Book Business

By JOYCE ILLIG

Broken Arrow

STRAIGHT ARROW Books, the trade publishing house recently involved in the controversy over American rights to Philip Agee's *Inside the Company: CIA Diary,* has been folded by its parent company, Rolling Stone.

The inside board members, consisting of comptroller Tom Baker, president Richard Irvine and publisher Jann Wenner, met on March 5 and made the decision to do away with Straight Arrow Books, a division of Rolling Stone which is owned by the overall corporation, Straight Arrow Publishers Inc.

Diane Cleaver, managing editor of the publishing house, who was informed of the decision on Monday, March 10, was reached at her New York office and said that the company has decided "it's not a trade book publisher. They want to do one-shot deals on newsstands and special package deals that they can do through the magazine."

Although no one mentioned the word "firing," Cleaver said that's what has happened in her New York office and with the staff in San Francisco. (Cleaver had just hired two new people, both of whom gave notice to former employers and are now in between jobs.)

In an indirect way, Cleaver said that when the CIA book deal fell through, it probably accelerated the decision to eliminate the trade book division. It was founded in 1970 and published an average list of 20 books a year.

"Their decision is based on financing," said Cleaver. "The book company doesn't lose money but there's no guarantee that you are going to make money on it. They want to have a built-in guarantee that they're going to make money and we spent a lot of time on the CIA book. On a small list, that really blows things open."

Cleaver said she's most worried about the fall list and the books coming up, "which they don't want." She hopes to find a job and take with her the books that she signed up.

Jann Wenner, in a telephone interview from his Rolling Stone office in San Francisco, said that it had simply become time to decide where the financial resources would be best put and that the economics of the book business made it impossible for them to operate as a small publisher, especially one based on the West Coast.

"The investment kept getting bigger and bigger," he went on. "The kinds of books I was interested in publishing meant we were competing with the likes of Random House or Doubleday. Well, we just can't do it by having a minor little book division."

Poirot's Last Case

DODD, MEAD received an unexpected envelope from England in January, containing one of the surprise publishing events of the year. Dame Agatha Christie, who will celebrate her 85th birthday in September, had decided to release *Curtain,* a book she had written in the mid-'40s and had intended for posthumous publication. In it, one of fiction's most famous detectives, Hercule Poirot, makes his farewell appearance.

Curtain will be published on October 15, 55 years from the U.S. publication date of her first mystery, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles,* which marked Poirot's debut. Christie has *Curtain* take place at the scene of the first book.

Last week, Dodd, Mead held one of the biggest and most exciting paperback auctions thus far this year when *Curtain* was sold to Pocket Books for $925,000. Opinion was unanimous among advance readers that this was "prime" Christie, and this opinion was reflected in the intense all-day bidding by telephone that began at 9:30 a.m. and ended at 7:05 that evening.

Jonathan Dodd, director of subsidiary rights at Dodd, Mead, submitted the manuscript to nine paperback houses and set a floor bid at $100,000. Seven houses started bidding in round one. When the third round ended with six houses still in active bidding, Dodd said he was amazed because four of the publishers had never had a Christie on their list. It was only when the price went over $835,000 in the fourth round that the four houses stopped bidding and left Dell and Pocket Books, the two houses with the largest Christie backlist, to battle over the top price.

Phyllis Grann, the new editor-in-chief at Pocket Books, said of that price that as long as it made economic sense, Pocket Books was determined to get *Curtain.* "With our kind of backlist, it made a great deal of sense," said Grann. (Pocket Books, a part of the pending Simon & Schuster Inc. acquisition by Gulf & Western, has been showing big money lately. The company recently paid over $400,000 for a suspense novel called *Looking for Mister Goodbar.)*

Out of the 80 Christie mysteries that Dodd, Mead has published in hardcover and sold for paperback publication, Pocket Books has 35 titles in print, Dell 36, Bantam seven and Popular Library two.

Jonathan Dodd, whose previous high price in a Christie paperback sale was approximately $300,000 for *Postern of Fate* in 1973, said that *Curtain* is the largest paperback sale in the history of that house for a single title.

This will be the 34th full-length novel to feature Poirot. He has also appeared in six short story collections.

JOYCE ILLIG writes regularly on the publishing scene for Book World.