"Down with Fiction and Up with Fact": Publishers Weekly and the Postwar Shift to Nonfiction

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This historical study looks at the common wisdom concerning a shift in balance between fiction and nonfiction in American book publishing following World War II (1945–1955), particularly from the perspective of the book trade journal Publishers Weekly. A brief statistical analysis suggests that although the collective effect of increases in each of a rising number of categories of nonfiction was to overshadow production in fiction, there was in fact a relatively steady and continuing gain in fiction production. The perception of the publishing community, as seen through the lens of Publishers Weekly, was that a drastic shift “away” from fiction was occurring for diverse reasons—from differences in price sensitivity and acceptability of paperbacking to ostensibly poor quality of postwar fiction. Also relevant were shifts in industry attitudes toward market research, the readership, and traditional tensions concerning the mission of publishing—between service-oriented profession and product-oriented business.

A seemingly permanent state of crisis is a recurrent theme within the book publishing history, concomitant with the loss of a Golden Age attributed to ever-more antiliterary economic practices. That lost Golden Age is almost always described in terms of “good” fiction written by the giants among novelists. Thus one of publishing’s most enduring bits of common wisdom—that postwar nonfiction production soared at the expense of fiction—fits easily within a sense that publishing was once again in danger of leaving behind its literary soul; and that “wisdom” seldom goes unchallenged. The question of whether production of fiction actually declined in favor of nonfiction can be answered partially, but only partially, by recourse to statistics. The industry’s own perception of its situation, challenges, and choices at the time is much more difficult to assess. One significant expression of that mentality for more than a century has been the voice of Publishers Weekly, the trade magazine for both book publishers and booksellers.

This article is an historical study intended first to ascertain through some available figures whether, in fact, production of fiction actually suffered com-

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pared to production of nonfiction, and if so, in what way. Then in light of those figures, indications of the industry’s own perceptions of the changes will be sought through the commentary and interpretation in Publishers Weekly for the decade following the end of World War II. The issue goes beyond the simple question of change in product mix or introduction of new products. As will be seen, it involved a shift in the industry’s conception of its mission—a shift entirely related to the time-honored tension between profession and business that has been inherent in American book publishing throughout its history but made particularly evident in the rapid postwar developments.

Academic studies of book history have often concentrated on the fiction of that era (or often earlier), and few ask why the perceived shift “away” from fiction took place—or whether indeed there was such a shift. The small number of contemporary writers offering economic analysis of the book industry and its market at mid-century, notably O. H. Cheney in 1931 and William Miller in 1949, do not address at length the comparative issues in producing fiction vs. nonfiction, undoubtedly because the universal assumption was, as Miller put it, that “fiction rules the trade-book world.” Other publishing historians writing later have offered rather generalized explanations of the change in balance between fiction and nonfiction without examining too closely its exact nature. The change in balance is sometimes implied to be the result of market changes that caught the publishing community off guard in their preoccupation with preserving a literary and cultural high ground for their industry. Others, often within the literary world, have characterized it as conscious and purposeful abandonment of fiction on the part of market-aware, if nonetheless reluctant, publishers. Still others are inclined simply to recount the historical circumstances at work as full explanation for the changes in publishing output.

Noting that the increased interest in war histories, memoirs, and the like had persisted into the postwar market, John Tebbel and others drew in the war itself as a contributing factor, particularly on the heels of a campaign to put special pocket-sized paperbacks into the GIs’ hands. Some, like Charles Madison and Chandler Grannis, focused on the flood of returning GIs into higher education and the resultant demand for course-related books, which, as John Dessauer pointed out, were paid for with government funds. But both interest in war and an influx of a returning, technically oriented workforce might also have been true of the period following the First World War. And indeed, Tebbel noted that the trend to nonfiction had begun to develop as early as 1928, “a trend which, in the next decade, would reverse for good the long dominance of fiction.” Others attributed the shift to the continuation of interest in science and technology spawned during the war; and Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt added that the demand for that American expertise in Europe had created an unprecedented export demand.

The historical circumstances are, of course, relevant and should be taken into account. Yet such observations tend to be tossed off as preliminary stage setting for study of some other issue. The implication that the increase in