

By the time Sid and I stepped down from editing RBML, we had published 45 solid articles and more than 100 book reviews by nearly 70 reviewers, and we listed almost 100 "Books Received," with short annotations about each. We had worked tirelessly for 6 years, and we were proud of having rescued this important publication, bringing it back to life in good style. We had increased its readership, broadened the topics it dealt with, and widened the scope of its authorship. We were happy to have accomplished what we had, and equally happy to turn it over to the next editors.

Perhaps the greatest accomplishment of all for me has been practically overlooked by readers. For my last issue (13.2, 1999) I commissioned Robin Price, one of the country's finest letterpress printers and book designers, to print a three-color cover from hand-set decorative and classical types and an assortment of dingbats. Robin did a brilliant job designing this cover—with the title laid out in the shape of a double dagger (she also printed at the bottom of the cover as a subtle joke "Double Dagger Issue / 19 ‡ 99"). It was beautiful, and possibly the only time a scholarly journal has had a hand-printed cover in decades.

Part of the fun for me was in being able to shape the design of the publication. I modified the good one that my predecessors had, chose a lovely paper for the cover, picked the colors for the covers (each pair of issues a year had the title in a color distinct from the colors used for other years), and chose the cover illustrations. The journal, I felt, in its physical presence, with its fine matte paper and elegant covers, classic typeface, and generous layout (margins like those in early-printed books) was a fitting publication for readers in the field of special collections. I now look forward to the imaginative touches that the new editor will bring.

From being a nearly moribund publication to being a vital and progressive journal, RBML/RBM has proven its worth to the world of scholarship for decades. We all owe ACRL a hearty Thank You for making this possible. And another hearty Congratulations to ACRL for reaching its current milestone.

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5. I was puzzled when subsequent editors claimed that their aim was to widen the scope of topics and authorship for the journal. It could not have been wider than it was when Sid and I left it. Further, dropping book reviews and Books Received was an odd decision, as was the complete redesign of the publication. De gustibus non est disputandum.

6. We quipped that, to get others to take on this big task, we offered triple the compensation that we had gotten. But triple nothing was not much of an incentive.