

Editorial Postscript on the Book

by Philip Harvey

The book keeps showing up on the desk. It is foursquare and irrefutable. Its title may be bland as blah or lively as a barrelful of monkeys. The blurb may bowl us over or add to our collection of gobbledegook. We are reminded every day that questions keep being asked, that there are unexpected needs that have to be met. The book may cost but long term is more stable and valuable than the gleam of many a website.

We wonder about the author, tireless after years. What hours and months went into one page, getting the details right, arranging the grammar. It is possible to imagine, but all of that labour - the inspiration, false starts, private arguments - is not apparent as we confront the rectangle of print on the eventual page. The dignified choice of words is effortless as it is precise. The cause and effect that brought these thoughts into proximity seem natural as sunlight after shower. Thesis, antithesis and synthesis gyrate in perfect coils. Who wrote and what is written vie for our private attention. The reason we value some books and not others is no accident.

Does it matter who the author is? It could be anybody or nobody. Time turns disputes into case studies and enmities into psychological paradoxes. We tend not to ask too many questions, just as we do upon being introduced to somebody, and the more we read that somebody the more we find that they are somebody, whether for good or otherwise somehow. Contact has been made. Somebody is our personal companion, be he the survivor of Troy or the archdeacon of Barchester. Some days somebody need only be a chatterbox, other days only an apostle is good enough.

The electronic revolution is supposed to have changed all that. No self-respecting library journal

of the past twenty years is without an editorial heralding the triumph of the electron and, often in the same breath, lamenting the demise of paper and rag. How easy it has been to adopt that view. The zeitgeist has handed it to us on a plate.

And yet, what is this revolution? Like any revolution, it's immediate and dramatic arrival distracts us from the continuing reality of established forms of behaviour - like the making and reading of books, for example. Reading habits may have changed, we read the newspaper online and correspond daily without recourse to a stamp and envelope, but not our reliance on the printed, bound book. Rumours of the demise of the book have been seriously exaggerated. Furthermore, we know that actual books contain any length of language not out there in the virtual equivalent.

All good revolutions have different currents of belief. Outcomes can be drastically other than the stated intentions of the revolutionaries. So much emphasis is now placed on online applications and resources that there are some who are discovering the book again as if for the first time. Indeed, an urgent need in libraries (of all places) is for the rediscovery of the book and of the somebody behind the ink. Consciousness of this somebody needs to be learnt each day. Why somebody made an index the way they did is the lead to its best usage. Familiarity with the names, terms and scope inside the broad range of library acquisitions continues to be a failsafe improvement over the superstition of the keyword search. The book crosses the desk and onto the shelf. The somebody behind the book should not be ignored;