

Joel Silver

EXIT INTERVIEW: JAKE CHERNOFSKY

JACOB L. (“JAKE”) CHERNOFSKY recently retired from his position of editor and publisher of *AB Bookman’s Weekly* magazine, which he joined in 1973. *AB*, which was originally titled *Antiquarian Bookman*, was founded on January 3, 1948 by Sol. Malkin, and the magazine’s name was changed to *AB Bookman’s Weekly* in 1967, “in recognition of a readership comprising mostly specialist dealers.” *AB*, which had been widely read for several decades by people involved in the world of antiquarian books, suspended publication in December 1999.

How did you get involved in antiquarian books and *AB*?

I got involved in antiquarian books through *AB*. I was a newspaperman in Florida in 1972, and I read several published interviews with the publisher of *AB*, Sol. Malkin, including one in *The New York Times*. Though I wasn’t an *AB* subscriber, I had some familiarity with *AB*, and read it from time to time. I was a collector in the sense of buying books that I liked and used. I would frequent used bookstores, I was enthusiastic about books, and I would buy books that interested me in the fields that I was pursuing. One of the fields, for instance, was the history of chemistry. I had attended the Polytechnic Institute in Brooklyn, where I focused on chemical engineering, although by the time I reached that stage of my education, I was getting a little tired of the subject. In an engineering school like that, you did not get a well-rounded education in the same way that you might at a liberal arts school.

In the interviews I read, Malkin said that he wanted to retire, and this meant that he was looking for someone to take over *AB*. I had been working

for various newspapers for many years, and I was looking for the chance to do my own thing. *AB* attracted me, so I contacted Malkin. We met, he liked the idea of my taking over *AB*, and he named his price. I didn't have that kind of money, so I asked what arrangement could be made as far as a down payment was concerned, with the balance to be paid off over a few years while I was earning money from *AB*. He agreed, and I borrowed money for the down payment, and paid that back over the years, and also paid Malkin off in installments.

While I was familiar with some areas of antiquarian books and knew the difference between antiquarian and used books, I didn't know the trade very well, so Malkin agreed that for the first two years, he would meet with me regularly and give me help with problems, and also give me his perceptions of the antiquarian trade and the major dealers involved in it. He would talk about some of the various antiquarian dealers and their general characters and idiosyncrasies, as well as any problems in dealing with them. I learned about many of the dealers over the next few months, and after this time, I consulted Malkin about any problems that I had with any of the dealers.

Once you got settled in at *AB*, what did your work involve?

After I became more familiar with things, I redesigned the contents of the magazine to my interests and liking. I had been a journalist, so I knew the difference between news items and feature articles, and so forth, and it wasn't too long before I decided to have a feature article in every issue, along with lesser items and news items. In refashioning the magazine, I saw that there were various categories of interest, and that's when the special issues were born. When I went out to visit dealers, I saw that each of them had a particular interest or interests, and slowly, over the next two or three years, I started to do special issues during the year on these different subjects. I think that the first special subject issue was devoted to children's books, and I added others after that. We would do special issues each year on these subjects. Malkin had not done special subject issues, but he did have

special issues related to major book fairs, such as New York and California, and I kept those up as well. The number of subject and book fair special issues grew, and at its peak a few years ago, I think that there were 23 or 24 special issues each year.

It took a number of years to develop the editorial content of the magazine to my liking. Before I took over *AB*, Sol. Malkin did the general editorial work, and Mary Ann Malkin did the reviews and a lot of the other work. I started out working alone, and I realized early on that I needed a staff if the magazine was going to be expanded, with more special issues and a broader appeal. So I trained different people in circulation, advertising, and promotion, which I knew how to do because of my background in journalism. When the magazine was properly staffed, I spent much of my time traveling and getting to know dealers around the country, and to some extent, abroad.

Malkin had also instituted “double issues,” which meant that there were several issues during the year that were dated to cover two weeks, so there were several weeks in which no magazine was issued. When I took over *AB*, there were 40 issues a year being published, and I brought it up to 49 or 50, depending on whether there were 52 or 53 Mondays during the year. So this gave me a little break, but not very often. I traveled during the off weeks when I could, and traveled more during the other weeks once I hired a staff. I would either hire people who knew journalism, in which case I would teach them about the trade, or I would hire people whose knowledge of the trade I valued, and then I would train them in journalism. Once I began to travel more, and I would meet people in the trade or at conferences who had particular interests and wanted to write something about them, I would ask them to write articles for *AB*, and many of them did. Some of these people had backgrounds in journalism, such as Ed Glaser, and Ed was one of the first people that I asked to do an article, and eventually, there were many other people.

How did the world of bookselling change during your time at *AB*?

When *AB* started, the trade needed *AB* critically—not just the people who advertised their wants, but also the people who advertised their businesses or advertised books for sale. It's only in recent years that online databases such as Bibliofind and the others have been available. Since they didn't exist then, *AB* was needed by many booksellers to advertise their books. *AB* was at its prime in those years, and it was indispensable to the trade. There were other attempts to try to do the same thing that *AB* was doing, but most of these were small operations that didn't have the funding that they needed. I didn't have the funding either, but I took over an existing operation, and I had the financial backing that it took to do it. So there was no major competition for *AB* until the Internet came along. Even before that, though, people had been buying computers, and they were able to put out lists on a much more regular basis than they had been able to before, and though that led to less of a dependence on *AB*, they generally kept up their subscriptions and their advertising. But as soon as the Internet came along, many dealers went out of business. A lot of collectors did their trading on the Internet, even to the point of selling, trading, and buying. Many of these collectors had become dealers, more or less.

Looking back, is there anything that you regret not doing with the magazine?

The most recent thing is that I didn't adapt the magazine to the changes brought about by the Internet. You've read on Exlibris about *AB* not going along with the Internet, and that's almost true. We did set up a web site, but by that time, I was close to (and I'm now past) 70 years old, and it was a time when I couldn't really carry it off, and this is why *AB* finally had to fold. First of all, it was out of fashion and it wasn't needed as much. To have gone along wholeheartedly with the changes and somehow adapting *AB* to total Internet publication and doing online advertising and so forth was more than I could do. We did, during the last year or so, have more of

an online presence, and long before that, we had something called *Automated Bookman*, which allowed subscribers to put all or part of their inventory on our database, and matched it every week against the wants that people had sent in. We would send any matches to the dealers who had the books in inventory, and they would deal with those wants directly. But when the Internet really got going, and more dealers and collectors were buying and selling online, they didn't need *AB* in the way they had before.

In addition to *AB*, you've also been involved with the "Colorado Seminar," the annual weeklong course on antiquarian bookselling. How did you get started in that?

The Colorado Seminar started when Margaret Goggin, who is a good friend, was the dean of the Graduate School of Librarianship at the University of Denver. She contacted me, Lee Ash, and Frederich Praeger and asked us to do a four-day mini-seminar for librarians, which took place in Denver in December 1977, and which was apparently successful. While driving me to the airport after that seminar, I told her that a seminar like this would be useful not only for librarians, but also for dealers, since there wasn't any kind of seminar that told dealers what they needed to know, like how to acquire books, how to evaluate books, or how to pack books. When I said "how to pack books," she almost jumped out of the car, and she said "you want such a seminar to teach them how to pack a book?" I said, "yes, I think that it would be useful to do it," and as it turned out, the sessions that we've had on packing books have been one of the most popular things in the seminar, especially when the instructor shows how the box he's just packed can be dropped on the floor without any damage to the books inside. Eventually Margaret agreed, and we began the seminar in August 1979. The first faculty member was Ed Glaser, and we also got Barney Rosenthal, Mary Benjamin, and Franklin Gilliam. A number of other people participated in other years, such as Jake Zeitlin, Ken Nebenzahl, Larry Witten, and Lou Weinstein. Other faculty members were soon added, including Mike Gins-

berg and Jennifer Larson. Margaret and I were co-founders and co-directors, and in addition to the faculty, we also had a different keynote speaker each year, and then a different specialist dealer. The seminar sessions were mainly in Colorado, but we also had a couple of sessions in Florida. I took over the seminar from Margaret beginning with the 1995 seminar, when it moved to Colorado Springs from Denver.

What are your future plans?

There are a lot of writing projects that I haven't had time to pursue, and now I'll finally be able to embark on some of them.