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An American reader asked today to name a mass-market publisher whose books are consistently, distinctively, pleasingly selected and presented will almost certainly land on Alfred A. Knopf – as would have many an American reader from the 1920s forward. This extraordinarily durable reputation – continuing long after Alfred Abraham (1892-1984) and Blanche Wolf (1894-1966) Knopf bequeathed their firm to others (it was acquired by Random House in 1960) – is surely a phenomenon worth exploring. Based on research at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Amy Root Clements explores how this distinction was established in this careful but curiously unsettled book.

Clements offers an engaging account. Alfred’s father, Samuel (1862-1932), an immigrant at the age of nine from Poland, had a turbulent early life but was well established in advertising before Alfred entered Columbia University in 1908. When Alfred started his publishing firm in 1915, his father provided $3,000 and space in his own office, becoming treasurer (and a substantial stockholder) when the firm incorporated in 1918, serving until his death. Blanche’s family seems to have been of more modest means – she was largely silent, perhaps misleading about it – and initially opposed her marriage to Alfred in 1916. She had, however, been fully engaged with Alfred’s plans from the start, and there seems no doubt that, though younger and less well educated than Alfred, she was both talented and highly ambitious.

Clements makes the case for the Knopfs as publishing impresarios rather than artists or intellectuals. Their genius was for adoption rather than innovation. She goes to considerable, and oft repeated, effort to dispel any notion that the Knopfs were pioneers in the elements of book design--paper, type face, layout, binding, dust jacket, etc. They delegated this work to 1920s and 1930s book designers and printers, whose work scholars have already discussed at length. Clements more lightly explores the Knopfs’ unceasing salesmanship – marketing genius, if you will--that fueled a relentless drive for “prestigious publishing.” They created a brand that has survived a substantial number of migrations into the clutches of multinational conglomerates. Often, Clements seems to cast the Knopfs as parasitic or plagiaristic performers, regrettably best known for qualities of their books they may have recognized, but did not themselves create.

The book has few illustrations. Portrait shots of the Knopfs as young adults grace the cover, but the text is enhanced with just 10 black-and-white illustrations: 3 full-page, 2-half page, the other five small cuts, none depicting the Knopfs. This is a shame, because the Knopfs created personal impressions as distinctive as their books. Blanche is consistently described as petite, slim, impeccably groomed, always elegantly (and expensively) dressed. Alfred, who also skimped not one bit on costume, favored Savile Row suits and bright pink and purple silk shirts with yet more flamboyant ties. Clements does not explore how the Knopfs’ packaging and marketing of themselves might have become part of their brand.

The Art of Prestige is quite readable. In the end though, Clements’ answer to the question that started her running seems to be the Knopfs did many thing things right, but not the things you might expect or
hope for. Their success was a combination of opportunistic, financially cautious (and often simply lucky) choice of authors; mostly intelligent delegation to production talent; stylish and highly consistent marketing that responded to author and title and consistently promoted brand; and an absolute insistence on paying bills (including royalties) on time, a principled stand that surely helped keep many an associate in camp.

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