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NONFICTION

The Good Old Days of Book Publishing, Martinis and All

“Among Friends” is a history of an industry transformed by consolidation and shifting tastes.

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AMONG FRIENDS: An Illustrated Oral History of American Book Publishing and Bookselling in the 20th Century. Edited by Buz Teacher and Janet Bukovinsky Teacher.

Some of the most stressed-out young people in the United States, if movies can be believed, work in publishing. IMDb, the online database, yokes these films together as a genre.

This makes sense. The young in publishing are acutely underpaid; some suffer from a broken-spirited servility; they fear they will never master the ninja techniques of literary social climbing. The older and more established in publishing have trod over a mountain of bodies to get where they are. They're not jumping unless pushed — as some have recently been.

No one knows anything, not really. Everyone is dowsing for a best seller, or wandering like Eeyore in search of his lost tail. Editors are living and dying by their profit and loss statements, or P&Ls. They are all hoping to be able to say once in a while, as John Le Carré reportedly did whenever he got a good publishing deal, “Baby will eat tonight.”

So what a treat it is to settle into “Among Friends: An Illustrated Oral History of American Book Publishing and Bookselling in the 20th Century,” a monster-size art book with a monster-size price (\$200) that primarily revisits the 1960s through the 1990s. This was a time, if the contributors can be believed, when all martinis came in triplicate, when levelheaded hippies out West made big money publishing books about “hydroponics” before you could say they were about “pot” and all kinds of mass-market and novelty bets, like “Juggling for the Complete Klutz,” which came with three bean bags, and “How to Keep Your Volkswagen Alive,” paid off.

The editors have gathered a chorus of voices. Some are well-known editors such as Robert Gottlieb, who was once the lead pelican in elite publishing's flying V formation, and Nan A. Talese and Morgan Entrekin. But many others are less known. Included also are the voices from the business side, as well as bookstore owners, the editors of children's books, the far-flung publishers of indie presses, sales reps and so on.

I don't trust all the happy vibes in “Among Friends.” The first thing that falls out of any history is the fear. But I liked them. In one essay, Jennifer Enderlin, the president and publisher of St. Martin's Publishing Group, recalls entering publishing in the late '80s and making her bones on a mass-market horror novel (she loved it, she writes, with a “white-hot passion”) called “Voodoo Fury.” The first printing was 65,000 copies, enough for a football stadium!

But because of industry consolidation and other factors, the bottom dropped out of mass-market books. The spinning wire paperback racks in drugstores and supermarkets vanished. Then, for a certain kind of reader, came Oprah's Book Club. Enderlin writes:

Suddenly, books were vitamins, not potato chips. They existed to edify you, to inform you, to discuss with other people. The guilty pleasure of reading “Princess Daisy” by Judith Krantz ... or a Jackie Collins novel was no longer in vogue.

You are unlikely to read “Among Friends.” I'm not convinced you should, at least until it arrives, if it ever does, in paperback. It's Brutalist in size and laden with dead space, like a haphazardly packed suitcase. Unlike the most dazzling oral histories, there is no presider, working like a D.J., mixing the material. Contributors have simply mailed in essays that can read like the “class notes” section of a college magazine. But this book, edited by Buz Teacher and Janet Bukovinsky Teacher, is a passion project, and it performs a necessary service, getting these stories on paper before they vanish. The ephemera (old Publishers Weekly covers, advertisements, etc.) is first-rate. Some good stories get told as well.

For example, here is Jason Epstein, the editorial director of Random House, replying to Mario Cuomo, then the governor of New York, when Cuomo complained that his wife could not find a copy of his new memoir in a bookstore: “Governor, no author since Homer has been able to find his own book in a bookstore.”

We read about the time Bob Woodward was walking with his agent, David Obst, and saw a dime on the street. Literary agents traditionally have taken 10 percent of their client’s earnings, though that figure has risen. Woodward bent down and picked up the coin. Then he rummaged in his pocket, found a penny and handed it to Obst.

One more. Ram Dass had to be talked into publishing his best-selling 1971 book “Be Here Now,” about meditation and yoga. He felt it was wrong to make money from his teachings. His future publisher, Bruce Harris, told him: “Don’t worry. Most authors don’t make money.” The book came out.

There is a lot here about Stewart Brand’s counterculture bible, the “Whole Earth Catalog,” and how it inspired a legion of small publishers. One contributor calls it “the mother ship of this era.” Back then, you could start a publishing house for about the price of a new car. This book charts the small beginnings — every Goliath was once a David — of chains like Borders and Books-A-Million. A lot of small trust funds were burned through.

The young will widen their eyes at the tales of regular tables at the Russian Tea Room and the Rainbow Room, weeklong parties down the Nile River for 100 guests and a weekend party at Mar-a-Lago, hosted by Oprah, for Maya Angelou.

They are more likely to be inspired by all the little-guy success stories here. Books about needlework and bird carving and leather tooling saved some publishers. So did items like “ALF” coloring books. We hear the origin stories of books like “Our Bodies, Ourselves,” the “Moosewood Cookbook,” “Zen Flesh, Zen Bones,” “The Tassajara Bread Book” and the earliest books from conspicuous consumption specialists such as Martha Stewart and Ina Garten.

If you have not heard terms like hand-tipped plates, head and tail bands, and pigskin and Smyth-sewn binding for a while, this book might be a hearth for you.

In the early 1990s, on my first date with the woman who would become my wife, I took her to the publisher Charles Tuttle’s used bookstore in Rutland, Vt., the contents of which were scattered over many floors of a rambling old house.

I was glad to see Tuttle recalled in “Among Friends.” He was a protean figure who, among other things, opened the first English-language bookstore in Japan. We also learn he instructed that the following should be on his tombstone: “Here lies Charles Tuttle. They said he would never stop drinking. Well he has.”

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