

'What is the relevance of the role of the literary agent in the context of current changes in the publishing industry?'

The value chain of the traditional publishing industry is based on replicating the work of an individual author in order that it reaches as wide a public as is economically possible – a process that requires the printing of books and their subsequent distribution into sales channels that physically connect the work of the author with the wider public.

The manufacture of paper books is both capital intensive and time-consuming. Printing a book requires substantial investment in labour and materials. The finished product requires logistical support to enable its sale through distribution channels (i.e. from the printers to bookstores and wholesalers). A book must be stored in publishers' warehouses for significant periods of time – if a title is to remain in print. Books can often be regarded as a perishable and seasonal commodity, especially if offered to retailers on a sale-or-return basis, so this investment can be a high risk as physical stock runs a significant risk of remaining unsold and being written-off.

To mitigate these risks, publishers have adopted a number of strategies, usually based on the ability to exploit economies of scale or scope. The most obvious is that the capital required to produce and market a book is treated as a scarce commodity. Despite the large number of books published in the UK, publishers are very selective in deciding in which titles to invest and spend large sums ensuring the quality of those they do publish (e.g. in editing, design, promotion, etc.).

There have always been small and specialist presses (for example, for poetry and academic works) but these have often specialised in small print runs that are not widely distributed.

'Vanity' publishers have long provided access to book printing for a fee but leave other stages of the value-chain – particularly editing, logistics and marketing – to others (usually an author). By contrast, for an individual author, the process of 'being published', in gaining access to the economic resources of the publisher is also an independent endorsement of the quality of their work. In addition to covering the costs in advance of producing a book, a publisher also bears a risk by traditionally paying an author an advance in lieu of royalties.

Perhaps reflecting the economic imbalance between multi-national publishing corporations and individual authors, literary agencies have become established as intermediaries between the two (although according to Blake (1999) this is largely an English speaking world phenomenon). The literary agent acts on behalf of the author, traditionally taking a percentage (typically 10-15%) of the author's income. A London Literary Agent in The MA Course Text Module session described the services a literary agent offers:

There are two main benefits to having an agent - first, our editorial input (we are often the first people to read a person's work with a view to the market)...we work with an author to get the manuscript in its best shape for however long it takes...and our management of your relationship with a publishing house - negotiating the best deal, managing the publication process etc. (An Agent, 2012)

With the rise of literary agencies towards the end of the last century, the literary agent has also assumed the role of a gatekeeper, controlling access to the commercial publishing industry, especially for new writers. This has benefits for publishers, who have come to rely on agents as a quality filter, allowing them to concentrate on other aspects of the book production business. However, agencies are still required to take a commercially hard-nosed

attitude, given the quantity and variable quality of submissions received from aspiring writers. Gordon (2011) says in *The Writers' And Artists' Yearbook*:

A literary agency most emphatically isn't a finishing school for aspiring authors...As every second person in the world right now seems to be touting a manuscript, agents are finding it seriously difficult to keep up the reading demanded of them...these days editors and publishing houses...regard agents of the primary sifters of material, of separating the wheat from the chaff. (Gordon, 2011)

Later in this article Gordon goes on to describe the close and supportive relationship that a good literary agent and author should share. However, his reference to 'every second person in the world right now' working on a novel that might be touted to him, illustrates a common perception amongst aspiring authors that literary agencies do not project a welcoming attitude towards new writers (e.g. with references to 'the slush pile', the less than complementary term for unsolicited manuscripts received by an agency). While most agents who accept unsolicited manuscripts say they will always read material that they receive, it is very rare for speculative approaches to lead to publication. For example, literary agency Blake Friedman receives over 20 manuscripts every day and in 2011 only three new authors were taken on by Oliver Munson, one of its three literary agents. This is a ratio of submissions to representation of well under one per cent¹.

However, much of what is submitted speculatively to agents is either of poor quality or misdirected (e.g. wrong genre). As a London Literary Agent said to MA Creative Writing students:

The slush pile is real, and there's a lot on there that is unpublishable - either because of the quality of the writing, or the subject, or both. We get about 10 unsolicited submissions a day, and in eleven years have secured deals for fewer than 10 unsolicited authors. If you could see the slush pile I think you'd be heartened about your own chances (An Agent, *ibid*).

If they are deluged with such a large amount of material, it might seem surprising that agents are often keen to engage with and encourage potential new writers. In addition to speaking to Creative Writing courses, agents attend writing conferences and many actively use online social media, such as Twitter.

As with many creative industries, the quantity of writers who are turned down by literary agents illustrates the large numbers who desire publication – for many different motivations.

Under the traditional publishing model, the only route into print for writers rejected by literary agents or publishing houses would be to finance their own vanity publishing enterprise. However, within the last decade, technological advances have recently brought down both the costs of traditional printing, such as printing-on-demand, and also created new devices that radically transform the distribution of the written word, notably e-readers such as Amazon's Kindle. The previous economic barriers to entry to publishing, particularly the need to use of large amounts of capital for the physical replication of books, have been removed – at least in these new models of production.

Therefore it is unsurprising that the large numbers of aspirant authors rejected by the traditional literary sifting process have been ready to provide the huge amount of creative

¹ Assuming 200 working days and a hopeful 3 new clients taken on per agent the ratio calculates to 0.2%. However, this figure includes all new clients, not necessarily those found from the 'slush pile'. Even if prospective authors make submissions to other agencies the success rate of gaining an agent is probably in the very low single percentage figures.

content that is now available either in print-on-demand book form or, more commonly, via electronic internet intermediaries such as Amazon.

Unlike the traditional publishing process, which commonly takes eighteen-months to two years for a book to move from final draft to being in a bookshop, a writer is now able to make his or her work available almost instantly.

Amazon has been driving the growth of self-published e-books through its Kindle Direct Publishing program, which now offers nearly a million titles to readers worldwide...KDP has attracted self-publishing authors in droves by paying royalties up to 70% and making it relatively easy for a writer to convert a manuscript in Word format to a legible Kindle edition without paying fees. (Publishers' Weekly, 2011)

Moreover, by removing the need for the capital needed to invest in paper, print and physical distribution, the level of author royalties that programmes like Amazon's KDP are able to pay direct to authors are far above the typical ten to fifteen per cent earned in the traditional publishing model. This has led to aggressive discounting – for example, if an author takes nearly 70p of the sales price of a e-book sold online at 99p, it will be more net income than the royalty on a novel discounted by a supermarket at £3.99, which could be less than 50p.

Such pricing may be testing the elasticity of demand for writing – the degree to which readers are price-sensitive (i.e. if books were cheaper, would customers buy more?). There has been a trend for some authors to give their work away for free, usually for a limited period on a promotional basis. For example:

Michelle Muto: The Book of Lost Souls is still FREE & in Amazon's top 100! Help keep it there! <http://tinyurl.com/67npswh> #YA #ebook (Muto, 2012).

As providers of digital content in the music industry have found, it can be difficult to re-establish the value of intellectual property if the customer expects to receive it for free.

Traditional publishers, while also benefiting from the reduced costs involved in the production of electronic books, have also been keen to prevent the price of traditional books being threatened by a spiral of discounting – or a customer expectation of free content. The pricing of e-books sold by established publishers is a controversial and still unresolved issue – such as the controversy over the 'agency model' where publishers are allowed to set prices of e-books.²³

Even with agency pricing keeping prices for electronic versions of traditionally published books roughly comparable to printed counterparts, the growth in the numbers sold has been dramatic:

In the first five months of this year sales of consumer e-books in America overtook those from adult hardback books. Just a year earlier hardbacks had been worth more than three times as much as e-books, according to the Association of American Publishers. Amazon now sells more copies of e-books than paper books. The drift to digits will speed up as bookshops close. (Economist, 2011).

With technology making electronic methods of publication easy and accessible, it might be argued that the role of literary agent as gatekeeper to the publishing industry is now redundant. Any author now has the ability to self-publish by creating an electronic book or supplying a PDF file that can be printed into a physical book on demand. These can be listed and sold on Amazon or even the author's own website.

² Similar in principle to the old UK Net Book Agreement

³ And which has led to publishers being sued by the US Department of Justice <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-17681137>

Moreover, as the process is virtually free, there is no financial risk – and the stigma associated with vanity publishing (where the author has to pay substantial sums to get into print) is rapidly disappearing. The Economist says: ‘self-published novelists, keen for attention and without agents or publishers to share the proceeds with, often sell their works extremely cheaply’. (Economist, *ibid*)

There may be signs that a hybrid model is developing in the current market where agents monitor the self-publishing market for new talent. A London Literary Agent said:

The trade press is full of deals at the moment for people who published directly on Amazon and then got a more traditional deal as a result... nowadays we all take the Kindle chart very seriously, and good digital sales of a self-published book can be the best ammunition. (An Agent, *ibid*)

There have been well-reported instances where books that have been rejected by agents or published by very obscure presses have become huge e-book successes. The BBC website reported that author, John Locke, was the first to reach sales of over a million e-books as a self-publisher.⁴ The BBC reports that Julia Keller, cultural critic of the Chicago Tribune applauds the democratisation that self-publishing promises to achieve: “Frankly, I think self-publishing is a splendid trend,” Ms Keller, from the Chicago Tribune, says. “Anything that challenges gatekeepers is a good and healthy thing.”

A current example is *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E. L. James. This trilogy is a ‘combination of romantic storytelling and themes of bondage and domination [that are] so steamy they have been dubbed “mommy porn”’ (Helmore, 2012). James, a previous unknown, has sold over 250,000 copies since 2011 and topped the *New York Times* bestseller list. It has also been suggested a reason for the books’ popularity is technological: ‘people can read this material on iPads and Kindles “without anybody knowing what they’re reading.”’ (Helmore, *ibid*). This may be an example of the industry gatekeepers failing to realise the effect e-readers may be having on traditional book purchasing habits.

However, the example of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, also illustrates the continuing importance of the literary agent in the publishing process. Reviewers have not been complementary to James’s writing style. One critic, while being generally favourable to the plot and concept, describes the prose itself as ‘pages of treacly cliché. ... her writing is as hackneyed as the hoariest Mills & Boon.’ (Barnett, 2012). It is a matter of debate whether readers are more tolerant of poor style than publishing industry professionals but, despite Gordon’s comments above, this criticism may indicate that authors do benefit from the quality assurance role of a literary agent.

Bearing in mind The Agent’s point about negotiating the best deal, it is notable that even authors of very successful e-books often choose to sign a contract with an agent and traditional publisher as a means of managing the consequences of success.⁵ Much of an agent’s work involves aspects that most aspiring writers hardly give a thought to, such as foreign rights. Also, despite technological innovation, the mainstream publication process still involves expertise, such as promotion and marketing which depends on professional experience and industry contacts. Agent Jonny Geller of Curtis Brown said of the commercial work undertaken by an agent on an author’s behalf:

⁴ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-16469000>

⁵ James has signed with Valerie Hoskins Associates.

I recently attended a conference, happily entitled “Disintermediation—who will be left?”, and the clear inference was that agents would be “disintermediated” out of the picture. I’m not so sure. Which author truly wants to close their Lithuanian rights deal (at midnight) while updating their blog (at 6 a.m.), revisiting the copy edit for the fourth time (a whole morning’s work) and keeping an eye on the hourly change of their book’s pricing? (Geller, 2012)

Current changes in the publishing industry, such as the rapid adoption of e-books, will have indisputably profound effects. The economic obstacles that have prevented most writers from being able to publish and disseminate their work have been removed. However, the proliferation of content may have a negative effect on quality standards and may also dilute income for individual authors. To make a successful writing career it is likely that it will remain as important as previously to have a good agent who will offer sound advice throughout a writer’s career and to guide an author through the changing publishing process.

References

- Barnett, L., (2012), ‘Mommy porn? Fifty Shades of Grey by EL James: review’, Daily Telegraph, 13th April 2012,
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/9201010/Mommy-porn-Fifty-Shades-of-Grey-by-EL-James-review.html> (accessed 13th April 2012)
- BBC News website, (2012) ‘US sues Apple and publishers over e-book prices’,
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-17681137> (accessed 13th April 2012)
- Blake, C., (1999), ‘From Pitch to Publication’, Pan MacMillan, London.
- The Economist (2011), ‘Great Digital Expectations’,
<http://www.economist.com/node/21528611>, (accessed 13th April 2012)
- Geller, J., (2012), ‘An Agent’s Manifesto’, <http://www.thebookseller.com/blogs/agents-manifesto.html> (accessed 13th April 2012)
- An Agent, (2012), online interview, The Text: Week 10 Discussion: A London Literary Agent, Manchester Metropolitan University, 15th March 2012,
<http://moodle.mmu.ac.uk/mod/forum/discuss.php?d=33475>
- Gordon, G., (2011), ‘The Role of the Literary Agent’ in ‘The Writers and Artists Yearbook’, A.C. Black.
- Helmore, E., (2012), ‘The rise of 'mommy porn': UK writer lures Hollywood with bestselling erotic trilogy Fifty Shades,’ Observer, 25th March 2012.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2012/mar/25/fifty-shades-mommy-porn> (accessed 12th April 2012)
- Munson, O. (2012), Message to author on Twitter, 13th April 2012
- Muto, M., (2012), @MichelleMuto, Tweet, 13th April 2012.
- Snow, D.O., (2011), ‘E-book Boom Boosts Self-Publishers’,
<http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/pw-select/article/50028-e-book-boom-boosts-self-publishers.html> (Accessed 12th April 2012)