

Big Brother and the Ethical Publisher

THE BUSINESS OF BOOKS: How International Conglomerates Took Over Publishing and Changed the Way We Read

by André Schiffrin

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Big Brother isn't here yet, but he's on his way—at least according to André Schiffrin, whose *The Business of Books* was recently published in paperback. In it, he discusses the current situation in publishing in which conglomerates are in the process of taking over nearly all independent publishing companies. Even Pantheon Press, which seemed to maintain much of its independence and commitment to quality books despite being owned by Random House, eventually gave in, forcing Schiffrin out after 30 years. Clearly, Schiffrin is very critical of the “bottom line” mentality—and strongly suggests that we should be, as well.

The tendency for huge companies to acquire more and more and to know less and less about the specifics of each acquisition is occurring in many, if not all, factions of American life, says Schiffrin. Near the very end of the book, he broadens this point by pointing to the changes in health care as one example. He states that “[n]ot only our belongings but our jobs, and, indeed, our selves have become commodities to be bought and sold to the highest bidder” (p. 171). And this trend—in publishing, at least—is not limited to the U.S.; it is happening all over Europe and the U.K., as his many, well-described examples illustrate.

Anyone who is interested in publishing a book—and with today's confessional mentality and emphasis on memoir, that seems to be everybody—ought to be concerned about this trend. If your book is not guaranteed to bring in money, most publishers these days won't buy it. And bringing in money means not only covering costs, but making a profit for the parent company. So you had better be an established writer (whose books sell well, that is) or a celebrity or have a unique take on a current event or popular topic; otherwise, no editor is going to take a risk on

you.

Does it make sense that writers can't get published without somehow providing a guarantee of profit? Of course it doesn't. But the people who are making the rules now don't know about publishing, won't commit to the new, the interesting, the important. They certainly are not interested in the history of publishing, which is actually a demonstration of taking chances on the new, the interesting, and the potentially important.

In his small volume, Schiffrin relates this history of publishing in New York and some parts of Europe since the 1940s. Some readers may be surprised to learn that many of the first publishing houses—some of which still exist under different ownership—were started by European immigrants intent on preserving their cultures. They also published the political agendas that in some cases had forced them to leave their homelands. Schiffrin tells his father's story: how he had worked in publishing in France until W.W.II first cost him his job and the loyalty of the company for whom he worked, and then his home. After a long and arduous journey to New York in the early 1940s, the elder Schiffrin joined forces with Kurt and Helen Wolff (better-known German publishers) and Kyrill Schabert to begin Pantheon Press. There, they published André Gide (in French) and the poet Stefan George (in German and English), among many others.

Schiffrin also weaves his own story through the book, and at times it's hard to tell if this is more an autobiography, a history of publishing, or a warning about the future. For several reasons, it leans more toward a history, as Schiffrin does not explore the details of his life unrelated to his career. But he gives details—about history, his own career, books published and why, and the stories of other publishing companies both here and abroad. On occasion, the details become tiresome, but they work effectively to prove his point (which, too, is frequently repeated).

We should be scared. Schiffrin makes that very clear. Letting the conglomerates take

over publishing and everything else will lead to a country without freedom, without new voices, without published and disseminated dissent. And this is very frightening. Indeed, it's downright terrifying, given what we hear in the news about the election in Iraq in which Saddam Hussein wins in a landslide; about the woman in Afghanistan who is sentenced to die because she bore a child out of wedlock; about Dubya, who wants to take over the world and its oil under the guise of bringing democracy and better living conditions to other countries. It could happen here, Schiffrin seems to suggest, so we had better beware and be aware.

Several aspects of Schiffrin's book, however, weaken his argument. While his personal story does provide a human aspect in what could be a dry tirade, in some places it takes over. Schiffrin, as a way of demonstrating his position of publishing—that ideas are important, chances should be taken—frequently refers to books that he has published and sometimes even commissioned and their well-known authors. After a while, though, readers understand the risks he took as a publisher and how they paid off, and may become irritated by the tales of his successes.

In fact, Schiffrin's very humanity detracts from his argument. Several times, Schiffrin's anger shows through, not general anger at the wrongness of conglomerate takeovers, but personal anger. The first occurrence of this is when he is discussing the situation in which his father was essentially disowned by his employer, the French publisher Editions Gallimard, when it had to affiliate with the Nazis to survive the German occupation. Schiffrin points out that the series of classics his father brought to the company "has since become the backbone of Gallimard's publishing" (p. 18), and states that "Gallimard continues to deny what happened during the war [. . .] in spite of all the evidence to the contrary" (p. 18). Later, when talking about his own experiences with the demise of Pantheon, his anger abrades the reader like a tiger's tongue. Schiffrin recounts the subtle, preordained phase-out scheme orchestrated by S. I. Newhouse when he bought Random House, and declares that "[t]he first step was to deny me

the right to have someone of my choosing with me when I made my case. [. . .]. The point was to keep me from having any witnesses when promises that had been made were later denied” (p. 98). He also uses words like “weapon” and “spin doctors.” Finally, Schiffrin insists that Random House made a campaign to “discredit” both him and Pantheon, even costing him a job at Harvard University.

Readers can understand Schiffrin’s frustration and perhaps sympathize. But the recounting of this tale has the flavor of vengeance, despite Schiffrin’s disclaimer that his story illustrates how the conglomerates work and that any number of people have had similar experiences. In a book demonstrating how this big “other” is wrong and bad, strong negative emotion doesn’t work. He would have been better to have written two books: a history and an autobiography rife with feeling, rather than trying to include both in one volume.

Schiffrin spends the last chapter sharing his experience with opening The New Press. He goes into a great amount of detail, which will be useful to people who read this book and are inspired to open independent publishing houses. Schiffrin clearly hopes there will be many such people, and wisely warns them of the difficulties. And while Schiffrin conveys himself as a sort of underdog hero, he admits that luck has a good deal to do with him being able to start and maintain The New Press. Luck aside, Schiffrin is clearly a man of character, one who struggles to maintain his integrity (in regard to publishing books, at least) in a world where “corporate interests have become far more important in controlling the circulation of ideas” (p. 131). *The Business of Books* should be taken seriously as an example, and, more importantly, a warning.