

# Writing the Book on Exports

## World Curls Up to Publishing Firm's Classics

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You cannot judge a book by its cover, but one publishing company sure knows a best-seller when it reads one. It was 1926, its first year of operation, when Pelican Publishing Co., of Gretna, La., published the first trade book written by William Faulkner. Thousands of voracious readers gobbled up copies of a book by what many now consider to be America's greatest literary giant.

The title of that book was *Sherwood Anderson and Other Famous Creoles*. The book highlights the lives and multi-ethnic diversity of authors residing in New Orleans' French Quarter in the 1920s, where Faulkner lived. But it was not until Pelican came under new ownership and direction of Milburn and Nancy Calhoun in 1970 that it began to turn a new leaf and tackle the unique challenges of marketing internationally.

"If you look at the history of every major publishing company," recalls Dr. Milburn Calhoun, who is a retired medical doctor, "you'll find that at some point early on they had a 'big book,' a breakout book that opens up all kinds of doors. As soon as we read *See You at the Top*, we knew it was our big book."

It was. The 1975 book by Zig Ziglar became an international phenomenon, soon steamrolling its way to best-seller status with more than 1.6 million copies sold.

"*See You at the Top* is an exceptional business and motivational book, the kind of book whose principles work well across numerous cultures," says Calhoun. "There's a great demand for business content internationally."

Small wonder. The forward flap of the book identifies Ziglar as one of the great motivators of the age with an "ability to encourage, uplift, and inspire audiences." Then there is the down-to-earth subtitle: "The 'How to' book that gives YOU a 'Check Up' from the 'Neck Up' to eliminate 'Stinkin' Thinkin' and AVOID 'Hardening of the Attitudes.'"

### WRITING ANOTHER CHAPTER

Talk about motivated sellers, buyers, and readers. *See You at the Top* inaugurated Pelican's program of foreign rights sales, yielding rights sales in 19 languages, ranging from Bulgarian and Chinese to Russian and Slovenian; in addition, English-language rights have been sold to Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore.

Pelican aggressively expanded its publishing program in the wake of *See You at the Top*, not only extending its line of business and motivational books, but also branching off into categories such as cooking, travel, children's, history, politics, and regional. Pelican now has more than 1,500 titles in print and publishes 75 to 100 new

books annually, entertaining millions of readers.

As the lines of titles expanded, Pelican decided it had reached a critical mass of titles that opened the door to actual distribution of bound books in foreign markets rather than just rights sales. Pelican pursued—and attained—arrangements with book distributors in the major English-language markets of Canada, the United Kingdom, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa.

Pelican also has deals in the works for Singapore, Malaysia, India, and Brunei. At the same time, the firm has in place nearly 200 separate foreign rights agreements in 27 languages.

The heart of Pelican's international marketing is its participation in the Frankfurt Book Fair. Held annually in Germany, this trade fair is the major gathering of publishers worldwide. This year, Pelican hopes to pursue rights sales on its new business titles: *The Blockbuster Toy*, on how to create and market children's toys; *The Secret to Permanent Prosperity*; and *Dreamweaving: The Secret to Overwhelming Your Business Competition*.

Calhoun expects that Pelican's growing list of Second World War history titles will help pique the interest of European rights buyers, expanding on recently

released titles like *Black Knights: The Story of the Tuskegee Airmen*. This book describes the famous African-American squadron that flew fighter escorts on more than 1,500 missions and never lost a bomber, an unmatched record. Then there is *The Ghost Army of World War II*. Ghost army? That's right: "The 23rd Headquarters special troops was a force of only 1,000 men who often masqueraded as 34,000 with skilled deceptions," says Pelican's catalog.

This fall, Pelican will release a major book from an author with previous best-sellers in both fiction and non-fiction: *The Influence of Air Power upon History*, by Lt. Colonel Walter Boyne, which is expected to sell widely in Europe. Two other publications include *The Bataan Death March: A Soldier's Story*, and *Truman's Dilemma*, which is about the momentous decision to drop the atomic bomb.

"In Asia, we see quite a demand for business books, and in Europe, there's a lot of interest in history as well," explains sales manager Joseph Billingsley. "One of our top sellers in Asia is the motivational book, *Think Like a Winner!*"

Billingsley says that business books are also gaining popularity in Africa, and that children's books, while selling well in Mexico, are already a big hit in Japan. "We were quite surprised to find that the Japanese love Raggedy Ann books, mainly because of the big colorful pictures," he says. "We're doing great business there in children's books."

In the United Kingdom, Pelican has smoothed out some rough transatlantic sailing. "We found that in Britain, people are very particular about having the words in children's books spelled exactly as it is in their country, so we were not initially successful with using the American version," Billingsley says.

"Our colorful, ah, 'colourful' children's books are now tailored to the U.K. market."

Pelican is now working to identify large English-language markets that it has not yet reached, and to locate distribution partners in those countries. To do this, Pelican turned to the U.S. Export Assistance Center in New Orleans and its director, Donald van de Werken. "We were hoping to do more business in Japan, and we were told there was a significant English-language book market there, as well as substantial income to be spent on books, Calhoun says. "This market research was tremendously helpful, as we wanted to explore actual distribution and not just rights sales."

Van de Werken introduced Pelican to the export assistance programs offered by the U.S. Commercial Service and recommended the International Partner Search. "In our case, they used our book catalogs as the primary selling tool and took these catalogs to the prospects they had identified," Calhoun says. "The program resulted in several leads, including a promising prospect that distributes and buys rights—the best of both worlds for our company."

The firm is also looking to do business in Mexico, and has also obtained several leads through potential prospects introduced to them by Van de Werken.

Whether it is a novel in the Netherlands or a mystery in Morocco, revenue generated from selling books in foreign markets is a small but critical component of Pelican's livelihood, explains Billingsley: "As a percentage of overall sales, foreign sales—including rights sales and sales to our distributors—are quite low. But you have to understand that publishing is a notoriously low-margin industry, with profit margin for publishers at best, around 7 percent. Lots of publishing firms would be very pleased to achieve even that. As a result, the so-called extra revenue from foreign markets, though small, is often what puts publishers into profitability."

Pelican now publishes more than 100 books annually and employs a staff of 35. More than 75 years after its publication of the book by Faulkner, Pelican Publishing, like Faulkner, continues to endure in its own way. ■

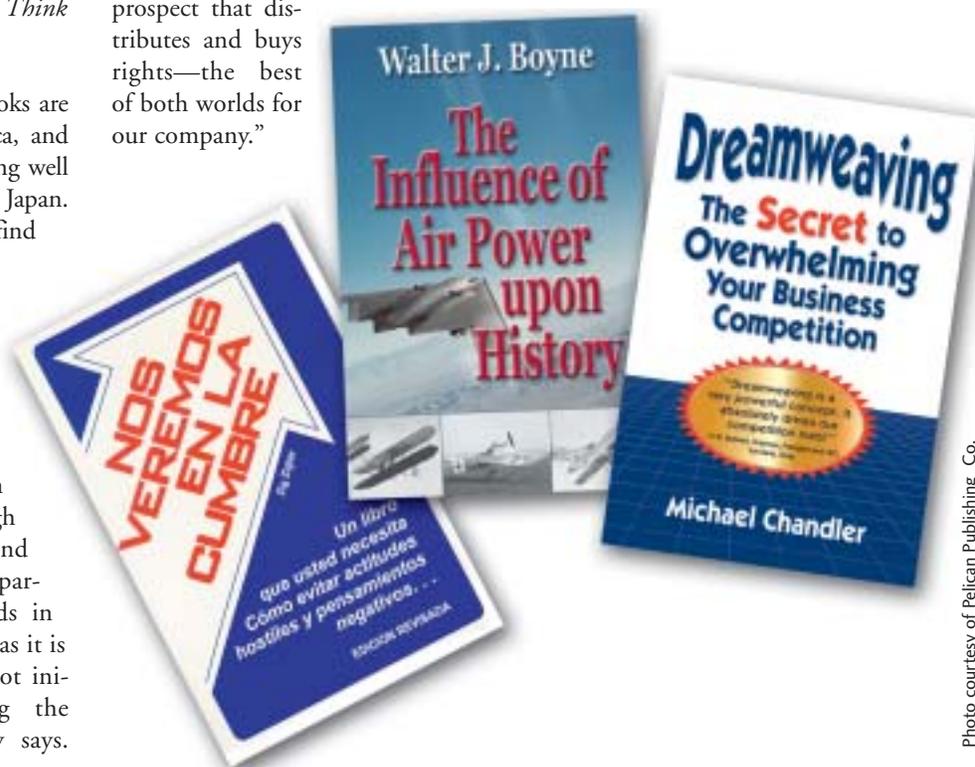


Photo courtesy of Pelican Publishing Co.