Books Abroad / World Literature Today: Past, Present and Future

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It is doubtful that anyone would have predicted that in 1927 a man named Roy from Nebraska would establish at the University of Oklahoma what would become the world’s oldest international literary quarterly in English. Such unlikely circumstances have characterized the extraordinary and illustrious seventy-five-year history of Books Abroad / World Literature Today, which had its modest beginning as a thirty-two-page publication produced by an entirely volunteer staff and distributed gratis to leading college and public libraries and interested individuals. Its founder, Dr. Roy Temple House, who grew up on a farm near Lexington, Nebraska, spent time helping Belgian war orphans and refugees following World War I (for which he received two medals from the Belgian government and was named the Chevalier of the Legion of Honor by the French government) before coming to the University of Oklahoma to teach German and direct the department of foreign languages. He was a strong proponent of internationalism and intensely desired to transcend the then-current regional and national trend toward cultural and sociopolitical isolationism via nonideological commentary on foreign literature. He also maintained the belief that literary criticism could be serious without being dull or pedantic.

Working seven days a week, House put together a journal known as Books Abroad that provided articles on literary subjects as well as reviews of just about any book from foreign presses he could get his hands on, including, for example, maritime histories, German hymnals, and etymological studies. His own assessment of the first issue was that it “featured mediocre paper and mediocre proofreading.” Soon, however, both the contributors and readers of the journal considered the publication a success, as it focused more and more on the world of belles lettres—fiction, poetry, and theater from Western Europe.
and Latin America. Nevertheless, the considerable work and expense involved with such a venture placed an enormous strain on the resources and resourcefulness of the editors, including Managing Editor Joseph Brandt (the founder of the University of Oklahoma Press and subsequent University of Oklahoma president). This led to a "Change in Policy Statement," which appeared in the Autumn 1931 issue (5:4, p. 462).

For five years we have been distributing this magazine without a cent of charge. This Quixotic [sic] procedure has been rendered possible by the generosity of certain foundations and certain individuals. . . . But Rocinante is growing weak in the knees, and our saddle is slipping. The bulk of our small assets are in such shape that we cannot turn them into cash or realize income from them during the current depression; and our alternatives are suspension or a small charge to subscribers. We have on file two thousand letters, many of them signed with distinguished names—in fact, such adjectives as "valuable," "necessary," "of inestimable value," "completely indispensable," occur with considerable frequency.

The editorial staff, local and foreign—and some of these men and women have made real sacrifices in this labor of love—will continue to contribute their services without charge. But it takes money, a good deal of money, to print and distribute the magazine. The modest subscription price which we have reluctantly decided to ask—$1.00 a year—will probably not be sufficient to meet the actual expenses of manufacturing and mailing, certainly not unless we have the support of all our present readers; but we are setting our price perilously low rather than risk limiting our usefulness in what we are convinced is a contribution to mutual understanding and good will among nations.

Fortunately, subscribers and supporters did not desert Books Abroad, and the journal continued publication throughout the depressed 1930s without missing a deadline. In fact, by 1932, Books Abroad was publishing articles on modern German theater and Russian poetry, along with commentary on the Nobel Prize in Literature by such luminaries as Upton Sinclair, Sinclair Lewis, H. L. Mencken, and Henry Van Dyke. The Swedish Academy's annual selection for the Nobel Prize would become a perennial topic in the journal for years to come. In 1939, for example, House asked writers and scholars to submit their selection for a "Super Nobel"—the writer who had made the greatest contribution to the world of letters during the first third of the twentieth century. The German novelist Thomas Mann was proclaimed the winner, and he himself would contribute to the pages of Books Abroad on a frequent basis. In 1951, the journal devoted a special issue to "What's Wrong with the Nobel Prize?" And in 1967, it hosted a full-scale symposium on the Swedish award, analyzing its selection process, its past choices, and its omissions.

In 1969, the Estonian poet and artist Dr. Ivar Ivask, Books Abroad's fifth director, inaugurated the journal's own literary award, the Books Abroad Inter-