

## **Books Without Borders? Readers, Writers and Publishers in the Global Literary Marketplace**

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Professor Claire Squires  
Stirling Centre for International Publishing and Communication  
University of Stirling

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**ppt** The title of my lecture is – as many of you will have understood – a pun. In December last year, the UK bookselling chain, Borders, went into administration. After successive buyouts from its original US owners, the chain had become crippled by the high-street rents its shops' extensive square-metre-age commanded, by the substantial level of cash tied up in the stock it needed to fill these shops, the growth of online and supermarket selling and also – perhaps – by some less tangible shifts in consumer behaviour.

The events of November and December 2009 unfolded in the spotlight of the British trade and general media, and the blogosphere. First, rumours of cash flow issues, that some suppliers weren't providing stock, and the news that buyers were being sought for at least some of the chain, including an advert in the *Financial Times*.<sup>1</sup> Then, publishers – concerned about their stock being tied up in the failing chain, put Borders on stop, refusing further supply of titles. Despite redoubled efforts to find a buyer, on 26 November it was announced that Borders was to go into administration. The ensuing days saw closing down sale posters shipped to all shops and progressively deep discounting of all titles (although the initial offers were in some cases less attractive than Borders' customary discounts). The shops emptied of stock and filled with pre-Christmas bargain hunters, who could, in the very final days, make offers for the shops' fittings and fixtures: its bookcases, shelving and furniture. Everything Must Go.

Before its closure, Borders occupied a 4% market share in UK book retail.<sup>2</sup> The cataclysm of the closure occasioned much discussion and debate, and also anxiety about the state of the bookselling and publishing industries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Borders was not our biggest high-street bookseller – that position falls to Waterstone's – but it was symbolic of a particular type of book retail. Borders brought to the UK the US model of big-box bookselling, replete with Starbucks café concessions, stock extending beyond books into magazines, music, DVDs and toys. Along with large surfaces areas went long opening hours, and the concept of the bookshop as a lifestyle destination.

Might the demise of Borders mean, symbolically, the end of this model of bookselling, pulled under by the growing market share of Amazon and the supermarkets? Might it mean that the heavy book buyers who dominate book purchasing in the UK had deserted this bookselling model either for the ease and deeper discounts of these alternative sales channels, or (perhaps, and) in terms of a book-buying experience – **ppt** to some of the savvy new breed of independents, whose curatorial and community-building approach offered something the more impersonal and increasingly centralised chains could not?<sup>3</sup>

Did, some industry commentators query, the demise of Borders mean a group of lost consumers – and book sales? Victims of the recession, yes, but also, perhaps, of a changing environment in which book retailers' fortunes rise and fall, taking their core markets with them?

My intention here is not to give a comprehensive overview of the local issues surrounding British bookselling – which may or may not have direct parallels to your own market, and to those of the rest of Europe and North America. Rather, it is to introduce an analysis of books more broadly in their industrial contexts, in relation not just to their sellers, but to readers, writers and publishers as well. In so doing, I will draw on a number of different examples and case studies from around the world, in order to address my theme of books without borders – borders with a small 'b'.

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In my post as the Director of the Stirling Centre for International Publishing and Communication, one of my key roles is in providing training and education for the publishers of the future. My own background has also been as a publisher, and I would define my writing and research within the discipline of publishing studies. But I am also a historian of the book, and I would like – if you would indulge me for a while – to start by spending some time discussing an example which might seem to have little relevance to our global literary marketplace of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but – as I hope will eventually become apparent – makes some revealing connections to our contemporary book world.

**ppt** Some miles north of the University of Stirling, where I am based, tucked away between the small Perthshire towns of Auchterarder and Crieff, is a rather remarkable institution. Established late in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Innerpeffray Library is Scotland's oldest lending library, a private collection which granted access to its books decades – indeed, centuries – before the circulating and subscription libraries that developed in Britain in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the public libraries of the 19<sup>th</sup>. Although very early records from Innerpeffray do not remain, it is clear that from around 1680 the 3<sup>rd</sup> Lord Madertie, David Drummond, opened his private library of 400 books to the surrounding community. Successive generations of the family retained the tradition, making available to readers in the area books of (and I quote) 'astrology, demonology, chiromancy, spiritualism, war, politics, law, agriculture, horticulture, natural history, history and literature'.<sup>4</sup>

What makes the Library a particularly rich historical record to us today is that from 1747, comprehensive lenders' records were kept **ppt**, and survive in the Library's archival holdings. The records detail each borrowing by title, date, and by name, location and occupation of the borrower **ppt x 3**. In so doing, the borrowers' ledgers represent an incredibly rich social history. From the ledgers – which (apart from a period during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century) extend until the closure of the Library as a lending operation in 1968 – we know that the men, women and children borrowers came from a variety of social classes, although the majority of them were located within the rural vicinity, a walking distance from the Library. The professions articulated in the pages of the ledgers include:

barber, bookseller, army captain, cooper, dyer, dyer apprentice, esquire, factor, farmer, flaxdresser, gardener, glover, mason, merchant, miller, minister, quarrier, school master, scholar, servant, shoemaker, student (of humanity, divinity, philosophy), smith, surgeon, surgeon apprentice, tailor, watchmaker, weaver, writer<sup>5</sup>

There are among the records many repeat borrowers, and as such the ledgers also provide, if we were to wish to label it such, rich data into borrower behaviour. What can only be imagined is the impetus that led each borrower to choose his or her titles. The rules of the Library meant that only the Librarian could take books down off the shelves, perhaps constraining, or at the very least focusing, the lending patterns. (Little is known about the Librarian figures and how they behaved with regard to the borrowers).

As yet, we have found no evidence of the impact such borrowings might have had on individual borrowers and their intellectual development. But without entering imaginative reconstructions of the transactions that must have taken place within the gracious walls of Innerpeffray, for the book historian there is still evidence aplenty of the voyages that books took from the library shelf to rural home and back again – and, through repeat borrowings, again and again through the centuries.

With colleagues I am engaged on a research project to track the voyages of these individual material objects to and from the Library. We also plan to extend the investigations beyond the geographically limited spaces of Innerpeffray and its local environs to encompass the physical journeys of the books from printer and publisher to bookseller, and thence into the hands of the custodians of Innerpeffray. Even further back the supply chain (if you like), we will consider where the texts contained within the books came from. The holdings of Innerpeffray include books in translation and their original European languages, bringing to rural Scotland an international intellectual discourse that had travelled across geographical borders, from the city to the country, via the hands and actions of a variety of intermediaries. What is more, from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century – probably attracted by the collection of books derived from the martyred Bishop of Montrose – the Library started to receive visitors (in addition to local borrowers), who came from the countryside and the

Scottish cities of Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen, but also from further afield: from midlands England, as the records show, and even from Canada.

What a research project focusing on Innerpefferay might show us – we hope – is a model of book borrowing and reading deeply grounded in local community; within a few square miles of land in Perthshire. But what it will also undoubtedly show us is the transnational transmission of books – and the ideas and ideologies they contain – across national boundaries.

The reason I'm talking about Innerpefferay today – an example which hardly fits my own brief of the 21<sup>st</sup> century global literary marketplace – is to start to think about how books – and the ideas that they contain – travel, circulate, and are embedded in literary communities. Where books go, how they circulate, how they are received, how they engender future literary works, are, of course, the questions that the communications circuit developed by Robert Darnton sought to codify, in order to turn the 'interdisciplinarity run riot' of scholarly effort into – if not a more coherent book history – at least one that attempts to find models and frameworks for understanding the circulation of books; locally, nationally, and transnationally.

Successive generations of book historians have added to, developed and squabbled with Darnton's circuit, which shows the flow of books from author to publisher, to printers, shippers, booksellers and to readers. The alterations to the circuit show, perhaps, that Darnton's deceptively simple formulation belies a deep-seated academic and also, I would argue, practical, cultural and commercial – need to map, track and make sense of the voyages of books, and their relations to the agents in the communications circuit.

I want to leave Scotland, and the past, now, to give more attention to the global, moving beyond UK borders, and even those of Europe, to touch down in China, Egypt and Peru, before thinking about literary voyages in the digital age.

First, though, a brief halt at the staging post of the London Book Fair. As I'm sure I don't need to tell this audience, book fairs such as London, Bologna and – pre-eminently – Frankfurt, are international events. They are trading opportunities, in

which publishers and publishing-related companies gather to do business, principally in buying and selling rights, but also to showcase new and established authors, to sustain and develop business networks, and to discuss prevailing industry concerns. This year, the London Book Fair's international activities and attendees were struck by the Icelandic volcanic ash cloud that still encroaches on European skies this week. The cloud severely affected travel arrangements, and the Book Fair was very badly hit, with many standholders, seminar speakers and other attendees – including the majority of the South African writers invited by the British Council as part of the Book Fair's annual market focus – unable to make it to Earls Court, leaving gaping holes in appointment schedules and seminar programmes, and many empty stands. **ppt** Here, a stand hijacked by 'Icelandic pirates' or, rather, smart publishers promoting a volcano pop-up book – and eliciting a smile or two from publishers whose sense of humour hadn't deserted them to the same extent as their business partners. As the ash-cloud showed us, if we did not already know it, publishing is a global business, but one that likes to conduct its dealings face-to-face with, as the day progresses into the evening, the accompanying encouragement of a glass or two of wine at one of the many Book Fair parties and after parties.

But now, as promised, to leave Europe behind for the streets of Cairo – though to an example which seems to cement the reputation of the publishing industry as a business based on human contact, and shared geographical and intellectual spaces, though the social glue seems to be cigarettes rather than alcohol.

On its international pages at the beginning of this month, alongside stories reporting arms tension between Iran, Israel, Syria and the UK, and a heated row between Jewish communities over reporting of both Israeli and Hamas war crimes, appeared a more positive Middle-East story, that of Egypt's Merit publishing house. **ppt** I quote from the *Guardian* article in which the piece appeared:

Mohamed Hashem's office, in a shabby downtown Cairo apartment block, is a far cry from the slick headquarters of Egypt's biggest publishing houses. Yet it's here on Hashem's threadbare sofas that you'll find the cream of young Egyptian writing talent, chain-smoking, chatting with literary critics and

thumbing through some of the thousands of books stacked from floor to ceiling.

‘We can’t compete with the big firms in terms of profits, but the new wave of authors will always be sitting here,’ says the 52-year-old with a grin. ‘Yes, we have poverty and limited resources. But we also have the future.’<sup>6</sup>

I must admit that I report this at second hand, because I know little about Merit or the Egyptian publishing scene, although I think I know why it’s being reported in the *Guardian*. Yes, it’s a good news story about the Middle East alongside the gloom and repeating cycles of hatred and violence of the other stories on the same page – a little light literary relief to take us away from the bombs and the blood. But I think it’s also there for another reason, and needs to be taken alongside reporting from the same newspaper earlier in the year: a substantial article entitled ‘How Waterstone’s Crushed the Publishing Industry’, by, in the journalist’s argument, stifling the creativity of publishers, inhibiting the independence of booksellers, and compromising literary opportunities for readers.

Here, on the streets of Cairo, within the smoke and book-filled room of Merit (perhaps a little nostalgia here from the *Guardian* stringer, as smoking is now banned in the majority of European workplaces), is a publishing company that has an intimate connection with its authors: no business barriers constructed here, no unanswered emails or voicemail messages, but writers and publishers in the same room, in a heady, smoky literary atmosphere. A literary coterie, if you like, but one that – in the account of the *Guardian* report – derives from, speaks to and has success in – communities ignored by other publishers. Samia Mehrez, Professor of Literature at the American University in Cairo, is reported in the article as saying that, ‘Many of these writers are writing about groups to which they belong. Rather than just representing them, they’re actually of them’ – citing novelists from outriding sectors of society, such as from the city’s garbage-collecting neighbourhoods. Here is a model where writer, publisher and reader are intimately connected.<sup>7</sup>

The journalist is not completely naïve in his depiction of this symbiotic relationship, and uses the conclusion of the article to highlight some of the more difficult developmental issues. ‘Commercial success’, he writes:

remains a challenge. Around 30% of the population is illiterate and by some estimates the average Egyptian reads a quarter of a page of a novel each year, meaning that sales of only a few thousand are enough for a book to qualify as a bestseller. But it’s a challenge Hashem is relishing. ‘The year we started, we published five titles and the number of people interested could be counted in the dozens,’ he says. ‘Now we have 600 titles under our belt, and thousands are interested. It’s my duty to try and expand that circle. We’re chipping away at a wall, and slowly we’re making progress.’<sup>8</sup>

Hashem’s final metaphor speaks of a border between literacy and illiteracy, between readers and non-readers, and how his efforts are reaching out, attempting to ‘expand that circle’ of readers, from coterie to community, if you like. The slow progress, chipping away at the wall, is a progress towards a model of book publishing, of literary community, that is attempting to get beyond the borders of literary and social convention, the constraints of poverty and illiteracy, and of the refusal to hear alternative voices, or to speak to different ears in novel ways. For the left-leaning *Guardian* newspaper, concerned elsewhere with the perceived over-commercialisation of the British publishing industry, it perhaps also suggests a model of literary activity that understands the need for commercial viability yet retains a sense of the cultural mission of the publisher, and the publisher’s role within society.

And now some more continent hopping (there’s quite a few air miles in this lecture) – this time from North Africa to South America, to another developing nation: Peru. Again I report from someone else’s work (though, **ppt** here, some images from Lima’s new Casa de la Literatura in an old train station which I visited earlier this year **ppt**). This time, the information comes to us via the literary magazine *Granta* and the Peruvian writer Daniel Alarcón’s article, ‘Life Among the Pirates’.

Alarcón’s depiction of the legal and illegal publishing and bookselling trades in Peru draw us into a world where the tensions between access and affordability do battle

with legitimate trade, the cost of publishing overheads, and respect for copyright and intellectual property. Here is a highly organized set of ‘informal book manufacturers whose overworked, antique presses are hidden in nondescript houses in slums all over the city’, the largest of which – it is estimated – produces 40,000 volumes a week, which are then speedily distributed to the city’s black markets: **ppt** the roadside hawkers, street corner stands, and beach booksellers.<sup>9</sup> Books from the Peruvian pirates, according to Alarcón, make it from the Pacific across the country and the continent, to Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, and as far as the Atlantic coast of Argentina, to Buenos Aires.

Alarcón weighs up this pirate economy in financial, cultural and developmental terms. Peru is, like Egypt, beset with poverty, and also the logistical difficulties of effective distribution in such a vast and geographically challenging country. A telling anecdote comes from one fellow writer who – dismayed that copies of his novel could not be found for purchase in his home town – commissioned a limeno pirate to produce copies of his book, which were then distributed efficiently and at an affordable price around the country.

Alarcón himself knows the irony of being subject to piracy. After the publication of his first book in 2007, he is taken out for lunch with another writer by their magazine boss. On their way to the restaurant, the boss calls to a street bookseller **ppt**:

‘Anything by Alarcón or Titinger?’ Huberth asked.

The man frowned. ‘Who?’

That was all. Huberth rolled up his window.

‘You’re both failures,’ he said, turning to us.<sup>10</sup>

This story sustains what is an unavoidable truth of markets subject to such wholesale piracy. Piracy is a peculiar symbol of success for an author, with the pirates being sound if not legal businessmen, only printing copies of already confirmed successes. Yet this is a bittersweet success, as it is estimated that the proportion of illegal to authorised copies sold of bestselling titles is at least 3:1.<sup>11</sup>

Alarcón considers this strange economy, in the context of the book's equivocal role as a commercial product, and within a developing economy:

If there is a special allure to book piracy [he writes], it is only because we imbue this business with the same qualities we project on the book itself. We focus on what is being manufactured and sold, as opposed to the fundamentally illicit nature of the enterprise. There are many reasons for this, of course. As a cultural artefact, the book has undeniable power, and the idea of a poor, developing country with a robust informal publishing industry is, on some level, romantic: the pirate as cultural entrepreneur, a Robin Hood figure, stealing from elitist multinational publishers and taking books to the people. The myth is seductive and repeated often: book piracy in Peru, the story goes, responds to a hunger for knowledge between a literate upper class and the poor, unlettered masses.<sup>12</sup>

Alarcón goes on to describe the difficulties in the communications circuit: the political and economic marginalization of the indigenous peoples, the expense of books (Alarcón refers to his own first book, sold for the same dollar equivalent price as it would be in the US, apart from in Peru this would be 'about twenty percent of the average worker's weekly wage'<sup>13</sup>), the lack of bookshops in many areas of the country, the parlous condition of school, university and public libraries. As he summarises:

Is it any wonder that books are pirated? You can lament the informality of it, you can call it stealing, you can bemoan the losses incurred by the publishing industry – but if you love to read, it's difficult to deny the hopeful logic: if someone is selling books, someone must be buying them. And reading, especially in a country as poor as Peru – isn't that a good thing?<sup>14</sup>

Of course, we know that the answer can only be a qualified yes – in fact, a qualified no. Copyright and intellectual property should be respected, the Berne Convention upheld, and proper recompense should be given to writers and publishers for their work and their risk. Moreover, as Alarcón emphasises, many of the sales of pirated works do not go to the downtrodden working classes and indigenous peoples, but are made

in the middle-class districts where the legitimate bookshops are. Yet the intractable arguments about the role of books in a developing economy remain, where legitimate supply channels leave much to be desired and vast tracts of the country untouched, and where the communication and transmission of ideas should be encouraged.

For me, as an academic, keen to communicate and disseminate my thinking, this fraught line of argument has parallels to the debate around open access within the academic sphere, not in terms of piracy and copyright (creative commons can deal with that), but in terms of the transmission of ideas. After all, my University expects me – contractually – to produce works (monographs, book chapters, edited volumes, journal articles) which it then must buy back for its Library in the form of hard copies, e-books and print and digital subscriptions. The ecology of this system seems wasteful of public resources, and in these recession-hit times, where the public sector is only just beginning to undergo its deepest cuts, seems hard to justify. And yet as a publishing studies academic, I understand and respect the role of commercial publishers in this value chain – not that of editorial value or brand, necessarily (the editorial board tends to bring this to the publication) – but of effective supply chain management and of technological infrastructure that, despite the growing numbers of institutional repositories, would be very hard to match.

Alarcón is clear, as well, that though the Peruvian pirates have a role in disseminating ideas further than might otherwise be able within a weakened industry, the pirates also contribute to that weakening of the legitimate industry, and are in it for their own financial gain, not for any philanthropic purpose.

The complex issues of supply and demand in the heavily pirated marketplace depicted by Alarcón are a testimony to a literary community in turmoil, in which readers, writers, publishers and booksellers have confused the transmission of texts and their legitimate trade, in which the often difficult balancing act of culture and commerce is made yet harder. I would argue that the book business – for all its occasional conventionalities, its traditions, even its mundanity and mediocrity – necessarily exists in some wild borderland of business, in which there will – and to a degree, always should be – a tricky relationship between the transmission of books and the transmission of their contents; in terms of the supply of consumer goods and the

supply of knowledge. Writing and reading will always – should always – sit uneasily within a market economy, unless its *only* purpose is to make money. And even with the most unapologetically mass-market of titles, every book sale is not just of a consumer good, a material object, but of a promise of entertainment, escapism, of the occupation of the leisure or commuter hour.

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Talking of travel, we are boarding the plane again. Another nation with an insatiable appetite for books, legitimate and illegitimate, is China. The huge bookstores of China's major cities (**ppt** here, Shanghai's City of Books) bear witness to this hunger. This is big-box selling, Chinese style (though with the global incursion of – here **ppt** – a Starbucks concession). In my own recent experience, these bookshops are crammed with **ppt** readers seeking textbooks, English language readers, piano music, global bestsellers in translation and original language, **ppt** books for women, books for children, **ppt** books for an influx of foreign visitors to Shanghai's Expo 2010, **ppt** books (in a rather strange juxtaposition, to my Western eyes) about 'military and culture', **ppt** editions of a famous comic book series (here, I noted, including editions of *Tintin in Tibet* and *The Blue Lotus*). And at the entrance to the shop, **ppt** supermarket-style trolleys to fill to the brim with all these purchases. Outside, **ppt** a reminder of a rather more traditional form of print media sales – the street hawker on a bike, with the daily news for sale.

At the moment, the Chinese Government is in the process of opening up yet further the publishing industry, with some larger organisations now listed on the Shanghai Stock Exchange, and with the once illicit 'cultural studios' now given much more acknowledgement and legitimacy, within a nonetheless highly regulated environment. The cultural studios – effectively publishers' packaging companies whose products were able to reach the heavily controlled market via secretive partnerships with Government and Government-authorized companies – are now more in the open, and more able to follow their own publishing paths in the relaxation of access to ISBNs.<sup>15</sup>

Although in response to very different socio-political and economic circumstances, the creative dynamism of the Chinese cultural studios, deriving from small teams with

innovative ideas, author contacts, and channels to market, could find an analogy in the seemingly mature British free market. Alongside the globalised conglomerate groups that dominate trade publishing – Hachette, Bertelsmann, Penguin, Macmillan and HarperCollins – there is a continual bubbling up of new trade companies, often with fresh ideas, innovative approaches to market and – occasionally – affording a different perspective on the role of the publisher in a very commercialised marketplace. Sometimes these companies are headed by newcomers to the industry, but often they have been created by those who have jumped – or been pushed – out of the big publishing groups. Examples might include Portobello (which has HarperCollins escapee Philip Gwyn Jones) or Quercus (with renegades from Orion and Random House). These are two of the ten members of the Independent Alliance, a grouping of some of the most prominent independent literary publishers in the UK. **ppt** The Alliance also includes Faber & Faber, Granta, Serpent’s Tail, and Canongate, an avowed mission statement of ‘independence, integrity, quality and range’, and a collective market share in 2009 above the smallest of the big 5, Macmillan (although the collective sales were only 3.3% of the market.<sup>16</sup> The Independent Alliance’s joint representation aims to replicate the marketplace clout of the conglomerates.

Some initially independent companies, after a few years of commercial success, find themselves negotiating to sell themselves to the bigger groups. An example might be that of Fourth Estate to HarperCollins in 2000, taking with it staff including Victoria Barnsley and Stephen Page (the latter of whom subsequently left to head Faber & Faber). This allows – in addition to personal wealth for the Directors – access for the smaller company to a greater level of funding and supply chain power. For the corporate owner, it gives access to the company’s backlist, but also some of its creative energies and staff talent pool.

Another small publisher which sold to a larger conglomerate in recent years comes in the shape of Tamarind, **ppt** the British-based multicultural children’s publisher, which became part of Random House in 2007. As its founder Verna Wilkins put it, the company was at a stage ‘where it needs growth, expansion and a committed team to take it to the next stage of development as an international publishing concern’.<sup>17</sup>

From its inception, Tamarind has been a fascinating example of a company with a very direct relationship between readers, writers, publishers and booksellers. Wilkins, its founder, a black Caribbean by birth, describes the parental and political impetus behind setting up the company in 1987, born out of a literary whitewashing:

One day, after a few weeks at his first school, my older son came home with a booklet the children were making in class. On the cover, was a face – the caption said, ‘This is Me’. He had painted his face bright pink! My heart gave a sickening lurch. Self-denial? Is that what the psychologists call it? Is this you? I asked feebly.  
‘Yes.’ – came the confident reply.  
‘Are you that colour?’  
‘No. The teacher gave out flesh colour to everyone!’  
‘Oh. Fine. I have a lovely brown crayon and we can fix that right now.’  
‘No!’ he said. ‘It has to be that colour. It’s for a book!’  
I had no choice. I had to become a publisher.<sup>18</sup>

Tamarind was thus founded, with the first books authored by Wilkins herself, but in close consultation with supportive teachers. She nurtured strong links with booksellers, gently encouraging them to stock, promote and sell her books. She describes her publishing work in representing the multicultural diversity of post-imperial Britain, and in reaching untapped markets through unconventional sales channels:

Many myths abound about book buying and black people. For the last four years, Tamarind has taken a stall at the Afro Hair and Beauty Show held annually at Alexander Palace [in London]. This is Tamarind taking the mountain to Mahomet to dispel the myth that black people do not buy books. Many yummy mummies go to Alexander Palace to buy hair and beauty products. They are not there to buy books! However, year on year, we sell large quantities of books to parents who constantly enquire as to where our books are sold. Many comment that they never see books like ours in shops. That show provides a lucrative market for us.<sup>19</sup>

Closeness to her market – in fact, given the beginnings of the company as a parent and a consumer – exact synergy between producer and consumer, has enabled Tamarind to build into an effective publisher, winner of the British Book Industry Award for Cultural Diversity, and eventually a buy-out target for Random House.

The folding of such small and alternative publishing companies into global conglomerates inevitably can bring some dissolution of their independent spirit and their founding principles, although the chance for improved market access is largely seen as a fair exchange. This is always questionable, of course, but I'd like to suggest that sometimes the small, the new, the local, can work effectively alongside some of the bigger book trade organisations and companies.

To give an example, and to return to Scotland, **ppt** the new Scottish literary magazine *Gutter* talks in the editorial to its second issue of its effective business relationship – before its pre-Christmas closure – with its local Borders branch in Glasgow. The magazine – a mix of short stories, poetry, book reviews, and the occasional literary cartoon – derives its material, as it proclaims, from ‘established and emerging writers born or living in Scotland [...but] global in attitude’.<sup>20</sup> *Gutter*'s paean to Borders explains its allegiances:

Borders Buchanan Street was a tremendous resource for those who had access to it. It wasn't just about choice – being able to browse hundreds of thousands of books on every conceivable subject from fiction to fetishism or peruse the unrivalled range of literary periodicals – Borders was genuinely committed to supporting local writers and publishers in a way unmatched by any other chain. While a culture of ‘computer says no’ prevailed elsewhere, they'd happily take tens, if not hundreds, of copies of locally produced books because staff knew they could sell them, thereby directly supporting literature and culture in this country.<sup>21</sup>

In *Gutter*'s relationship to Borders, at least until the latter's demise, there might seem to be a rival narrative to the over-simple decrual of large corporations. Here instead, there seems a happier working link between big and small, conglomerate and independent, and the capacity for both to be able effectively to foster and sustain

literary communities. Indeed, after its seeming cultural (if not commercial) nadir of 2009, Waterstone's now has an energetic new boss who promises more locally sensitive retail – 'cleverer' bookselling. An appeal, it is to be hoped, to both the intellectual and the business mind.

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I've offered you a series of vignettes – stories, if you like, from a world of books and its attendant readers, writers, publishers and retailers. I've reflected on just a few of the many intermediaries and agents in the publishing supply chain, in the communications circuit. But I realise I've barely touched on the digital, other than in passing reference to online selling, which I promised to do when I agreed to give this lecture. Although I've referred to Amazon in passing, this is the first time I've mentioned Google, or Apple, or the iPad, the Kindle, or the Sony eReader.

This – until now – is quite intentional. I wanted both to lay out a historical model of literary transmission – that we can see in Innerpefferay, for example, and to dwell on some contemporary, 21<sup>st</sup> century examples drawn from the realm of print culture. As publishers, booksellers, and other professionals in the world of books, you will know these patterns, these shifting relationships, as will those of you who are involved in teaching and studying publishing, librarianship and information science, history of the book, literature and literary transmission. For me, this vital, shifting, ever-changing dynamic is the essence of my interest in the literary marketplace, and its relationship to what Robert Darnton calls 'the whole socio-economic conjuncture': in the case of Egypt and Peru, for example, the conjuncture of poverty, illiteracy, and illegality. I've also, I hope, touched on some of the business transactions by which these models of literary transmission are enabled or disabled: the legislative frameworks of copyright and Governmental control, for example. To my mind, it is only with such a range of models from the traditional print sphere that we can begin to understand the evolutions and revolutions that the digital environment is bringing to global and local literary marketplaces.

Much has been said – is being said, and is yet to be said – about the current gentle reshapings and radical convulsions that digital publishing is bringing to us. Reference

and journals publishing has largely shifted to digital transmission, both demanding increasing investment in digital infrastructure, and throwing up the questions of ‘free’ and open access. We are taking to e-readers, though not yet in our droves. Google, initially by stealth and now in the full glare of various courts and legal procedures around the world, is digitising and well on its way to monetising content that – in many accounts – they don’t have rights to. Are these Silicon Valley pirates, to whom we will submit, in their tantalising offer of unparalleled access to and transmission of texts to the billions of readers on the Web?

Amazon and Apple have emerged from quite different business beginnings to enter this year a cold war for digital content, using the big publishing groups as their intermediaries. I wouldn’t go so far – yet – as to say their Vietnam, but publishers are right to be wary of ceding yet further control to Amazon, whose insistence on price control and the traditional wholesale model for ebooks, has seen them in recent months withdraw the ‘Buy’ button from Macmillan US titles. Kindle customers were also given a dystopian warning last year when digital editions of George Orwell’s *1984* (what more appropriate title) and *Animal Farm* were remotely deleted from some devices. For publishers, that Amazon is currently seeking to appoint in the UK a ‘Senior Kindle Vendor Manager’ (a mouthful of a job title), whose role is to enhance ‘new and existing publishing relationships’, might seem very positive, but it might also hint at Amazon’s plans to go direct to literary agents for content, thus cutting publishers out.<sup>22</sup>

Will Apple and the iPad proved more congenial bedfellows for publishers? The promise of the agency model might suggest greater control for publishers and – through the iPhone and iPad’s multimedia capabilities – greater creativity in the brave new world of enhanced editions and digital interactivity. Yet of course I’m not the first to sound a note of caution here, as well. There are, and will be, other smart phone and tablet device providers, and some degree of competition in the digital content marketplace. But Apple’s brand dominance places them in a dangerously near-monopolistic position, in which they can call the shots.

Apple might seem to be ceding price control to the publishers, but it is simultaneously building an empire that might only be rivalled by the much more low-tech scanning

model of Google. At this point, my mind fills with virtual visual satire: the Google pirate ship, the iPad raft, and the mighty Amazon, doing battle on the high seas of digital content provision, with publishers constructing precarious planks between them, never quite knowing if they are going to be made to walk them, or to be washed away by a tsunami. Meanwhile, readers and writers bob about on the waves, tied tightly to their digital driftwood platform of choice, but tossed about in the literary flotsam and jetsam.

All this sounds cynical, and it is. I'm wary of these digital giants and of how a dream of digital content, carefully guarded by digital rights management and territorial copyright, might nonetheless turn into a nightmare for the transnational transmission of literary culture, the construction of literary communities, and the business of books. Recently, for example, the Australian Publishers Association complained that Apple is concentrating too much on content from 'the northern hemisphere'. If Australia is complaining about the lack of representation in this digital content-grab, where does that leave Africa?<sup>23</sup>

And yet there are opportunities here, quite real opportunities, and I want to give you one example to demonstrate I'm not a digital doom-monger, or – again – that I don't believe that big and small businesses can work together with writers and readers in the literary marketplace. I want to conclude by talking about one final – and this time, I promise, a digital – example of literary community. It's also a company of which I am part (as a non-Executive Director), so I beg your forgiveness for what might seem a product plug, but I hope is illuminating.

**ppt** Ether Mobile Publishing, launched just this year at the London Book Fair, is the brainchild of a British novelist, Sophia Bartleet, whom I got to know when I worked for Hodder & Stoughton publishers. Some years later, Sophia called me one day: I, busy in my office; her, pushing her trolley around the supermarket.

'I've got an idea...'

She began...

You see, like many of the rest of us, Sophia had become an iPhone evangelist but, unlike many of us has gone on to become an iPhone entrepreneur. The concept is simple: Pocket reads, ideal for a commute or a coffee break. Short stories, essays and poetry delivered via an iPhone app. (If the company grows successfully, it will generate apps for other mobile phone app stores – though the initial launch with iPhone underlines Apple’s market dominance).

The stories cost from 59p to £1.39 with some free, out of copyright, content. Currently appearing on the app are last year’s Booker Prize winner Hilary Mantel (**ppt** here, at the London Book Fair launch), Louis de Bernières, Alexander McCall Smith, Toby Litt, Maggie O’Farrell, and classics from Arthur Conan Doyle and Bram Stoker, among others. There’s also an essay from Paul McCartney – yes, the Paul McCartney – on vegetarianism.

There are, I think, three interesting points to be made about all this and, I hope, they summarise and bring right up to the digital present my discussion about books, readers, writers and publishers – and several of the other intermediaries and agents in the communications circuit.

The first is to do with literary community. Ether is a partnership between Sophia and her husband James (a businessman, but in a completely different industry: scientific glassware). Also on board are Maureen and Mike, who come, respectively, from the worlds of the mobile phone industry and IT. They met through a mutual friend, a new author who is also one of Ether’s short story writers. As I mentioned before, Sophia and I know each other when I worked at her publishers in the 1990s.

The connections continue. Sophia’s literary agent has been instrumental, not least in getting some of his other authors on board, including Hilary Mantel. I’ve passed on some of my contacts: Toby Litt, for example, one of whose short stories I first published (and editorially butchered: sorry again, Toby) in a student literary magazine when we were both at University of East Anglia in the mid-1990s. One of the essays, on censorship and Iranian publishing, is written by Iranian publisher Arash Hejazi, who was one of my students last year. The essay, to travel on a brief aside – speaks of the potentially emancipatory effects of the digital realm for writers, readers and

publishers in oppressive regimes. Hejazi's own experiences during the aftermath of the Iranian elections last year bear testament to this: facebook, YouTube and Twitter became political weapons of communication, proving that the computer keyboard and digital camera – if not mightier than the sword – are at least substantial combatants. Government shut-downs of websites, and monitoring of IP addresses and email accounts, represent the other side of this equation. My own recent visit to China brought this home to me – no access to the social media sites that I was used to (China has its Government-sanctioned equivalents of facebook, YouTube and Twitter) and, while I was visiting, the Google announcement that it was moving its Chinese website to Hong Kong, deciding no longer to submit to the self-censorship of the 'great firewall', and cyber hackers seemingly intent on gathering data on the online activities of human rights activists. Smuggling digital text and images out of the reach of the restrictive practices of such regimes via proxy servers and encoded communication is another form of illicit publishing, if you like, but one I would wholeheartedly condone, in the interests of free speech and human rights.

Back to Ether's literary community, though. On a more local level, another of Ether's essayists, Paul McCartney, was got on board by Sophia at the school gate – their children attend the same school.

What might this tell us about literary community, then? Is this simply a story of a well-connected set of entrepreneurs, who can pull strings, ask favours, and doorstep the mega-famous?

Having seen a little of the company from the inside, I know that's not quite the case. The financial risk of setting up such a company is high. A good concept in editorial terms, as you know, doesn't necessarily mean the market will take to it. Price points in the digital environment are notoriously difficult to get right. There's been a lot of hard work in establishing the company too: the technical side, of course, but also around convincing literary agents that the business model that Ether offers them and their clients is tenable. This is the second aspect I wanted to draw out of this digital publishing example.

Ether works through the app store and iTunes, and for each purchase, Apple takes their cut, with the remainder being shared by Ether and the author and their agent, if they have one. (I can't tell you the % going to the author; that information, you will understand, is commercially sensitive.) This is the agency model, with prices set by the publisher. It's been interesting that, beyond having to be persuaded to work with the company (having a novelist as the Editorial Director has certainly helped) – it has been difficult to convince some literary agents that this digital business model is one that makes sense. Perhaps they're right to be cautious – after decades of rumours of the death of the book, followed by a period of platform anxiety and piracy scares – concerns about digital publishing now rest upon the business models and the ways in which they are shifting the power relations between the traditional actors in publishing and new intermediaries: the giants of Apple, Amazon and Google, but a host of smaller companies, of which Ether is but one. These emerging business models, dis- and reintermediation, are reshaping a publishing world that has remained relatively stable since the inception of copyright in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, or even since Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in the 15<sup>th</sup>.

Some literary agents, then, have been hard to convince. Some, through understandable concerns about cash and control; others – my guess is – who are simply burying their heads in the sand, perhaps over-involved in their own narrow but important established literary worlds, and wishing the digital world would go away. Yet other literary agents, however, have been much keener and quicker to convince. The company has also received an extremely positive reception from authors, and this leads me to my final point about Ether, and to my concluding remarks as a whole.

For authors, particularly in the UK, it is difficult to get short stories, essays and poetry published, even as a well-known writer. The print market is not currently receptive to any of these literary forms, forums for them are limited, and the opportunity to monetise them rare. Hence, stories by A-list novelists have found their way onto Ether's lists. Stories by bestselling writers are sitting in bottom drawers.

A digital venture like Ether offers authors the opportunity to lend these works the light of day, and to publish in a range of genres that the current UK market finds hard to promote. For readers – should they choose to – there is an opportunity to access

content in these genres from a range of established and new authors. For the literary community then – we hope – is the opportunity of a renaissance of literary genres which have been undervalued in recent print publishing decades. Might it be that the mobile phone engenders some kind of literary as well as business shift? Certainly, all the announcements and hectic developments around book apps and enhanced editions, might seem to suggest so. Some of this activity will, inevitably, fall by the wayside, and there's life in the print book yet. But I'd like to think that there are some real opportunities for genuine innovation here, a shaking up of a sometimes complacent, self-regarding literary establishment, but also the chance to reinstate some seemingly less popular literary genres.

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One of my personal anxieties about the digital is that we potentially lose a physical sense of literary community, as we become more and more glued to our mobile phones and computer screens. Gone and going, it might seem, are our big-box bookshops, the Borders that had some undeniable virtues. Long gone, for certain, is the idea that you walk several cold miles over fields to borrow a book from the local Lord. Going might be – with piracy-resistant DRM – the lending of tattered and loved paperbacks to friends and family. Going, our centuries-steady concepts of publishing intermediaries, business models, and working practices. Our industries are once more under the crises enforced by recession, cash flow, and volcanic ash, but these changes are yet more seismic.

But I don't want to end on note of cultural pessimism because, as you will all know, the production, circulation and consumption of books – print or digital – is much more complex, nuanced and continually regenerative than that. Despite the global giants – and the shifting power relations – publishing and literary activity demonstrate robust regional and national differences and tendencies. These tendencies might consist of some of the more undesirable aspects of print piracy in Peru, or censorship in Iran. But these are also the possibilities of the smoke-filled room, with the literary coterie reaching out to the poverty-stricken streets of Cairo. These are also the parents spurred into writing and publishing by the inadequacies and prejudice of existing publications, and doing very well with it. These are also the development activities of

new print and digital enterprises: *Gutter* and *Ether*, purposefully bringing literary creativity and small business dynamism to the literary marketplace. These may be the possibilities for those existing within oppressive societies to communicate words of freedom via the digital. There are – there will be – hundreds and thousands more examples of readers, writers and publishers finding their way in the global literary marketplace, both working within and across borders, speaking between and across local, national and transnational literary communities, and for that reason I remain optimistic.

To conclude: I hope – in the reception which I understand awaits us after some further words, that I will have the chance to hear from some of you about further examples of exactly these tendencies. I thank you for the great honour of the invitation to deliver this 3<sup>rd</sup> Chair in Book and Publishing Studies, and also for your kind attention, which I hope has been deserved.

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<sup>1</sup> See Borders file

<sup>2</sup> Graeme Neill and Neill Denny, 'Borders' fall to shrink trade by £35 million a year', *The Bookseller*, 6 December 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Reference to Kelvin Smith's talk 2009

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.innerpeffraylibrary.co.uk/books.htm>, accessed 16 May 2010

<sup>5</sup> Taken from George Chamier, *The First Light*

<sup>6</sup> Jack Shenker, 'Pioneering publisher reshapes Egypt's literary landscape'. *Guardian* 1 May 2010, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Jack Shenker, 'Pioneering publisher reshapes Egypt's literary landscape'. *Guardian* 1 May 2010, 31.

<sup>8</sup> Jack Shenker, 'Pioneering publisher reshapes Egypt's literary landscape'. *Guardian* 1 May 2010, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Alarcón, 'Life Among the Pirates'. *Granta* 109, 9-36, 10.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Alarcón, 'Life Among the Pirates'. *Granta* 109, 9-36, 12-13.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Alarcón, 'Life Among the Pirates'. *Granta* 109, 9-36, p.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Alarcón, 'Life Among the Pirates'. *Granta* 109, 9-36, 14-15.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Alarcón, 'Life Among the Pirates'. *Granta* 109, 9-36, 13.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Alarcón, 'Life Among the Pirates'. *Granta* 109, 9-36, 15.

<sup>15</sup> China Market Report full ref

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.quercusbooks.co.uk/independent\\_alliance.htm](http://www.quercusbooks.co.uk/independent_alliance.htm), accessed 17 May 2010; Catherine Neilan, 'Indie Alliance becomes "fifth biggest publisher"', *The Bookseller*, 24 January 2010, <http://www.thebookseller.co.uk/news/110358-indie-alliance-becomes-fifth-biggest-publisher.html>, accessed 17 May 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Alison Flood, 'Random House buys Tamarind', *The Bookseller*, 7 December 2001, <http://www.thebookseller.com/news/49489-random-house-buys-tamarind.html>, accessed 17 May 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Verna Wilkins, 'The Right to be Seen', the 2008 Patrick Hardy Lecture, 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Verna Wilkins, 'The Right to be Seen', the 2008 Patrick Hardy Lecture, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Back cover copy, *Gutter* 2. [n.d. February 2010].

<sup>21</sup> Editorial, *Gutter* 2. [n.d. February 2010], ii.

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<sup>22</sup>[http://bookbrunch.co.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=section&layout=blog&id=18&Itemid=121](http://bookbrunch.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=section&layout=blog&id=18&Itemid=121), accessed 19 May 2010.

<sup>23</sup><http://www.thebookseller.com/news/118119-apple-too-focused-on-northern-hemisphere-claims-apa.html>, accessed 19 May 2010.