

Publisher: Igitur, Utrecht Publishing & Archiving Services. Website: www.tijdschriftstudies.nl

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URN:NBN:NL:UI:10-1-114160. TS ·> # 35, juli 2014, p. 66-69.

Review

Loren Glass, *Countercultural Colophon: Grove Press, the Evergreen Review, and the Incorporation of the Avant-Garde*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013. 255pp. ISBN: 978-0-8047-8416-0. € 27,99.

Loren Glass mostly gets things right in this new study of the American publisher Grove Press and its literary magazine *Evergreen Review*. He starts off correctly by emphasizing the significance of Barney Rosset. Having purchased Grove Press, a nascent publishing house boasting only a handful of titles, in 1951 (with money derived from his family's fortune), Rosset bankrolled it, and led it into modest profitability by securing the writing he loved or had been taught to love. This was the writing of many of the world's leading experimental and modernist writers. He was led there by his own preoccupations, for example with Henry Miller (and hence, Paris) but also by his first wife, the painter Joan Mitchell, and by Sylvia Beach, Wallace Fowle and Richard Seaver (the last three leading him in particular to Samuel Beckett). Editor Donald Allen's importance is also correctly identified early on in this study, though perhaps more stress might have been placed on how Allen led Rosset to the New York School,

Black Mountain, and San Francisco Renaissance poets, not to mention the Beats (via Jack Kerouac).

Along the way Glass recognizes Rosset's awkward mix of impulsiveness, radicalism, shrewdness and brio, though perhaps he underplays the back-up provided by Rosset's business manager and defensive guard, Fred Jordan (Rosset loved American football and often spoke of Grove Press as a team). Glass also identifies the seminal significance of Rosset's recognition that the walls of censoriousness established in the USA by the Comstock laws were crumbling and organized Grove to push at these weakening defenses. What could have been stressed more in this study is that Rosset did this quite systematically. He followed up Grove's breakthrough publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by publishing work by Henry Miller, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs.

Grove's magazine *Evergreen Review* served as a both offensive attack and defensive guard during such assaults on censorship, something Glass could have emphasized more. *Evergreen* essays defended the texts, extracts were carried and adverts in *Evergreen* drew attention to link-ups with Grove's booklist. Grove was commercially canny in all this: sex

does sell books; indeed, it made Grove profitable, even when early on featuring gay sex (John Rechy, Dotson Rader, William Burroughs), despite the fact this was still illegal in the USA.

All this worked, as Glass notes, because the rapid post-war expansion of higher education, fuelled partly by the GI Bill, led to a demand for quality paperbacks. Here Grove had antecedents. Glass picks out Anchor Books, which used the *Anchor Review* (1955-57) as its outrider. He could also have named Penguin Books across the Atlantic, which was busily paving the way, even down to its striking colophon. How Penguin branded itself helped Rosset shape Grove. Also of significance were *New World Writing* (1952-1958) and *Discovery* (1953-1955). Grove had these progenitors, but their relatively short lives convey the riskiness of the venture.

Yet, Rosset made Grove work, bringing the world's avant-garde into fuller visibility. 'Avant-garde' is a notion Glass should have explored further (it features in his subtitle, after all). Academics customarily deploy the term modernism when thinking of the fifties and sixties, but back then the more risky and progressive sounding word avant-garde was more abroad and sounded highly exciting. Glass makes a good fist of conveying this uneven excitement and its difficult mix of both 'cultural elitism and cultural pluralism'.

Countercultural Colophon is divided up into well-chosen sections. First comes 'New World Literature' – a criss-crossing of the globe encompassing Kenzaburo Oe, Amos Tutuola, Octavio Paz, Pablo Neruda, Jean Cocteau, André Gide, Boris Pasternak, Max Ernst, etc.,

as well as translators like Richard Howard and Ben Belitt. The section heading is wrong, though: it is confusing to use the phrase 'new world' with all its Columbian associations. The second section's label is better: 'Off-Broadway', though again the world's avant-garde figures large in this section. Beckett is rightly emphasized (Grove was for decades Beckett's US publisher), but maybe other French experimentalists were more influential: Antonin Artaud, Jean Genet, and Eugène Ionesco. Grove also imported UK playwrights like Joe Orton, Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard. From the US came Jack Gelber and Barbara Garson. Less contemporary, but still influential, Bertolt Brecht also featured large. Grove's importance can easily be made clear here; Glass does just that.

Glass's third section, slightly repetitively, returns to Grove's censorship battles. Taking its name from Charles Rembar's study of how Grove led an assault on the concept of obscenity, this section adds to Glass's earlier discussion the troubled passages of Jean Genet, Hubert Selby and other, earlier figures like the Marquis de Sade, John Cleland and Frank Harris. Glass makes it clear how Grove relied on 'enormous batteries of critical endorsements' to win each of its censorship fights: Grove's approach to Frank Harris' *My Secret Life* was assiduously scholarly, for example. But the financial allures of going further down this line led to a deterioration as Glass acknowledges: 'By the late 1960s, the Evergreen [book] Club had abandoned any pretention to literary value and became a source for anything sexually explicit that Rosset could acquire,

including sex manuals, gay porn, stag films, and erotic art catalogs.’

The consequences of this reorientation were to prove dire. Trouble with feminists arose. Glass goes on, later in his book, to explore this in the closing section, ‘Takeover’. Before he does this he switches his attention, a bit awkwardly, to other matters, in two intervening sections: ‘Reading Revolution’ (about Grove’s engagement with writers such as Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Malcolm X, Amiri Baraka, Ho Chi Minh, and lesser lights like Régis Debray, Julius Lester, Jack Newfield, and Nat Hentoff); and ‘Booking Film’, about Grove’s film division (concerned with distribution), its film books (including scripts and interviews) and *Evergreen Review*’s film criticism. Central to this was Grove’s successful distribution of the films *I Am Curious (Yellow)* and *(Blue)*.

But by now a line had been crossed when making money from explicit, sexualized images of women’s relationship to men in what was still a very patriarchal society. Julius Lester’s 1970 *Evergreen* article ‘Woman – the Male Fantasy’ revealed how things were going wrong for Grove. Lester, still listed as a contributing editor then, noted how ‘*Evergreen Review* gratifies the ego of the sexually inadequate male.’ In response, Robin Morgan and others from the Society for Cutting Up Men (SCUM) invaded Grove’s offices that same year. The police were called. Many avant-gardists deserted Grove, which meanwhile floated on the stock exchange on the back of its profits from overly-objectifying eroticism.

Glass could have come down harder on Grove here; it is worth reading

Robin Morgan’s version of events, for example, for an alternative account (see *Going Too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist*). He does not mention *Evergreen*’s use of photo-essays featuring scantily-clad women, deliberately echoing the pages of *Playboy*, after 1967. But he does understand how Pauline Réage’s erotic novel *The Story of O* constituted a kind of climax: ‘*The Story of O*’s reception in the United States must be understood in terms of the text’s relocation from an exclusive European modernist milieu in which the text could be interpreted as a species of sexual ritual into a mainstream America milieu in which the emergence of New Social Movements was precipitating a post-modern politics of sexuality that would condemn the text as a premier example of patriarchal sexism.’ But of course, as Glass recognizes, *The Story of O* does more complex things with male/female sexual interactions. Sexual performances do not necessarily map onto sexual identities in Réage’s Sadean universe.

Glass grasps Grove’s flawed achievement in bringing to US publishing and reading a new way of thinking: ‘the Grove Press backlist is a renewable resource of dissidence and dissent that continues to energize new generations of radical artists and activists.’ But this must be qualified: it was with an almost consistent loss of radicalism that ‘Grove almost single-handedly transformed the term “underground” into a legitimate market niche for adults during the second half of the twentieth century, inviting readers to “Join the Underground” by subscribing to *Evergreen Review* and by joining the Evergreen Club’. I think Glass overuses the term ‘under-

ground' early on in his account – the term did not really assume substantial traction until the mid 1960s, but he does show how Grove, never much more than a small press, intervened in America's cultural development – if not so singlehandedly as Glass implies. There were many other players: many little magazines, other small presses – too much underplayed in this book.

What else is missing? Well, Glass could have attended to Grove's support for America's avant-garde poets (Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, Frank O'Hara, Edward Dorn, Lawrence Ferlinghetti,

Gregory Corso, Paul Blackburn, John Ashbery). And maybe Glass should have drawn more upon how avant-garde presses and little magazines operate via interactive networks that mutually reinforce and critique. Doing that would have sharpened his account. Yet, such objections should not take away from what Glass achieves.

•> RICHARD ELLIS is *Professor of American Studies at the University of Birmingham. He is the President of the Society for the Study of American Women Writers. He has published over eighty articles and books.*