

The Modern Literary Agent

[from: *Contemporary Publishing and the Culture of Books*

[ISBN: 9780415750226] (Routledge, 2020)]

Angus Phillips, Oxford Brookes University

The literary agent is prominent in trade book publishing in the UK and the US, whilst the role is rarer in other publishing markets, such as in continental Europe. What started as an intermediary between the author and publisher has developed into a much broader function, acting on behalf of the author, with elements of business, editorial and marketing. The agent is a key gatekeeper into the mainstream publishing world for authors, especially in the area of fiction. Literary agents champion authors, offer them invaluable support and advice, and may be the single point of continuity throughout their writing career.

There are significant challenges to the established media gatekeepers: authors may find an audience through social media, podcasting, fan fiction, or self-publication in e-book form. Yet there remains the cachet of publishing with an established publishing house, plus the publisher has access to high street retail for the print edition. Agents carry out a valuable function for publishers, acting as a filter for new authors and projects, and undertaking considerable editorial work.

As diversity has become such a live issue in contemporary publishing, questions arise as to how the agent's gatekeeping role is exercised. Possible threats to the role of the agent come not only from self-publishing but also from the continuing consolidation among publishing companies, publishers dealing directly with authors, and the erosion of authors' incomes.

A brief history of the literary agent

The work of the literary agent can be traced in the UK back to the later years of the nineteenth century. The agency A. P. Watt was started by Alexander Pollock Watt in the 1870s, working for both authors and publishers. For authors, working on a commission of 10%, he read their work and helped place it with publishers. His authors included Conan Doyle, Kipling, and Rider Haggard. For publishers he would help them place serial or other rights; and find suitable authors as required. Mary Ann Gillies views the principal task of the agent from this time as 'to recognize a work that would sell. There was no sense in trying to place material for which there was no market, especially when the agent's earnings depended on a commission from the sale' (Gillies, 2007, page 30).

The role of the agent came under scrutiny, and by the beginning of the twentieth century the Society of Authors recommended that authors should be wary of using agents as they were seen as too allied to the interests of publishers. It was suggested that agents could

place more books by keeping the agreed royalty rates paid by publishers at a lower rate; and that they would make more money for themselves overall with this approach (Hepburn, 1968). But this would be at the expense of the earnings of individual authors. George Bernard Shaw regarded the literary agent in an unfavourable light, commenting that 'The literary agency is a ... favourite resort of persons who have not ability enough either for ordinary business pursuits or for literature' (The Author, 1 November 1911).

The Society of Authors was also concerned about dubious practices such as charging a fee for reading manuscripts – seen as a business model in its own right for agents. In the *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* of 1930, there is to be found a cautionary note:

Owing to complaints of the methods of some literary agents it has been deemed advisable, in the interests of writers, to cut the usual details of the terms upon which business is negotiated. Anyone needing the services of an agent is likely to make a more careful choice if preliminary investigation is a forced necessity.

(*Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* of 1930, page 168)

The practice remained controversial and in post-war New York the successful agent Scott Meredith charged a reading fee. At times the service read over 3,000 scripts annually, and when Arthur Klebanoff took over running the agency in 1993, he introduced a flat fee for a read of \$450. The income covered the overhead of the agency (Klebanoff, 2002).

Sterling Lord, who represented authors such as Jack Kerouac and Ken Kesey, talked about the kind of person who was a literary agent in the 1950s in New York: they

were people who were in the business because they liked writing, rather they liked books. It wasn't all about money, and for a long time, the money really wasn't very good. For example, when I started out, many agents weren't interested in the movie business at all, because they thought those guys out there were thugs.

(Albanese, 2013, page 20)

The role of literary agent, however, became more professional and to be seen as commonplace within mainstream trade (or consumer) publishing. In the 1960s and 1970s new opportunities arose to exploit the rights in books: for example by selling film rights. There was also 'the massive expansion of the market created by the rise of the retail chains. ... books were increasingly made available to consumers in ways and on a scale that had simply not been possible before' (Thompson, 2012, page 62). By the mid-1990s Michael Legat viewed agents as both 'an accepted and respected part of the literary scene' (1995, page 13). This was also the era of the super-agent: a prominent example was Andrew Wylie in New York, who was willing to challenge what he saw as a cosy relationship between agents and publishers, and to poach top literary names to bring into his stable of authors.

Dubbed 'the Jackal' for his aggressive poaching of other people's clients, his distaste for commercial fiction and his disinterest in social media [are] legendary. He is the reigning king of the backlist, profiting mainly off classic titles rather than taking risky

bets on new ones. His only criterion is enduring quality, and his client list is eye-popping: Amis, Nabokov, Bellow, Rushdie, Roth.

(Bennett, 2013, page 26)

Wylie began his agency in New York in 1980 and in 1995 Martin Amis dispensed with the services of his agent, Pat Kavanagh, to sign up with Wylie. This opened up a rift between Amis and Kavanagh's husband, Julian Barnes. When asked in 2016 about his relationship with Amis, Barnes said: 'When we meet, we talk ... It's not a problem. He lives in Brooklyn and I live in Tufnell Park' (*Radio Times*, 5 December).

The period before the turn of the century coincided with further growth in retail for books, from supermarkets to book superstores and Amazon, and the book market offered higher incomes for successful authors. The hardback market expanded and publishers were keen to secure the best books and authors through the offer of large advance payments. With publishers willing to put up advance payments to secure a deal, the author would receive substantial cash sums not just the promise of royalties to be earned in the future. Additional opportunities for income streams came from subsidiary rights – from film rights to translations – whilst agents could divide up volume (book) rights by territory and increase the overall pot. For example, they might sell US rights separately to one company in New York, and UK and Commonwealth rights to a publisher in London, whilst selling the rights in several languages.

A long-established network of literary scouts, acting on behalf of international publishers, facilitated the sale of translation rights. They were in regular touch with agents and publishers in New York and London in order to alert their publishing houses as early as possible to exciting new books and authors.

every major trade publisher - from Korea to France and from Italy to Finland - has a scout in America and possibly also one in England, so that even the slightest buzz in New York or London about a new young writer is immediately, and often simultaneously, transferred to dozens of European publishers, whose concurrent interest and heated bidding regularly have a self-fulfilling effect on the announcement that the writer in question has written an 'exciting' book, about which - as the curious expression goes – 'everybody is jumping up and down'.

(Asscher, 1993, page 27)

The agent takes a prominent role in trade publishing, acting as a gatekeeper for new authors, and pitching books to publishers. This contrasts to the role of the editor, now significantly diminished, especially as the decision to publish a book must align with the opinions of colleagues in sales and marketing. Of publishing in the twenty-first century, Sterling Lord wrote:

[it] has come to resemble less the selling of paintings or other creative work and more that of carpets or refrigerators. Books are no longer bought by publishers on the basis of one editor's commitment. The editor and sometimes even the publisher

have to check with other editors, advertising, sales, promotion, or a higher authority, or all of the above. It is “committee publishing”.

(Lord, 2013, page 291)

The Writers' and Artists' Year Book from 1930 recorded 30 agents in Britain – all but two were in London. By the 2019 edition (published in 2018), there were 182 listed in the UK and Ireland and in a more diverse range of locations, although the overwhelming majority were still based in London and the South-East (only seven in Scotland and Ireland, and none in Wales). The large agencies in London have a number of agents working for them (Table).

After the financial crisis of 2008, the book market found growth to be more elusive, compounded by the difficulties of high street retail, the rise and fall of e-books, and a decline in the readership of literary fiction (Phillips, 2017). Editors came under pressure to publish fewer and more commercial books, and author incomes suffered as the market favoured a relatively low number of highly successful titles each year.

Table. Number of literary agencies in Britain (Writers' and Artists' Yearbook)

1930	1946	1975	1995	2003	2008	2019
30	39	80	138	161	161	182

The present role of the agent

Storytelling can now take many different forms – from a podcast to a Netflix series – and the agent has become what Jonny Geller from Curtis Brown calls a literary manager. Those forms are

a huge opportunity for us because now we can have a good storyteller tell a story and I can think well actually this would work better as a ten part series and then the book. It depends on what the author wants.

(Geller, 2019)

In today's world of book publishing the mainstream publishers do not accept unsolicited manuscripts from authors – the so-called slush pile has either moved online (to sites such as Wattpad) or to the offices of agents. To win a publishing contract with a publisher, a first-time novelist must first secure an agent to represent them. Successful agents working with a stable of brand authors will find it difficult to make room for new authors but many agents will still review submissions from new authors. Although the odds are stacked against them (a large agency can receive up to 15,000 submissions a year), there is a continuing appetite for new authors within the industry – there is an ongoing search for fresh talent with an appealing back story and seen as promotable.

Agents will source new authors from the slush pile, through social media, or perhaps from the range of creative writing degrees – around 50 universities in the UK offer a course at

master's level. Networking with agents and editors can be one of the key selling-points of a creative writing programme. The agency Curtis Brown launched its own creative writing courses in 2011. Often, however, agents will source new talent through personal recommendation, creating a network into which it is hard to break into without the right connections.

It is in the Code of Conduct of the UK Association of Authors' Agents that no reading fee is charged to authors without prior consent in writing. Separately there are author service companies that will carry out paid work on manuscripts – mostly this is with an eye to the author self-publishing. The agent acts as a gatekeeper within the industry, and carries out initial filtering for the publisher (Bhaskar, 2013). It is very hard to get in the front door and secure an agent's services but once an author has an agent, their chances of securing a publishing deal are significantly enhanced. The prominent agent Carole Blake (1946–2016) wrote:

If a writer has an agent, a publisher knows the writer has passed through at least one level of screening, and that another professional in the trade, the agent, believes the author has a future. The agent's reputation says something about the author's abilities, too.

(Blake, 1999, page 45)

If the agent sees the potential of a book – on receipt of a synopsis and a few chapters in the case of fiction – they may then request the full manuscript. On agreement to represent the author, they will work with the writer to secure a publishing deal. The agent does not receive any financial return before such a deal is signed. They will set out to improve the proposal and sample material from the author, until these are ready to show to selected editors. The agent will maintain good contact with publishers and will know who is likely to be interested. A new book may sell to one publisher or go to auction among a number of interested players. The agent's job is to advise on the best deal and to find the right fit for the author, in terms of the relevant publishing list and the proposed marketing and publicity. Securing a high advance is likely to lead to the publisher allocating a high proportion of their marketing budget to the book.

The division of rights is a source of tension with those publishers that want to purchase world rights. A publisher seeks to secure as many rights as possible whilst the agent wishes to sell them separately or reserve them in case of a deal in the future. A global publisher will argue that they can publish around the world; an agent sees the benefit in signing individual deals by territory and language. A first-time author may be tempted by a good offer for world rights from a big name publisher, perhaps fearing less success elsewhere; a good agent will recognise that advance payments from a number of sources will increase the overall sum that a book will command. There is also a potential benefit from domestic publishers championing the author in their markets. E-book rights would now be regarded as part of the volume rights for a book, acquired by the publisher with the print rights, and with a standardised royalty rate, but no similar arrangement yet exists for audio rights (a

fast-growing part of the market). Yet many publishers would now expect to take audio rights as part of any substantial deal.

Translation rights may be sold by country through sub-agents in other territories or through international work: for example, at the major book fairs, such as Frankfurt and London, or at Bologna (children's). The larger agencies will have departments that concentrate on the sale of translation rights.

Serial rights – extracts sold to a newspaper – will most likely be reserved by the agent. Their value has shrunk in recent years as the sales of newspapers have fallen, but there may be significant publicity value in some deals. Options may be sold for film or TV rights but only a few titles will go into production. The larger agencies will have a separate division that deals with Hollywood and the streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon. Agencies will manage the literary estates of successful authors: for example Roald Dahl (David Higham) and Ian Fleming (Curtis Brown).

At the same time as doing deals agents will be carrying out editorial work – in-house editors have less time to edit as their responsibilities have broadened. Specialist readers for agencies may help with tackling the slush pile, whilst the agents work on improving proposals and helping their authors (especially new ones) develop their next books – from helping shape the structure to line-by-line editing. They will read drafts for the author, who may then get a new set of comments from the editor at the publishing house. Editors seeking authors for a new non-fiction project or publishing list may enlist the help of agents, or decide to approach authors directly.

Much editorial work has in effect been subcontracted from publishers to agents, reducing the overheads of publishing houses. This was highlighted by Eric De Bellaigue:

In the 1960s and '70s, some agents barely read manuscripts before passing them on to the publisher, safe in the knowledge that the latter's editorial resources were comprehensive. Not today. The agent's role will now cover the pre-selection of publishable texts, work on authors' presentations to publishers, followed by editorial work - sometimes considerable - on the text ahead of submission - all of which also has the practical advantage of cutting down the time to publication.

(De Bellaigue, 2008, page 112)

Books that are ready to go, with little need of editorial work, are more saleable and likely to attract higher advances from publishers keen to fill their forward lists.

Agents will guide the careers of their authors, conscious of market trends: whether psychological thriller (*The Girl on the Train*) or up-lit (Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine). As Sophie Lambert of C&W comments, 'We have to offer more and more strategic advice to authors, in terms of what their long-term goals are ... writing beautiful, quiet fiction is not going to be a recipe, for the most part, for commercial success' (Lambert, 2019). There are performative aspects to authorship, with an expectation that they are active on social media, be visible in the media, read the audiobook, and participate in literary festivals. In a broader business role, agents today work with authors around their websites, promotional

campaigns, and their backlist. They will champion their authors' views to the publishers around book covers. To work with non-fiction authors in particular, some agencies have launched services offering writers for events, talks and after dinner speaking. If a publisher is not selling enough copies of an author's backlist, the agent may seek to move the books to another publisher or assist in the self-publishing of the titles. The Ed Victor Literary Agency in London set up Bedford Square Books in 2011 to publish POD (print on demand) editions and e-books of titles that have gone out of print or are unavailable. From the agency Charlie Campbell said:

We expanded into e-publishing purely as a service to our authors. Of course, there is the possibility of a conflict of interest, but we are doing all we can to avoid such a thing. We would always prefer to be the agent than the publisher, and so, if a suitable offer was made by a publisher, we would accept that and revert to being the agent on the deal.

(Spavlik, 2011, page 9)

The role of the agent is of little significance in other parts of publishing, for example, in academic publishing, since the level of royalties received does not justify the use of an intermediary. However, the expansion of the number of agents has led to some academics being invited to sign up with an agent for their books for a broader general market. Some academics writing for a trade market may still find it useful for their agent to be involved in, say, a college textbook deal. The reason why there are agents in US and UK publishing is that the returns available to authors are higher than in other markets. Writing in the English language opens up a range of international markets, whilst global exposure encourages sale in translation (the two strongest world markets for the exploitation of copyrights are the US and Germany).

With the global dominance of the English language, and now translations from English, an unfair advantage has developed, with a momentum of its own, regardless of the quality of the books. This also has implications for authorship, with some authors choosing to write for an international readership, with a consequent shift in content and style.

(Phillips, 2014, page 103)

Indeed some authors choose to write in English and then be translated for the edition in their domestic market. The well-established network of agents and scouts facilitates the sale of subsidiary rights, from film and TV to translation. A book written in a smaller language will have less initial exposure and requires specialist readers to assess its potential for other markets – a sample translation may be required to stimulate rights sales. No such issues exist for books in English.

Sums payable to the author from a publisher will first be paid through their agent – a practice that dates back to the days of A. P. Watt. Originally established by Watt at the level of 10%, the commission is now at a base level of 15%. Just as publishers make their profits from a base of bestsellers, alongside their bets on other titles, agencies will find that their

successful authors help to subsidise their work with new authors (yet to bring in income), and their midlist authors – yet to make a breakthrough with their sales. Sometimes they have to make tough decisions, dropping midlist authors in favour of new talent. An author who does not sell may be dropped by both publisher and agent.

With a greater emphasis in the publishing industry on frontlist titles and bestsellers, the income of agencies is derived in a higher proportion from advance payments, and less from royalties once advances have been earned out. A successful agency will aim for a split of 70:30 in favour of new business (Geller, 2019). This makes income uncertain and with advances reduced since the financial crash of 2008, the job of the agent that much harder work.

The rates of profitability at the top publishing groups contrast with diminished incomes for authors: it was estimated that in 2016 the shareholders of the big five publishers received up to three times the amount paid out to authors (Solomon and Atkinson, 2018). A 2017 Arts Council England (ACE) report into literary fiction concluded that there are only around 1,000 novelists in the UK who can make a career from their sales alone. Taking a hardback book which sells around 3,000 copies:

For the sake of simplicity, that represents £30,000 of total revenue of which the retailer is likely, on average, to take half – so publisher, agent and author must make do with £15,000 between them. Selling 3,000 to 4,000 books is not unrespectable. However, making a living as a writer at this level of sales is exceptionally difficult, to say the least.

(Arts Council England, 2017, page 16)

Authors will have received an advance against royalties but the report supported the view that advances have been on a downward trajectory. Huge six-figure advances hit the headlines, but they are largely the exception, and the floor for advances may be only a few thousand pounds. For agents an advance in the region of £5,000 to £15,000 will earn them from £750 to £2,250. Simone Murray concludes:

financial realities have contributed to a marked polarization of authorship into authorial celebrities at one end who may be marketed as virtual brand-names, and the mass of other authors, formerly denoted ‘midlist’, who struggle to maintain publisher support and must fight among themselves for editorial and marketing attention.

(Phillips and Bhaskar, 2019, page 49)

Saturation in the market, as can be seen from the number of agencies, reflects the presence of smaller agencies, close to lifestyle businesses, with low levels of turnover. Eric de Bellaigue commented on the ‘one striking characteristic of the industry, namely the Lilliputian scale of so many literary agencies. This is as true of the United States as it is of the United Kingdom, with numerous instances of one-man or one-woman firms’ (2008, page 114). The agents may have worked previously for publishers, perhaps as editors, and are content to work with only a few authors. Occasionally publishers break away from the

established pattern of working through agents, and hold open submissions – aiming to attract new books and authors directly. But mostly editors are happy to work with agents, who feed their publishing programmes. In *Merchants of Culture*, John Thompson writes,

For the most part it is agents, not editors or publishers, who are expected to discover new talent, to find new writers whom they think are promising and to work with them to turn an idea or draft manuscript into something that an editor or publisher would recognize as an attractive project and potentially successful book.

(Thompson, 2012, page 75)

Professionals in publishing move around frequently and stability for authors is maintained through their agent, whilst their editor may have moved on to another publishing house. When Julian Barnes's editor, Liz Calder, left to co-found the publishing house Bloomsbury, he chose to remain at Jonathan Cape. 'Why would I want to go with her when it is she who has left me?' (Maschler, 2005, page 85) As George Greenfield observed,

many authors have discovered that, with all the chopping and changing that has taken place and will most likely continue to take place in the ownership and staff of publishing houses, the one fixed point in a fluctuating world is their literary agent.

(Greenfield, 1993, page 197)

Editors also become agents, perhaps sick of the round of musical chairs that is often the state of commercial publishing. Editors are measured on their sales and they have to bet on projects, and sometimes bet big in order to impress. Moving on may be their own decision or it is forced upon them.

In turn, authors may decide to move publishing house, to be reunited with their editor, or to seek improved terms or greater attention for their books. Robert Gottlieb, former Editor-in-Chief of Alfred A. Knopf, writes:

There are many reasons writers switch publishers. Money certainly is one of them: When a writer or his agent wants more than the publisher thinks is prudent to pay, or another publisher has flashed bigger bucks. When a writer and his editor don't really understand (or like) each other. When a writer doesn't feel that his publisher really believes in him. When a writer feels that a change of publisher might change his luck. When a writer is having a mid-career crisis and just needs to make changes in his life, which often involves changing spouses as well as publishers.

(Gottlieb, 2016, page 176)

Sometimes they will decide to move agencies, for a similar set of motivations. Martin Amis, who accepted an advance of £500,000 for his novel *The Information* (1995), negotiated by his new agent Andrew Wylie, broke with both his agent, Pat Kavanagh, and his publisher, Jonathan Cape. Reflecting on this move many years later, he said:

The person who wants a quiet life, which is 90% of me, should have taken the Cape offer [of £300,000], and that would have been the end of it. These things stay with you. For years it

was the number one thing people asked about, and it was not my finest hour. (*Guardian*, 14 July 2013)

An agent has to have a broad mindset in today's environment in which books reach many more platforms than ever before, as observed by Juliet Pickering of Blake Friedmann:

a book on my list, *SLAY IN YOUR LANE: The Black Girl Bible* (2018), gathered traction across radio, TV, podcasting, corporations, and even reached into fashion outlets. There are traditional spaces for books, and an ever-growing opportunity to take books into non-traditional spaces, which the agent has to start thinking about from the point of taking on the book and the author.

(Clark and Phillips, 2019, page 150)

The agent who is well connected with the world of TV and film can help authors source work in the area of screenwriting. Ultimately the role of the agent is to support their author with encouragement and advice, offer sound business advice, guide them in their writing career, and maintain their morale. Mandy Little of Watson, Little says, 'it's not about a book, it's about a long-term relationship between author and agent; developing talent to the extent that the author is capable of, or perhaps challenging him or her into new directions' (2011, page 23).

Diversity in publishing

A key issue in contemporary publishing is that of diversity and inclusion. How can books represent more fully the nature and composition of society? This issue can be examined along dimensions such as the workforce, authorship, and what is published; and around characteristics from race and gender to class. The author Nikesh Shukla, who edited the crowdfunded book *The Good Immigrant*, writes powerfully about the experience of being a person of colour:

race is in everything we do. Because the universal experience is white. [A] commenter on a short story I once wrote, was pleasantly surprised to see Indians going through the universal experience. Much as I was surprised that I was excluded from the universal experience, it hammered home the knowledge that the universal experience is white.

(Shukla, 2016, page xi)

On the subject of class, the founder of Bluemoose Books, Kevin Duffy writes:

There is an increasing disconnect between the lives of those who commission books and the real world of readers up and down the country. ... An author I publish was told by a very eminent writer with whom she was studying that "literature is always middle class; written about, by and for ..." To write in a different way, about different people, the way Ken Loach makes films, is assumed to be political.

(*Guardian*, 17 June 2014)

For publishers struggling to achieve growth in mature book markets, can they broaden their horizons whether recruiting staff or new authors? Mathangi Subramanian writes about children's books:

All over the world, children's literature has a diversity problem. In the US, the Cooperative Children's Book Center reported in 2017 that only 6% of published books for children were penned by black, Latino, or native American authors. Regardless of authorship, only 4% of books for children and teens had LGBTQ+ content. The same year in the UK, only 4% of books for children and teens featured a black, Asian or minority ethnic character. In Australia, a recent study by Victoria University found that books for children and teens almost exclusively star middle class, heterosexual, white families, and most protagonists are male.

(Hindustan Times, 3 January 2019)

As literary agencies have a prominent gatekeeping role in mainstream publishing, they too must consider the nature of their workforce and how new talent is discovered. Personal recommendation from existing clients when taking on new authors does not broaden the pool from which they originate – it only reinforces the strength of the existing network drawn from a particular class and background. Julia Kingsford comments on her work as an agent, 'Basically my white, middle class authors were only recommending people from their own social circles, who tended to be white, middle class people who had been to top universities, and worked in the media' (Kingsford, 2019). Drawing on authors from creative writing programmes may have a similar result – these are writers with the time and financial resources to develop their craft. 'Whilst talent is universal, the craft of that talent isn't', says Julia Kingsford.

In 2018 a new UK literary agency, the Good Literary Agency, opened its doors to non-agented writers with a focus on 'discovering, developing and launching the careers of writers of colour, disability, working class, LGBTQ+ and anyone who feels their story is not being told in the mainstream' (thegoodliteraryagency.org). The agency, supported by funding from Arts Council England, was founded by Nikesh Shukla and Julia Kingsford. A key aim of setting up the agency was to work with authors that for financial reasons were not getting serious attention to develop their talent and careers. Julia Kingsford says,

When we talked to publishers about why there was a lack of diversity in publishing, publishers said that they didn't get sent enough. When we talked to agents what they said was that they sent loads – it just didn't get bought or got bought for such small amounts of money that it wasn't necessarily worth their while to pursue. ... Agenting is a business where you have to follow the money.

(Kingsford, 2019)

Publishers are experimenting with blind recruitment processes – hiding details such as name and education – when making an initial selection of candidates. Should agents do the same when inviting new projects? Trade publishers are discussing opening up offices in other parts of the UK, to get away from a London-centric view – should agencies adopt a similar

approach? The difficulties should not be underestimated. Research by Melanie Ramdarshan Bold examined whether literary agents can be successful outside London, looking at the case of Scottish-based agents (there were none in Scotland until 1989). She found that it was more difficult to develop expertise given the smaller pool of opportunities available, and concluded that

the majority of Scottish literary agents are ill equipped to sell rights and either outsource this task to external agencies or sign over the rights to publishers in exchange for larger advances for their authors. Unfortunately, these publishers do not always exploit the rights efficiently, and so lucrative rights are often left unexploited.

(Ramdarshan Bold, 2013, page 16)

A lack of diversity in the UK and US publishing markets is also reflected in the lack of translated works. Chad Post of the Three Percent blog says:

The big corporate presses are not doing very many of these books. They do the big books that seem like they are built to make a lot of money or have a name—Haruki Murakami, Stieg Larsson, the books that are set to have a large sales base for whatever reason. (Edgerly, 2016)

Smaller presses may publish high literary titles in translation; and surprisingly it is Amazon with their AmazonCrossing programme that fills the gap in the middle – for example, those genre titles such as mystery or thrillers that do well in their domestic markets. There are definitely some agents interested in the area of translations but if they have to follow the money, often their inclination will be to concentrate on authors writing in English.

The future of the literary agent

Agents remain a fundamental part of the ecosystem of trade publishing, and are valued by both authors and publishers. They continue to spot new talent in their gatekeeping role, and nurture the careers of authors whilst protecting their interests. Can we see any threats to the position of the literary agent? The continuing consolidation of publishers can only depress competition for agented books. The larger publishing groups still allow competition between their imprints when other publishers are in the hunt for a book. This favours authors but how long will this be allowed to continue? Also the aim of securing world rights, if achieved by publishers, will diminish the opportunities for agents to sell works themselves into different territories. In addition, publishers may increase their direct approaches to authors – this is already the case for some commissioned non-fiction titles. Celebrities may use the services of their lawyers to negotiate contracts as books are seen as just one part of the exploitation of their brand.

The impact of self-publishing continues to be felt in the publishing industry. The democratisation of authorship means that there is a ready route to publication which bypasses the mainstream publishers (Phillips, 2014). There are not accurate figures on the sales of self-published books but a large number of titles are published through this route. The aim of the self-published author may be to attract their own audience, and take a

higher share of the book's revenue. Some also see the possibility of attracting the interest of a commercial publisher – the large publishing houses keep an eye on successes through storytelling sites such as Wattpad, crowdfunded options such as Unbound or Kickstarter, or e-book publication through Amazon. Such filtering bypasses that done by agents, but those signing up with a mainstream publisher may still feel they need an agent's help when negotiating terms.

Wattpad has moved from simply being a platform to the creation of a whole model around the exploitation of stories through different media. The author Anna Todd posted her story *After* on the platform in 2013, and it went on to be read over 1.5 billion times. The book was sold to Simon & Schuster, and Wattpad received the equivalent of an agent's commission, taking 15% of Todd's earnings. For the Hollywood movie, Wattpad acted in the role of producer (Cuccinello, 2018). Could the filtering role of agents be carried out by AI? – Wattpad thinks so and in 2019 the company announced the opening of its own publishing division and the proposed use of algorithms to aid the process of selecting titles: 'Whereas traditional publishing is based on individual editors' tastes, Wattpad's technology will scan and analyze the hundreds of millions of stories on the app to find themes or elements that might determine a story's commercial success' (New York Times, 24 January 2019). The erosion of authors' earnings has impacted on the work of agents: if more work is required to generate the same level of income, something has to give – from work on the slush pile to the level of editorial input given to new writers. The larger agencies have developed an infrastructure of lawyers, accountants, or PR experts, and these overheads have to be covered from the share of author incomes. Those agents may be forced to restrict themselves to working with the known quantities of successful brand authors. Authors, in turn, may direct their efforts towards projects in the world of audio, TV, or film, away from books. Some agencies, already working across media, are well placed to deal with such a shift, but smaller literary agencies will undoubtedly struggle.

References

- Albanese, A. (2013), 'The Agent', *Publishers Weekly*, 18 February.
- Arts Council England (2017), Literature in the 21st Century: Understanding Models of Support for Literary Fiction. www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/literature-21st-centuryunderstanding-models-support-literary-fiction [Accessed 15th November 2019].
- Asscher, M. (1993), 'The Challenge of Being Small and Unknown', *Publishing Research Quarterly*, Summer.
- Bennett, L. (2013), 'The Dastardly Defender of Letters', *New Republic*, 21 October.
- Bhaskar, M. (2013), *The Content Machine: Towards a Theory of Publishing from the Printing Press to the Digital Network*, Anthem Press.
- Blake, C. (1999), *From Pitch to Publication*, Macmillan.
- Clark, G. and Phillips, A. (2019), *Inside Book Publishing*, 6th edition, Routledge.

- Cuccinello, H. (2018), '\$400M Fiction Giant Wattpad Wants To Be Your Literary Agent', *Forbes*, 24 September.
- De Bellaigue, E. (2008), "'Trust Me. I'm an Agent.'" The Ever-Changing Balance between Author, Agent and Publisher', *Logos*, 19:3, 109–119.
- Edgerly, L. (2016), 'Found in Translation: How Amazon Is Filling a Gap in World Literature', <https://teleread.org/>, posted 27 August.
- Geller, J. (2019), Joint CEO of Curtis Brown, interviewed by the author, 14 January.
- Gillies, M. A. (2007), *The Professional Literary Agent in Britain, 1880–1920*, University of Toronto Press.
- Gottlieb, R. (2016), *Avid Reader: A life*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Greenfield, G. (1993), 'Literary Agents: Where They Come from and Where They Are Going – A Transatlantic Study', *Logos*, 4:4, 189–197.
- Hepburn, J. (1968), *The Author's Empty Purse and the Rise of the Literary Agent*, Oxford University Press.
- Kingsford, J. (2019), Co-founder of The Good Literary Agency and Kingsford Campbell, interviewed by the author, 16 January.
- Klebanoff, A. (2002), *The Agent: Personalities, Politics and Publishing*, Texere.
- Lambert, S. (2019), Director at C&W (Part of Curtis Brown), interviewed by the author, 19 February.
- Legat, M. (1995), *An Author's Guide to Literary Agents*, Robert Hale.
- Little, A. (2011), 'Agenting Now', *Logos*, 22:2, 22–27.
- Lord, S. (2013), *Lord of Publishing: A Memoir*, Open Road.
- Maschler, T. (2005), *Publisher*, Picador.
- Phillips, A. (2014), *Turning the Page*, Routledge.
- Phillips, A. (2017), 'Have We Passed Peak Book? The Uncoupling of Book Sales from Economic Growth', *Publishing Research Quarterly*, 33:3, 310–327.
- Phillips, A. and Bhaskar, Mi. (2019), *The Oxford Handbook of Publishing*, Oxford University Press.
- Ramdarshan Bold, M. (2013), 'Can Literary Agents Be Based Outside London and Still Be Successful?', *Logos*, 24:1, 7–18.
- Shukla, N. (2016), *The Good Immigrant*, Unbound.
- Solomon, N. and Atkinson, O. (2018), 'Open Letter on Author Earnings', *The Bookseller*, 29 June.
- Spavlik, J. (2011), 'Fitting Literary Agents into the Digital Publishing Equation', *EContent*, September.
- Thompson, J. (2012), *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the 21st Century*, 2nd edition, Polity Press.
- The Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* (1930), A. & C. Black.