Why Can't Academic Books Be Affordable?

James Heffernan

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A year ago in these pages (Summer 2021), an article by Sandi Sonnenfeld offered a mixed report on what university presses have been doing lately. While many of them have been venturing beyond scholarly monographs into what she calls "a wide range of books aimed at mainstream audiences," Sonnenfeld found that these monographs—which have traditionally made up most of their lists—remained unaffordable for "most public libraries and independent scholars and researchers." Well, yes and no. Or maybe times have changed in just one year.

Consider some new titles from three different academic presses: Yale, Chicago, and Ohio State. In late July, Yale will offer Helen Hackett's *The Elizabethan Mind* (448 pages, 23 black-and-white illustrations) for $35.00, and for the same price next January you can buy Alma Steingart's *Axiomatics: Mathematical Thought and High*

Modernism in paperback from Chicago Press. More surprising still, Chicago is charging just $20.00 for Alice Kaplan's and Laura Marris's *States of Plague: Reading Albert Camus in a Pandemic*—a 152 page hardbound due out in October. But with a hook big enough to hoist a blue whale, this title digs into the present-day experience of millions of Americans. It's far from the sort of heavy-going academic monograph that university presses have traditionally published— such as Eliran Bar-El's Chicago-pressed study of how a Slovenian philosopher named Slavoj Žižek made himself a public intellectual. Unless you're an academic, you probably won't recognize his name or even his subject, and in any case, the clothbound edition would cost you $99.00.

More revealing still are some new titles from Ohio State, which now classifies its books as either "trade" or "scholarly." In the first category, Edward P. Horvath's *Good Medicine, Hard Times: Memoir of a Combat Physician in* Iraq goes for $23.95 in paperback; in the second, Molly Margaret Kessler's *Stigma Stories: Rhetoric, Lived Experience, and Chronic Illness,* costs $119.95 in cloth. But since *Stigma Stories*

will cost just $29.95 in paper, the big difference in price here is not so much between “trade” and “academic” as between cloth and paper. Though academic hardcovers published by university presses may sometimes be much more expensive than trade hardcovers, academic paperbacks are definitely getting more affordable.

In fact, if the latest catalogues from Yale, Chicago, and Ohio State are any indication, university presses are clearly moving toward making their academic books affordable. Just as clearly, they are veering away from what they used to publish exclusively: specialized monographs aimed at academic readers. In other words, even though nearly all university presses are subsidized, they’ve become leary of books that are unlikely to reach beyond academic readers and thus pay their way. Of course university presses will continue to publish catchy titles by such academic stars as Terry Eagleton, whose *Critical Revolutionaries: Five Critics Who Changed the Way We Read* is just out from Yale at $28.00 in hardbound. But the freshly minted PhD who’s got a monograph on Milton’s portrayal of angels in *Paradise Lost* may now look long and

hard to find a university press that is even willing to consider it. Right now, so far as I can tell, the only publishers that truly specialize in such books are the academic divisions of commercial houses—as I have lately learned from my own experience.

Starting in the late 1960s, I've written half a dozen academic books that have been published by various university presses, and I am now happily anticipating publication of my latest book: *Politics and Literature at the Dawn of World War II.* This time, however, the publisher is not a university press but the *academic division* of a commercial press: Bloomsbury.

Bloomsbury Academic has treated me very well. After steering me through a major overhaul of my first draft, the BA staff produced the book—copyediting, page proofs, cover design, index-- in just three months, and as I write these words in early June of 2022, the book is virtually ready for its close-up, though it won't appear until December.

So what's not to like? In a word, the price of the book, which exemplifies a major problem with academic books as a class.

Academic books differ categorically from trade books. Issued by commercial publishers and aimed at the general public, trade books typically sell for less than $25.00. From Amazon, for example, you can buy the hardcover version of Kellyanne Conway's 512-page *Here's the Deal: A Memoir* (just out from Threshold Editions, an imprint of Simon and Schuster) for $19.41. My own forthcoming book, with 212 pages and just one black-and-white illustration, is priced at $103.50 in hardbound (marked down from $115.00), with the e-book costing $82.80.

Why this gigantic difference in price? It's a numbers game.

Successful trade books sell in the thousands, which is obviously what is expected for Conway's memoir. According to content specialist Sarah Rexford, books that make the NYTimes Bestseller lists have to sell at least 5,000 copies a week, and in the universe of trade books, titles that end up selling fewer than 5,000 copies are generally considered flops.[1]

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[1] https://electricliterature.com/everything-you-wanted-to-know-about-book-sales-but-were-afraid-to-ask/). (https://selfpublishing.com/new-york-times-bestseller-list/

By contrast, academic books rarely sell more than 1000 copies in their lifetime. My last one, *Hospitality and Treachery in Western Literature*, which took me ten years to complete, was published by Yale in 2014 and priced at $65.00 hardbound. So far it has sold 573 copies, a little oover half of its first and only print run. (I shudder to think of those remaining 427 copies gathering dust in a Rhode Island warehouse.)

In turning from university presses to a commercial house— more precisely to the academic division of a commercial publisher— I am also indirectly hitching my wagon to the shining U.K. star known as Bloomsbury Publishing, publisher of Harry Potter. For the sales year ending August 31, 2021, Bloomsbury's gross revenue was £100.7 million, up 29% over the previous year; its pre-tax profits were £11.1 million; and its net cash was £43.7 million (https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/academic/). Unlike university presses, then, Bloomsbury needs no outsize subsidies, so it could easily afford to subsidize its academic division.

Unsurprisingly, it doesn't. As a commercial house, it expects its academic division to be self-supporting—and prices its titles accordingly. Though Bloomsbury Academic's royalty rates are comparable to those traditionally offered by university presses, it normally prints just 300 hardbound copies of each book, often selling no more than 100. Which, of course, is why its books are so pricy. In 2016, *Ithaka-S+R* calculated the average cost of publishing a university press monograph at $29,000.[2] Given the economies of scale available from the parent company, Bloomsbury Academic may be spending somewhat less than that for each of its books. But even if it's spending only $20,000 per book, it can recoup its investment (and make a profit) only by selling at least 200 copies for more than $100 each. And it often struggles to sell even 100 copies—mostly to libraries. If anything, then, Bloomsbury Academic's books are substantially more expensive than university press books.

Why then do I keep on writing books that may end up selling so few copies? Young professors write books not to make money but to get

[2] https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/the-costs-of-publishing-monographs/)

tenure. Having retired from teaching almost twenty years ago, I have no need to meet tenure requirements, but I cannot seem to break the habit of writing about literature and hoping, of course, that at least a few other people out there may be interested in reading what I write. Or even, to ratchet up the dial of expectations, that a few people might welcome the book, salute its impact, and recognize its contribution to our understanding of the literature it treats.

Let me then tell you a little more of my own experience.

In 1969, just over fifty years ago, Cornell University Press published my first book, *Wordworth's Theory of Poetry.* Priced at what was even then a readily affordable $10.00, it was reviewed in print seven times and sold about 2300 copies during its lifetime. My last book, published by Yale, was far more ambitious in its scope but has had almost no impact. Though the late and renowned Hillis Miller praised it highly in his reader's report, which is quoted on the dust jacket, it was reviewed just twice online and nowhere in print.

I don't know how typical my experience is, but I do know that young professors now must often wait years to see their books reviewed, and sometimes never see them reviewed at all. In 2009, I tried to fill this gap—minimally, to be sure-- by launching the online *Review 19* (www.review19.org), which reviews books on English and American literature of the nineteenth century. Thanks to our hundreds of reviewers (and a good deal of editorial work by yours truly), we've so far reviewed over 600 books—many of which might not have been reviewed anywhere else.

Since my new book treats the literature of the mid-twentieth century, it will not be reviewed by *Review 19,* and I have no way of knowing if it will be reviewed anywhere. In my heart of hearts, however, I confess to what I strongly suspect is a common condition among academics: crossover dreams.

My new book aims to show how the imminence and outbreak of World War II ignited the imaginations of writers ranging from Ernest Hemingway and W.H. Auden through Bertolt Brecht to Evelyn Waugh

and the highly controversial Irène Némirovsky. By closely comparing historical narratives of the major events of 1939-40 with literary re-creations of them, it aims to compare the kinds of truth we find in history with the truths of literature. Does that sound purely academic? Or might such a book cross the threshold of the academy to reach "general readers" who happen to be interested in World War II, or the relation between history and literature, or both?

If I seem to have wandered away from my announced topic, which is the prohibitively high cost of academic books, let me hasten back to it. Besides the difficulty of getting such books reviewed, even in academic journals (let alone the *New York Times*), I believe the biggest single obstacle to their circulation—especially beyond the academy-- is their price. When "general readers" can buy nearly all trade books for less than $25.00, why would they lay out more than a hundred dollars for an academic book that may well be less engaging, less readable, less fun? Even if the book sounds interesting, why wouldn't they simply check it out of a library?

In response to this question, I've been told by an authoritative source (who declines to be named) that commercial publishers of academic monographs simply cannot make them commercially viable without pricing them far above trade titles. My source admits that this is a bone of contention among academics but right now, I see no prospect of change.

Which is truly regrettable. With university presses gradually veering away from specialized monographs aimed at academic readers, the academic divisions of commercial houses like Bloomsbury and Macmillan are filling a gap and performing a valuable service. But so long as their books are priced far above comparable titles—not just trade books but academic studies, especially in paperback, published by university presses—I fear that such books will continue to gather more dust than readers.