



## Amanda Laugesen, *Taking Books to the World: American Publishers and the Cultural Cold War*.

Amanda Laugesen. [\*Taking Books to the World: American Publishers and the Cultural Cold War\*](#). Boston and Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2017. 192 p. ISBN 9781625343093. \$US28.95.

In *Taking Books to the World: American Publishers and the Cultural Cold War*, Amanda Laugesen maps out Franklin Publications's global initiative, "a kind of American Cold War book empire, one that brought American books and the publishing industry to all corners of the globe" (2). She contends that Franklin is both typical of and unique to Cold War American diplomacy. On the one hand, "Franklin sought to offer a particular image of the United States, one that highlighted the best elements of the nation and of what it had to offer to the world" (3) as a means of creating allies and combatting international communism in what is now called the "Global South." On the other hand, Franklin was committed to local control of book selection, translation, distribution, and management, perpetually rebuffing the U.S. State Department's propaganda imperatives in efforts to promote an indigenous book culture. Informing both these aims was Franklin's desire to create new commercial markets for American books and publishing. For these reasons and others, Laugesen argues that Franklin is a particularly useful vehicle for examining the tangled web that was "cultural diplomacy" during the Cold War.

Laugesen's history draws from a broad archive "news reports; government documents; trade publications; personal interviews; Franklin minutes, reports, letters, advertisements, and publications" and reads in part like a political thriller as it details how Franklin Programs had to navigate complex personalities, tense partnerships, and ever-shifting geopolitics in the volatile postwar world. The book begins with a brief history of twentieth-century American cultural diplomacy and subsequently demonstrates how Franklin both drew from and departed from such in its use of books as weapons in the battle for "freedom." Founded in 1952, this private and government funded organization was first largely "an adjunct to USIA cultural diplomacy programs" (39), but increasingly distanced itself from government ties as it sought to establish local book cultures free of overt American propaganda in the Global South. Chapters two through five explore Franklin's contradictory vision and how it ultimately led to the program's demise. Franklin's idealistic bookmen believed that their attempt to bring American books and literacy to the world was a charitable act free from ideological taint. They sincerely thought that reading American books in translation would help to spread freedom throughout the world. At the same time, the program's drive to establish

American “values” and markets, its imposition of a one-way flow of information (American books were translated into other languages but indigenous books were not translated into English for American readers), its “modernization” rhetoric and initiatives, and its willingness to work with oppressive regimes to gain a foothold in local book markets all smacked of imperialism and reinforced problematic Cold War American foreign policies. For that reason, potential South American and African markets rejected Franklin and its hold in the Middle East became increasingly tenuous with the rise of Arab nationalism. Ultimately, Franklin’s competing aims couldn’t be reconciled, and the program ended in 1978.

*Taking Books to the World* is one of the most compelling studies of Cold War cultural diplomacy to date. By studying one organization in-depth, Laugesen is able to highlight the complexities and contradictions which were endemic to Cold War American politics and culture. Her detailed research and nuanced argument make this book a model of responsible book history work. Even more, Laugesen is an excellent storyteller—her narrative is engaging, suspenseful, and always accessible. By bringing together Cold War, postcolonial, and book history studies in such a way, she expands our understanding of books’ geopolitical soft power and adds to the ever-growing field of Global South studies.

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