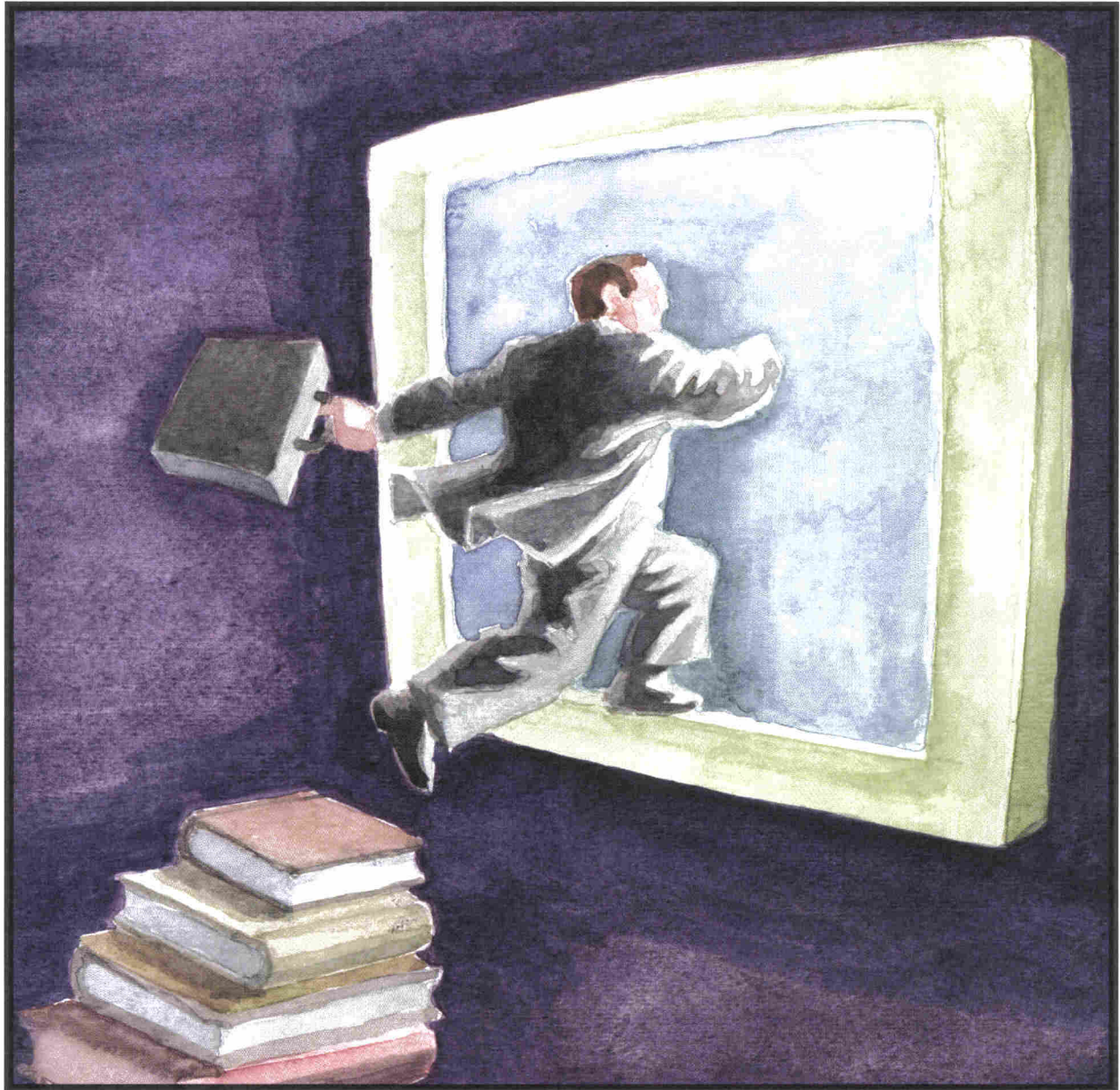


# AUTHORS GUILD

Summer 2008 **BULLETIN**



**Books, Profits & Digits: Publishing's Wary Leap  
Watched Any Good Books Lately?  
Roy Blount on an Author's Primary Mission  
Copyright on a Cocktail Napkin**

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## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Ever wonder where the (generally top) author royalty of 15 percent came from? I confess that I had not, but now I think I may know.

Yesterday I acquired Stanley T. Williams's 1935 two-volume *Life of Washington Irving* (Oxford) and was moved this morning to check his *Bibliography of the Writings of Washington Irving: A Check List*, issued in the following year. Looking for something else, I came upon this:

"Let aggrieved authors of the twentieth century read Walter Scott's frank letter to Irving on conditions in the trade, in which he declares that, arrange it as you will, the bookseller 'contrives to take the lion's share of the booty.' [Walter Scott to Irving, Edinburgh, December 4 1819, P. M. I., I, 443.] Sometimes the copyright was sold outright; in 1827 Irving offered that of the Columbus to John Murray for three thousand

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guineas. A more usual method, however, was publication upon shares. 'The mode of doing so . . .,' wrote Irving, 'is to agree about the number of copies in an edition, and the retail price to be placed upon them; to multiply the number of copies by the price of each, and divide the gross amount by six.

For this sixth part, the publisher to give his notes to the author.' ["Irving to John Murray," Madrid, July 29, 1827, P. M. Irving, *Life and Letters of Washington Irving* (New York, 1862-1864), II, 263.]

A sixth part is, of course, 16 2/3 percent, so today's authors take a bit of a haircut from the standard in Irving's day.

—John Thorn  
Saugerties, NY

*Continued on page 39*

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## ALONG PUBLISHERS ROW

BY CAMPBELL GEESLIN

First, the good news. Last year, 3.13 billion books were sold, compared to 3.1 billion in 2006. Higher retail prices, according to Book Industry Trends, helped increase revenues by 4.4 percent to \$37.3 billion from \$35.7 billion.

Juvenile hardcover sales were increased by 10.5 percent to \$301.6 billion last year (bumped up by Harry Potter). Religious books were up by 4.2 percent last year, selling 274.5 million copies. Adult trade hardbacks and paperbacks increased 1.8 percent to 839 million copies sold. Net revenue increased 4.3 percent to \$9.39 billion from \$9.18 billion. Mass market paperbacks sales were down 5.8 percent.

This spring, however, several publishers reported weak sales. Random House had a 4.9 percent decline in operating profit. Simon & Schuster reported 32 percent decline in operating income in the first quarter of this year.

Al Greco, a senior researcher at the Institute for Publishing Research, told The New York Times, "There is an economic malaise that's hitting this business. Basically what we're seeing when we look at the entire retail sector is that consumers are obviously very cautious."

OUR POET: Adam Gopnik, a staff writer at The New Yorker, wrote an essay about why W. H. Auden "is an indispensable poet of our time."

Gopnik observed: "Being everywhere at once while going nowhere in particular is what poets do, and Auden did it. Where journalists write about what people are arguing about in public, and novelists about what they are talking about in private, only poets seem able to show that what people argue about in public is identical to what they talk about in private, that what we are arguing about is the sum of our own guilts, fears, anxieties, hopes."

Gopnik concluded: "If [Auden] sometimes sounds in the forties as if he were speaking to us from a very high soapbox in a very big square, well, listen: we can hear him, still."

MOTHER TONGUE: The quotable W. H. Auden had this to say about English: "I think we are frightfully lucky because being a mongrel language, we have this enormous vocabulary. And then because it is an uninflected language, you can turn nouns into verbs and

*Continued on page 16*