

Morgan's next ride

Grove, one of America's most successful independents, has just announced plans for a UK operation. In New York, Liz Thomson talked to President and Publisher, Morgan Entrekin

Five years ago, Grove/Atlantic was having a tough time. Indeed, having merged AMP with Grove/Weidenfeld in 1993 with his business partner, Joan Bingham, Morgan Entrekin admits that it was "touch and go. We were struggling along. A couple of years we made money, then we had a loss. In 1996, the whole industry was hit hard." Then along came a first novel that transformed the company's fortunes. "We sold 1.6 million copies of *Cold Mountain* in hardcover and we did \$19m off the back of it. At the time, in a good year, the company was doing \$9m." It's now around \$15m.

Success breeds success, though the Grove/Atlantic list never did lack for good books, and three years down the line from Charles Frazier's internationally acclaimed debut, Entrekin has been able to announce the launch of Grove UK (the Atlantic Monthly Press imprint is to be dropped) which will be financed through Grove US. "We've had several good years and I've been looking for ways to expand, moderately and cautiously. One way is to commit to keeping our own paperbacks and building our paperback programme. Grove UK is another way."

Entrekin has been considering such a move for some while, deciding to do it now because "I found the perfect person to run it for me - Toby Mundy. The plans right now are to start with Toby and one other person on staff, partnering with a larger house. We'll see how it goes from there." The intention is not necessarily to publish globally. "I should make it clear that, although I hope to contribute some significant American and international books and authors to Grove UK, Toby and I intend the list to eventually consist primarily of books he has commissioned in London," Entrekin explains. "In addition, there are a number of Grove backlist books that are currently out of print in the UK, which we will selectively add to the list." The plan is to start publishing in the spring.

Meeting Entrekin is something of a surprise, as one expects him to embody something of his reputation as a hellraiser. In fact, he's quiet-spoken and courteous, as befits a southern boy. "We remember our manners," he smiles, adding that southerners are also "hedonistic, not big on guilt. Someone described us as Latin WASPS." Now 45, he was born and raised in Tennessee to parents whose southern lineage goes back generations. "My late father was a lawyer and my mother was active in the community with the symphony orchestra and the museum and so on. I'm one of four children but I was raised as part of a big southern family... As the century ended, I was in Nashville at this historic house my brother and sisters and cousins and I took over to give a big party. I was dancing with my four-year-old and six-year-old cousins on the stroke of midnight. I love Tennessee, and family is a big thing, partly because I've never gotten married and had my own family. But I'm also very close to my childhood friends there."

Entrekin attended "a very old southern boys school" that provided the inspiration for *Dead Poets Society*, which was written by a classmate. "The character Robin Williams plays was a teacher there named Sam Pickering. I was too young to have him as a teacher, but he introduced Jack Kerouac into this very old southern prep school and eventually got thrown out as a result." Entrekin is now on the school's advisory board of trustees and is "as involved as I can be" and notes that the school, like the society to which it belongs, has evolved a lot. "I was growing up at a very tumultuous time - there was the Civil Rights movement, Vietnam - and here I was in a place out of the 1930s... It was a repressive and conservative society, but it made you see very clearly what's right and what's wrong and which side you were on. My family was more enlightened, liberal and intellectual; my grandmother painted and my parents collected art."

Like many of his generation, Entrekin was disappointed to have missed out on the hippy-dippy Sixties. "I would have liked to have been in California, so that's where I went after Nashville. Stanford was pretty eye-opening. I wanted to throw rocks and take LSD but the rock-throwing was over! Although interested in literature, he went to read art history, starting at the beginning with the Mesopotamian basin because he was then consid-



Morgan Entrekin: caution and moderation

ering a career in archaeology. But Saturday mornings spent piecing together rare pottery damaged in the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 soon cured him of that. "It was so tedious - I couldn't believe it. I realized it wasn't a line of work for me." In the event, Entrekin graduated in creative writing and art history.

However, a summer spent in Dublin on an exchange programme made him realize that sitting alone all day writing was no more attractive than reassembling ancient pottery. "It's a very difficult thing to do - you need a particular sort of psyche and I'm not by nature a solitary person. And I now see it makes most people a little crazy." Which gives Entrekin sympathy for the writer's lot.

Inspired and encouraged at Stanford by the likes of Raymond Carver, Max Crawford and Chuck Kinder, "mentors who became friends", he headed east to Cambridge, Ma., and Radcliffe's publishing summer school, an intense programme that continues to launch any number of people on their careers. "I didn't know what a publisher did, and the course was very demanding. You had to do a lot of preliminary work before you even arrived. I know what I know about production from the week we spent on it - there are many in this business who don't know anything about production. They'd give you a manuscript to read and you'd write a report and they taught you about copy editing and exposed you to the business of subsidiary rights, marketing, distribution... The course was six or eight weeks long and it exposed you to all aspects of publishing, which to me seemed interesting." It also introduced him to Gary Fisketjon, "who's still one of my best friends in publishing. We were seated in alphabetical order so he and I were next to each other. We kind of checked each other out and within a week we were hanging out together every night." Which is perhaps where that hellraising reputation stems from.

The course completed, Entrekin thought he might as well give publishing a go, especially since it enabled him to follow his girlfriend to New York. He soon got a job at Delacorte, where he was exposed to both commerce and literature. "I worked with a man named Seymour Lawrence, who was one of the early imprint publishers, and I was under his wing and editing Kurt Vonnegut and Richard Brautigan as well as handling commercial novels

and true crime. I was lucky, given a chance early on." Within six months he was an editor, within 18 a senior editor commissioning his first book: *Hellfire*, Nick Tosches' biography of Jerry Lee Lewis, "one of the greatest books ever written about rock 'n' roll", now republished by Grove.

Lawrence and Entrekin were "a good team", youth and energy balancing experience, but when the older man was let go Entrekin knew he wouldn't dally long at Delacorte. "From various opportunities, he selected Simon & Schuster, an interesting place to walk into in 1982. Dick Snyder was running it and I went in at 26 as a senior editor. It was a tough and competitive place and I learned a lot, though I was a bit intimidated. I was the hot young kid and there was resentment." During a two-year sojourn he acquired such bestsellers as *The Living Heart Diet*, Richard Ford's *The Sportsman* and, controversially, *Less than Zero*, by Brett Easton Ellis. "That was an interesting little dance..."

Impressed, Snyder then offered Entrekin a three-year contract, "which was flattering - and for the first time I was going to be making a good living." He flew home to Tennessee to think it over. "I said,

'Daddy, should I sign this?' He said it was a perfectly good contract if I was sure I wanted to work for these people. I told him that what I really wanted to do was set up on my own like Seymour Lawrence but that I'd probably have to wait until I was 40 and had a big track record. He asked, 'what if you financed yourself - how much money would you need?' I thought of a number, which he doubled, and said that I should go back to New York on Monday and quit and, if I couldn't raise enough money in

Manhattan, he'd do it for me in Nashville."

Entrekin came up with a proposal for "a sort of self-financed imprint" whereby he would put up the money for advances, as well as paying his own and an assistant's salary. "To this day, I'm not sure whether it was brilliant or not, or who got the better side of the deal." He raised some money ("it took about four phone calls to close friends"), his family the rest and, with \$1m, went into partnership with Atlantic Monthly Press, then owned by Mort Zuckerman and run by Harry Evans. Pretty soon, both men wanted out and Entrekin put together a deal with an old friend, Carl Navarre, and brought in his old friend Gary Fisketjon to run it, Ann Godoff from S&S to be senior editor and Jack McKeown to be Associate

Publisher. "We were a little inexperienced but we had a lot of energy."

Entrekin kept his own eponymous imprint separate. "We did some great publishing, but Atlantic didn't really work because we had no backlist. Their overheads were heavier than mine and I also had a little bit of luck, publishing *The House of Morgan* by Ron Chernow, *My Traitor's Heart* by Rian Malan and *Parliament of Whores* by P J O'Rourke, which went to number one." Entrekin had first published P J at Delacorte, when he suggested he turn a *Rolling Stone* article into a book that became *Modern Manners*.

In the end, Entrekin bought out his partner and, his publishing colleagues having departed to other jobs, began looking around for a backlist publisher to provide him with ballast. His eye alighted upon Grove Weidenfeld, which hadn't worked out as either Lord Weidenfeld or Ann Getty had hoped. After a year of discussions, another old friend, Joan Bingham, helped buy out part of the Getty shares and she and Entrekin became partners in Grove/Atlantic. "That was February '93. I had to make a lot of cuts, let go the majority of staff. It was a big job and we went through the entire backlist, repackaged it, refreshed it, commissioned new introductions, new translations. It is extraordinary and the drama list is the best 20th century drama list in America."

As he admits, it wasn't all plain sailing, but he's acquired astutely in a climate that, on both sides of the Atlantic, has lately favoured independents. "We're more the size of Bloomsbury but bring the kind of philosophy to it that Jamie Byng does at Canongate. One of the pleasures of being an independent publisher and having the shareholders I have is that, although we're not running this as a charity and we do need to make money, there's not a huge demand for a certain level of return. There are checks and balances." Nevertheless, in the mid-Nineties, Entrekin did question whether it was possible to make money as a small-to medium-sized general publisher in competition with Farrar, Straus & Giroux, and Knopf. "For the first time I borrowed money, which made me nervous - but I knew the company was healthy with no external debt and I knew we had some interesting things coming in '97." Thus, when he bought Charles Frazier he wasn't flush with cash but, having lost a couple of auctions, felt he really needed *Cold Mountain*. "The six-figure advance was a bit of a stretch but we earned it back even before the book was finished."

The resulting windfall has funded "cautious expansion" and, after paying off debts and giving all the staff a raise, there's money in the bank. "What I'm trying to do is publish really good, solid books that will sell between 10,000 and 50,000. I haven't built this company around the need to have a bestseller every year. I work with authors in a somewhat different way: I probably over-commit on marketing, but with the idea that this is a partnership and I'm in business to create this writer. We're having great success because people see we are doing good books and supporting them aggressively... People say the mid-list has disappeared, but I'm flying as a mid-list publisher. In Britain, though, it really is feast or famine."

Entrekin's greatest regret is that his father, about whom he speaks with evident love and affection, didn't live quite long enough to see his son's first number 1. "But he believed the company would be a success and I know he'd have appreciated *Cold Mountain*." While he remains umbilically attached to the south, home is in the West Village, a few minutes' walk from the Grove offices just south of Union Square. Opera ("absolutely classic Verdi, Puccini and Mozart") plus the occasional baseball game are Entrekin's only hobbies. "My whole life feeds into what I do because I love it. I get to drink with writers and other publishers!" He warns about the dangers of Manhattan myopia ("we're not just selling books in Manhattan... I go across America all the time") and relishes his contact with the international publishing community. He travels to Europe regularly and loves Frankfurt. "I've never understood the resistance to it. It's sad. It's a great community of people and we have a ticket into it."

"I love it all," Entrekin concludes. "Someone once asked me about an exit strategy. I said - death!"

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