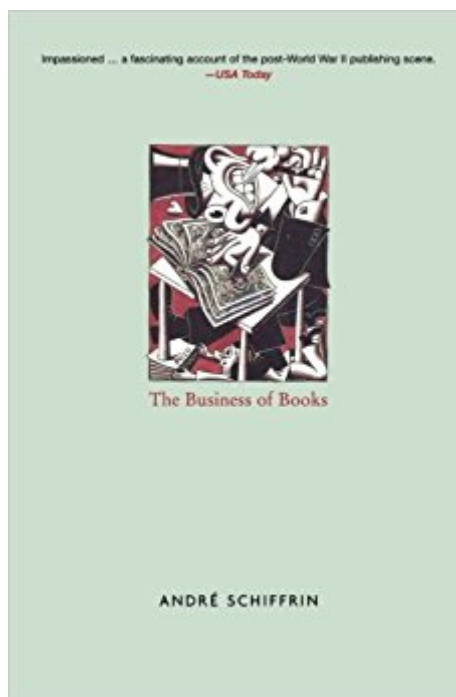




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The Business Of Books: How The International Conglomerates Took Over Publishing And Changed The Way We Read



Synopsis

Post-war American publishing has been ruthlessly transformed since André Schiffrin joined its ranks in 1956. Gone is a plethora of small but prestigious houses that often put ideas before profit in their publishing decisions, sometimes even deliberately. Now six behemoths share 80% of the market and profit margin is all. André Schiffrin can write about these changes with authority because he witnessed them from inside a conglomerate, as head of Pantheon, co-founded by his father, bought (and sold) by Random House. And he can write about them with candor because he is no longer on the inside, having quit corporate publishing in disgust to set up a flourishing independent house, The New Press. Schiffrin's evident affection for his authors sparkles throughout a story woven around publishing the work of those such as Studs Terkel, Noam Chomsky, Gunnar Myrdal, George Kennan, Juliet Mitchell, R. D. Laing, Eric Hobsbawm and E.P. Thompson. Part-memoir, part-history, here is an account of the collapsing standards of contemporary publishing that is irascible, acute and passionate. An engaging counterpoint to recent, celebratory memoirs of the industry written by those with more stock options and fewer scruples than Schiffrin, *The Business of Books* warns of the danger to adventurous, intelligent publishing in the bullring of today's marketplace.

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Customer Reviews

The descendant of a distinguished publishing family, Schiffrin has been the gadfly of American publishing ever since he quit his post as head of Random House's Pantheon imprint in a blaze of

publicity 10 years ago, complaining that the publisher's new management wanted to trim his list severely, removing from it many of the socially conscious titles he was proud to publish. He went on to found and run the New Press, which, with strong foundation support, has continued to do many of the kinds of books that Schiffrin insists should be published, but which he claims have increasingly been abandoned by big commercial houses. In this brief but pithy treatise, some of which has already appeared in Europe, Schiffrin forcefully argues that publishing only for immediate commercial return is not only economically shortsighted but culturally disastrous. Without being unduly nostalgic for the "good old days," he insists that big American publishers used to offer lists that were much better balanced between popular entertainment and necessary social and political commentary than they are today. He further argues that the attempt to appeal to the lowest common denominator of taste, which has, he says, led network television and movies in such depressing directions, has dumbed down publishing to an alarming degree, robbing it of much of its standing as a vehicle for the expression of significant ideas and outlooks that may not have instant appeal. Whether the increasing use of the Internet for publishing will prove to expand this more enlightened mission remains to be seen, but based on past experience with the urgencies of the profit motive, Schiffrin is not optimistic. His book is a salutary and sensibly written reminder of the ideals that drew so many into publishing, and that, if he is right, are so seldom reflected in it today. (Oct.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

• "Andre Schiffrin is an old-fashioned New York publisher, the sort that loves and believes in books. Not just best-sellers, but little books with big ideas." • "The Times [London]" • "Andre Schiffrin presents a somber portrait of American publishing where the pursuit of profit has strangled all creativity." • "Nouvel Observateur" • "Newsworthy and important, eloquent, smart, thoughtful, and well-presented." • "The Nation" • "An absorbing account of the revolution in publishing during the last decade." • "Financial Times" • "Forceful evidence that corporate insistence on higher profits has been cultural and business folly." • "Business Week"

The best book about publishing that I've ever read. It explains how NYC publishing came to be taken over by multinational corporations, and how that takeover negatively impacted the quality and quantity of offerings made available to the public. Highly recommended to anyone bold enough to take a peek at how the proverbial sausage gets made.

From a writer's perspective at least, all of Schiffrin's assertions about the publishing industry are stunningly true. In fact, my agent quit the business some years ago after attending a lecture by a revoltingly wealthy and arrogant agent who assured her and the rest of the audience that yes, money is indeed the bottom line. As Mr. Schiffrin points out, publishers are simply not interested in authors anymore; they are interested only in the book being submitted. That is to say, there is no attempt—as in the days of Max Perkins, the legendary Scribner's editor of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Thomas Wolfe—to invest in an author whose first book may not be a great seller, nor even her second but who will nonetheless write books the house can be proud of and may some day turn produce that most marvelous of beasts, the literary bestseller (à la Gabriel Garcia Marquez, John Updike, Toni Morrison). In a smooth, flowing voice that, while it may lack bells and whistles, is exceptionally lucid, Schiffrin tells the story of how publishing houses went from being "family owned and small, content with the modest profits that came from a business that still saw itself as linked to intellectual and cultural life" to an industry in which some of the executives, such as Alberto Vitale at Random House, freely admit they are too busy to read a book! I was riveted almost from the opening page. Some of the reviewers have accused Schiffrin of being elitist—maybe because he lives on the Upper West Side or because he believes editors should have some say—beyond profitability—in what is being published. They find him distressingly left wing. The fact is, Schiffrin is arguing for all editors, EVERYwhere to get behind authors of their choice. Many small houses will present many diverse voices rather than 5 huge conglomerates chasing the same dollar with their celebrity memoirs and Tom Clancy thrillers. He argues for the freedom for editors and houses to express their tastes and to let the public decide whether that taste suits them or not. But if a book never sees the light of day because corporate executives, who often know nothing about books (Vitale, Schiffrin points out "did eventually agree to read the novels of Judith Krantz" published by his own company), decide it won't sell enough copies, then you have market censorship. When that happens on a large enough scale, it's not the end of democracy, but democracy is certainly weakened by a shrinking pool of ideas and opinions from which to draw. Schiffrin quotes the German publisher, Klaus Wagenbach: "If books with small print runs disappear, the future will die. Kafka's first book was published with a printing of 800 copies. Brecht's first work merited 600. What would have happened if someone had decided that was not worth it?" Somehow, advocating books with tiny print runs like this doesn't strike me as elitist. If you are even slightly connected to the book business, if you are at all interested in books, if you give any thought at all to the future of the free exchange of ideas in this country and abroad, this is a must-read. I can't recommend it highly enough.

Schiffin was a great writer and a great confidant.

Through this "memoir/history," Andre Schiffrin has not allowed a thirty year career at Pantheon to pass without comment. Largely a critique of the dynamic aspects of the publishing industry, Schiffrin bemoans the emerging, profit driven behemoths geared toward publishing commercially viable works while ignoring "books with new, controversial ideas or challenging literary voices." Not without hubris, the author portrays his nurturing of the likes of Studs Terkel, Noam Chomsky, R.D. Laing, and a host of literary luminaries. He seems to delight in the contrast of Michael Korda's best selling authors, Harold Robbins, Irving Wallace, and Jacqueline Susann. These authors are discussed in Korda's memoir, "Another Life," selected as one of the best hundred books of 1999 by Publisher's Weekly (see my review of this work). Schiffrin's hostility over leaving Pantheon, along with a coterie of editorial honchos, is understandable. However, he was not flexible enough to get with the program of the new owners. Schiffrin's logic is flawed. It does not follow that a profit making mandate precludes the release of worthwhile works. While Schiffrin recognizes the Internet as an avenue for disseminating information, he balks at the vastness of the material on line. "How can we know if what is offered is reliable?" With characteristic arrogance he avers that, "publishers, above all, are people who make a selection, who choose and edit material that will be distributed according to certain criteria, and then market and publish it. By putting their name to writers' work, they provide a guarantee and guide to the reader." Tell this reviewer, gentle reader, when was the last time you bought a book because it was published by Random House, Simon & Schuster, or the dubious Free Press? What Schiffrin has ignored, and what is bringing about iconoclastic changes in publishing, is the new technology, Print on Demand (POD). This technology will bypass the Schiffrin's, and enfranchise tens of thousands of authors who would heretofore remain unpublished (see iUniverse.com) due to the likes of self appointed mavens, who through whatever whims, wield the power to decide who gets published and who doesn't. Even major publishers are now utilizing POD. This means no significant investment by the publisher for questionable initial print runs. The more the public wants, the more they can get from Print on Demand. If they don't want it, it doesn't get printed. Therefore, the 40% returns from booksellers are diminished or virtually eliminated. There is no need to earn out an advance when one may not exist. While this reviewer does not concur with Schiffrin, his book is nonetheless a worthwhile read.

Schiffrin's book is not quite memoir, not quite history, and not quite rant, yet it has a bit of all

three. Written by an insider--a deep insider--Schiffrin writes with credibility and passion, and his voice always comes through clearly. From his early Pantheon days to his currently independent-press days, he paints a disturbing picture of what's happened to the industry while, at the same time, giving some hope (through his own re-emergence) that there is (and, I think, always will be) a place for the hard-fought publication of new and important works. However, given that the book isn't quite one thing or another, it feels a little bit unfinished. I almost felt that there should have been two books: one a more in-depth review of the industry's history and the other a deeper dive into the author's own experiences. A final note as well: the title of this book is quite awful, and it wouldn't surprise me if many picked it up (as I did, originally) looking for a primer on getting started in the business. It is not that; not in the least.

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