

From: Nicholas Murray
Sent: 01 January 2006
To: Alan Shearman
Subject: HMV/Ottakar's merger inquiry

Dear Mr Shearman

In response to your advertisement in the 23 & 30 December issue of the "TLS" inviting evidence on the anticipated acquisition of Ottakar's by HMV Group I am attaching, as a pdf file, an article by me which has just appeared in the December/January issue No 174 of the Welsh magazine "Planet".

Obviously this is written in a lively, polemical style and not in the style which one would adopt for a formal submission of evidence but I think it may have some value in expressing what many serious readers and writers are currently feeling about this whole issue.

If for any reason the file is not readable please let me know.

Yours sincerely

Nicholas Murray

John Doyle

From: Alan Shearman
Sent: 04 January 2006 13:36
To: HMV Ottakars Distribution List
Subject: FW: HMV/Ottakar's merger inquiry



MurrayPublishing20
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To see, please.

Alan

-----Original Message-----

From: Nicholas Murray [mailto:n.murray@britishlibrary.net]
Sent: 01 January 2006 15:35
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Nicholas Murray
<http://pages.britishlibrary.net/nicholas.murray>

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DEALING WITH THE DEVIL: THE CRISIS IN CONTEMPORARY PUBLISHING

by Nicholas Murray

This article is reprinted from Planet magazine no 174, Dec 2005/Jan 2006. Visit Planet's website for subscription details at www.planetmagazine.org.uk

It is a pleasant June evening in Athens. I am in the company of the two Greek translators of my biography of Franz Kafka, at the restaurant, *O Platanos* [The Plane Tree] in the northern district of Patissia. Actually, we are beneath the broad, waxy green leaves of a mulberry tree which, as the evening wears on, will start to shower our table with small falling insects. The talk, understandably enough, has been of translation and the quiddities of language. Alexandros is translating from the original German my numerous quotations from Kafka and talks of the pleasure it gives him to see Kafka being reborn "in my language". Xenophon is translating my English text. He recently translated Conrad's *A Shadow Line* and explains that in modern Greek most of the terms still in use by sailors are derived from the days of occupation by the maritime empire of the Venetians. Earlier, on our way to the restaurant, walking through the streets of Patissia from the city bus, he says that my use of the word "recycling" to describe Kafka's reworking of some earlier texts, doesn't work in Greek although there is a word almost identical to it and meaning the same thing (a municipal dustcart obligingly groans past us at this point) so he has found a way round it, a periphrasis. Xenophon has the dry, sardonic intelligence so characteristic of the sophisticated Athenian which makes it all the more surprising when, briefly, he appears to lose his cool. His most recent translation, of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, was attacked by a Greek reviewer because he chose to deploy some unusual and recondite vocabulary. He raps the table and declares angrily: "It's linguistic terrorism!" In solidarity I point out that a

Welsh reviewer attacked my recent novel for using a French word. He nods solemnly. More evidence.

That sense of constraint, of the limiting of possibilities, of writers being forced into moulds by publishers, booksellers, agents, fashion-conscious reviewers and critics, may always have been present - who ever said being a writer was an easy option? - but it seems to me that there has been a rapid advance recently of the forces ranged against the contemporary writer. It is not a matter of censorship and repression as it still can be in many countries of the world but rather a growth in the power of conformity, in the narrowing of choice. And it is not just a matter of concern to writers, it is affecting - and will continue to do so in far more damaging ways - the people who matter most of all: readers.

The conditions in which books are produced and put before readers are always subject to change and innovation and this has often brought great benefits. Such high points for the modern reader as the launch of Penguin Books, the rise of public libraries, the spread of universal literacy, and more recently the possibility of searching and finding rare or difficult to acquire books on the Internet, have to be celebrated. But it seems to me that the changes we are witnessing just now are far less benign and are in danger of drastically limiting the range, originality and innovative quality of the books we read. It may not be terrorism but it certainly frightens me.

The recent capture of the high street bookselling chain, Ottakar's, by the HMV group which owns Waterstone's will, if the Office of Fair Trading eventually permits it, put Waterstone's in firm control of nearly a quarter of all bookselling in Britain. When this chain was first launched by Tim Waterstone in the 1980s it was seen by

many as a breath of fresh air. Here were big, stylish, comfortable shops with a huge range of books of real quality. I was one of those seduced. Sadly, after several changes of hands, this chain is far closer, especially in the smaller shops which have, one by one, snuffed out the light of independent bookshops in many small and medium-sized towns in Britain, to the notorious WH Smith, Waterstone's, with its powerful buying policies, its apparently total control over the publishing industry which must give it ever larger discounts, pay bribes to get its books displayed in the windows and the front of the shop, even submit its book jackets for approval, and with its supermarket-style "3 for 2" promotions of book "product", is plainly a very powerful force.

What is perhaps less fully appreciated are the further ramifications of its power. Not merely do publishers have to kow-tow to the chain booksellers like Waterstone's (and as independent booksellers vanish an oligopoly parallel to the supermarkets - of which more later - is slowly established) but their existence modifies the entire publishing universe. The Chairman of the Society of Authors, Antony Beevor, recently claimed in the pages of the Society's magazine, *The Author*: "I have already heard editors say that marketing departments will not allow them even to consider a manuscript, unless without any work on it, they can guarantee it being accepted for a three-for-two promotion." I sincerely hope he is wrong. He added that Waterstone's had a new "ordering strategy" which warned staff against ordering more than one copy of any book which was not what it categorised as an 'A-Grade' new title. If a book cannot be displayed or ordered in quantities of more than one at a time what hope is there for the small publisher, the off-beat volume, the quirky, the innovative, the title that appeals to a serious minority only - what hope, in other words, for richness and variety? What hope for the open-minded, inquisitive reader?

In these conditions of market conformity editors - who once ruled the roost in publishing - are no longer at the creative heart of the publishing process. Men and women with years of publishing experience are now routinely humiliated at commissioning meetings by sales and marketing people who tell them that their bright idea won't sell - a famous formulation in publishing which takes the form of a self-fulfilling prophecy. If they say a book won't sell ("No one wants to read a boring Russian novel which ends with the heroine throwing herself in front of a train") then that is precisely what will happen. Like a cancer, the dreary nostrums of sales and marketing eat their way into the innards of the book business. And it goes on. Literary agents, who exist to supply new work to publishers (most of whom now refuse to look at unsolicited manuscripts that don't come from an agent) are also affected by the rules set by the bookselling chains. They will find themselves, consciously or not, assimilating the requirements of the chains when looking at new work that is presented to them. Selecting more of the same, the stuff that looks like the stuff that sold last week rather than the stuff that might surprise us next week, becomes the easiest option.

The first casualties of this new harsh climate will be the small and medium-sized publishers and - I stress it again - their readers, who are gradually being denied choice. I spoke to several small publishers and found a universal gloom. Nicholas Jacobs of Libris, a tiny publisher specialising in German literature and nineteenth century studies, explained that he had always had difficulty in getting his kind of book reviewed in the press and stocked in the shops and that recent trends had merely made matters worse. Anthony Rudolf of the Menard Press made the point that the huge discounts demanded by the chains - sometimes as high as 60 per cent - were clearly disadvantageous to small publishers. "The only way to

survive is to think small and be a cottage industry. We are outside the mainstream. We are off the radar.” Small presses like these have often been in the vanguard of literary innovation and they have a dogged survival instinct. They will probably carry on in some shape or form. “Being a small publisher has to be a passion; it’s always uphill,” says Rudolf. I asked him if he thought that serious literary fiction would go the way of poetry where, following the abandonment or drastic pruning of their poetry lists mainstream publishers in recent decades ceded the field to small independents like Carcanet, Bloodaxe, or Seren. He replied that this was unlikely. Poetry publishing lends itself to the cottage industry approach. People sell at readings. It can be promoted to its small readerships more easily. Fiction isn’t quite like that.

Gary Pulsifer runs the much bigger independent, Arcadia Books, and he is worried by the recent Ottakar’s takeover. He is prepared to concede that the chains do still stock a variety of publications: “But they push far fewer titles - and it is these marketed titles which achieve volume sales.” I asked him if there could actually be a shrinking audience for serious writing, especially a lack of younger potential readers, or could it be that mainstream publishers and booksellers were simply not trying hard enough to reach readerships which palpably exist. “Part of the problem I’m sure is that we publish far too many new books each year in the UK. They are all competing for space. That said, conglomerate publishing goes for the obvious sell, even if particular imprints within the conglomerates still publish good books. But one only has to look at the demise of Flamingo at Harper Collins or the merger of Harvill with Secker at Random House to realise that quality lit. ain’t where it’s at there. I’m convinced the main reason that Random acquired Harvill was to feed Vintage’s need for backlist titles - and Harvill had a number of great titles in this respect.”

Interestingly, none of these publishers felt that Internet sales were a significant factor, negative or positive, in the current situation.

The suggestion that there are too many books published is an apparently paradoxical complaint when we are saying that too few get promoted but it is connected to the central failure of contemporary publishing and bookselling: a failure to identify and support quality. Here the critics and reviewers must be brought into the indictment. One can sense in many broadsheet books pages a tension between the literary values of the books editor - and some of these like Boyd Tonkin in *The Independent* are fully aware of the problems discussed above and have ventilated them in their columns - and the demands of their own editor for celebrity profiles, book business chatter, and varieties of puffery. The decision of *The Times* to alter its books pages to accommodate such features has won the enthusiastic approval recently of Waterstone's Head Buyer who has attacked the books pages for having the temerity to think that serious criticism is more important than selling books. The dumbing-down of books pages and their growing pre-occupation with personalities and trivia is indeed part of the problem and further proof of the spread of that cancer. But given those figures some sort of critical winnowing is vital. At the time of writing the bibliographical agency Nielsen Book Data reports that 114,000 new books have been published in 2005, an 11 per cent rise on last year. It predicts that at least 200,000 titles will be out in the UK by the end of the year. These figures, of course, include just about everything (computer manuals, directories etc) including digital, print-on-demand and self-publishing. In France they are a bit more selective about what constitutes a book. Their data agency for books, le Syndicat national de l'édition (SNE) thinks we published 80,000 titles in 2004 compared with 70,000 in Italy and 60,000 in Spain.

The French figure was 50,000, a four per cent increase on last year. The publisher Viviane Hamy (who publishes the offbeat detective writer Fred Vargas) told *Le Monde* earlier this year: "There is certainly a growth in the number of titles but less and less diversity in literary works." This surely the point. Bookselling, which has increasingly come to resemble supermarket food retailing, has allowed quantity to triumph over quality. One important measure of quality is originality, diversity, innovation. The supermarket analogy is irresistible as the chains pile them high and sell them cheap. Just as supermarkets reject or destroy fruit and vegetables that don't resemble something manufactured on a production line - every shiny apple must be smooth and symmetrical and free of the slightest flaw, unlike the delicious apples on my Radnorshire tree with their bruising, insect bores, and aberrant shape - so the booksellers are on the lookout for the bland and blemish-free. And there appear to be plenty of people in the literary supply chain ready to pick those plastic apples.

The number-crunchers and the marketing gauleiters in publishing have traditionally been anonymous bogeymen but recently an identifiable figure has begun to emerge from the half-light. Lucifer has a name and number. Waterstone's Head Buyer, Scott Pack, has been allowing himself to be exposed to media scrutiny, affording us some precious insights into the people who buy the book "product" for their increasingly powerful chain stores. "I have a confession to make. I love bestsellers," he told *The Author*. "We all need bestsellers," he went on because they make the money which allows us the luxury of having a few poetry books on display. "It is all a question of balance." Well, quite. According to *The Observer* who interviewed Pack in his Chiswick bunker: "He looks a little like you might expect him to look; early thirties, with a goatee, and squarish specs, like an extra in one of those "It's Grim up north London" cartoons in *Private Eye*."

Publishers allegedly (all were too fearful to speak to the *Observer* journalist, Tim Adams) go in fear of the man in square specs because he can make or break them. Waterstone's is allegedly demanding 65-70 per cent discounts for some Christmas promotions on top of "contributions" of £30,000 or more towards marketing costs of each title promoted. One can understand the small publishers' sense of marginalisation. Pack, to be fair to him, is a bookseller. He is interested in selling books, not evaluating them, criticising them, contemplating their aesthetic quality. He hates bookreviewing which is a waste of time. If a review in, say, *The Observer*, results in 20 sales of the book the following week "then it means they have reviewed something their readers have no interest in reading. I don't see the point of that." Whereas the point of Scott Pack is very clear.

Waterstone's recent acquisition of Ottakar's chain will only increase the power of Pack. It is a measure of our current desperation that the defence of Ottakar's is seen as a heroic act of cultural rescue. I walked boldly into the chain's branch in Aberystwyth recently to see for myself and was immediately faced with a dump-bin promoting two Welsh Books of the Month: *Mr Vogel* by Lloyd Jones and *The Dust Diaries* by Owen Sheers. My spirits rose. Two cracking good books, one published by an independent Welsh press, well-positioned and well-promoted. And then the old devil in me spoke: "Where are the rest?" Sure enough, as one walked along the fiction shelves there was little sign of the products of Welsh literary publishers, to select one example. The biography section was meagre. The shop was not, in the end, at all impressive for its range of stock. If this was the best they could do in a big university town and cultural centre (albeit one with two strong independent booksellers specialising in Welsh material which would certainly have stocked all my missing books) then roll on Waterstone's.

I have dwelt on the mechanics of publishing and bookselling because the people in charge of it are responsible for what we are allowed to read - for what is allowed to be written - and they have growing power. They may not be terrorists but they are absolutists and the ordinary reader - unless he or she revolts - is required merely to roll over and acquiesce in their strength. The only countervailing power, *pace* Mr Pack, is that of criticism.

I hope that the Welsh literary scene, worryingly fixated just now on literary prizes and puffed-up razzmatazz, will heed this and recognise that the overwhelming need is for sharper, better-informed, more dispassionate and constructive criticism. For if there is critical failure then victory is granted by default to the people who think that what matters is *The World According to Clarkson* - number one in the *Sunday Times* paperback bestseller list as I write and the contemporary book equivalent of Watney's Red Barrel keg beer. The brewers told people that this was what they wanted in the 1960s. They fought back.

Anyone for the inaugural meeting of the Campaign for Real Literature?

Nicholas Murray lives in Powys. His novel, "Remembering Carmen" is published by Seren.

His website is <http://pages.britishlibrary.net/nicholas.murray>