

**Among the bookmen: a view from the editor's chair**

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When I joined *Publishing News*, on 16 January 1984 – some years before most of you were born, I'm sad to say - one of the first calls I was asked to make was to the publicity department of Quartet. "You're speaking to Sophia Sackville-West," a somewhat intimidating voice informed me. Heaven's above! How extraordinary that someone from such a celebrated family should be on hand to answer a mundane query about price and publication date. Of course, I didn't know about Naim Attallah and about the posh young women who worked in publisher's publicity departments.

I'd read music, not English, but I felt I should be impressed and I suppose I was. Somewhat alarmed, too. I'd watched *Brideshead Revisited* on the television, but my own grammar school and red-brick university background hadn't prepared me for this. I'd known a Belinda at uni, an aspirant soprano, but Belindas and Camillas and Lucindas had not loomed large in my life. Publishing it seemed was different. I wasn't sure I'd feel at home.

Fast-forward almost 30 years, and it's now my life. Sure, I have some *civilian* friends, but the book business is what I live and breathe. It's been not just my bread and butter but also my meat and drink - rather too literally, as both my clothes and the bathroom scales attest. A job which I thought would lead into publishing proper became my *raison d'être* – hard work, but an endless source of fun and anecdote, excitement and stimulation. I've been incredibly lucky, observing the industry from within, a part of it yet apart *from* it. For many years, as we chronicled the exits and the entrances of so many players, we at *Publishing News* felt like the still point in a turning world. Then in summer 2008, my world and that of my colleagues turned: for a variety of reasons, but only in part because of the illness, founder and publisher Fred Newman - who died just a few months later - decided to close the magazine. It was time to exit that particular stage.

But the industry that brought the curtain down on *Publishing News* after 29 years was very different from the one on which the feisty little newspaper founded by Fred Newman and Clive Labovitch – who had been Michael Heseltine's partner at Haymarket - first shone its light. With the exception of a handful of chief execs, most of those working in the book business today wouldn't recognise the publishing world of the mid-1980s, when books were bought at full price (£8.95 for Gloria Steinem's *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*, published by Liz Calder, then at Cape, and one of the first of many signed copies I would acquire) and when to cross the portals of a Waterstone's was to be led deep into temptation. Cheap books were available only via book clubs or in remainder

shops – where, given a good exchange rate, all manner of arcane American goodies might be discovered. Bookshops in the 1980s were exciting places.

In those days *PN* operated out of appropriately Dickensian offices in Museum Street, a beguiling yet down-at-heel cut-through from Bloomsbury Way to Great Russell Street that is now an extension of Covent Garden. Sidgwick & Jackson, over which the other-worldly William Armstrong presided, was our immediate neighbour, hard by Hawksmoor's St George's, Bloomsbury. Souvenir Press was round the corner, and founder Ernest Hecht, a professional curmudgeon with a big heart, would drop by for a chat and a riffle around our desks. André Deutsch was down the road, still a literary force to be reckoned with.

Slightly to the north, Bedford Square was the beating heart of the publishing industry and, in its elegant Georgian buildings, Hodder & Stoughton, Michael Joseph, Chatto, Cape and Bodley Head and Thames & Hudson went about their gentlemanly business. So, too, the Publishers Association. Hutchinson - at that time owned by London Weekend Television - stood proud and alone in Fitzroy Square. Macmillan, whose corridors still occasionally resounded to the tapping of former Primer Minister Harold Macmillan's walking stick, perched near Fleet Street.

Hamish Hamilton, sister company to Michael Joseph and also part of the Thomson Group – which also then owned Times Newspapers - was on Long Acre and, on Henrietta Street, Livia Gollancz, that most formidable of den mothers, ruled the firm her father Victor had founded. Upstart Century, where staff included a young publisher named Gail Rebeck, was just north of the Strand. Collins, still in the family, though Rupert Murdoch already held shares – was in Mayfair, the westerly limit of the Bookrest Walk (as the Book Trade Charity's then annual fundraiser was called), in which everyone, Chiefs and Indians, turned out.

With one or two notable exceptions, among them – inevitably – Ed Victor and the late Giles Gordon - the agents with whom they did business were generally low profile. To an extent quite unimaginable today, deals were done over a proper lunch - that is to say three courses with wine and possibly a “sticky” - at watering holes such as the White Tower, the Gay Hussar and Bertorelli's, which was then a very different place, with editors who knew their own mind and who most certainly didn't answer to sales and marketing departments and who were more than happy to pick up the phone and chat without going through the rigmarole of a three-page press release.

They bought volume rights in this or that project – that is to say hardback and paperback. The aim was to make a success of the hardback and then sell on the paperback rights for a substantial profit – Chatto, Cape and Bodley Head mostly to Pan, then owned jointly by those companies, together with Macmillan and Collins; Michael Joseph and Hamish Hamilton to sister company Sphere; and numerous hardback houses to Penguin, which was *just* Penguin, reliant, as were Pan and Sphere, on the granting of licences. At least until publishing's big bang, in spring 1985, when Peter Mayer, in a move that both surprised and confounded, bought Hamish Hamilton and Michael Joseph: vertical publishing was born.

In fact, though the Penguin deal altered publishing itself in the most fundamental way, the event that changed the way publishing was *perceived* – as a business, not a trade – had occurred a couple of years earlier, when Paul Hamlyn took Octopus to market. The offer was vastly over-subscribed and, suddenly, the City began to take notice of publishing. Arguably, it was that event – which significantly enriched several Hamlyn employees, so allowing a number of start-ups – which led to the City-backed launches of Headline and Bloomsbury and to the merger-mania which characterised the Thatcher years.

Indeed, when, in 1987, Si Newhouse of Random House US hopped on a plane and signed a deal for the proud but loss-making CVBC Group (Chatto, Bodley Head and Cape, but not, in fact, Virago, which was the subject of an MBO), it felt like another sell-out to Reagan's America. Then Random House UK bought the recently merged Century Hutchinson, a move which, far more than Penguin's swoop on the Thomson book publishing companies, signalled the start of corporate publishing. International Thomson bought ABP, Reed Elsevier bought Octopus, News International HarperCollins.

The Nineties, too, brought change, particularly on the academic and professional front, much of it of a European nature: the upstart Headline bought first Hodder and then John Murray, Holtzbrinck Macmillan, Bertlesmann Random House. Anthony Cheetham, who'd founded Century and ended up running Random House before being booted out by "a small Italian mouse", set up Orion, later bought – along with Hodder Headline *et al* - by Hachette. And, of course, Little, Brown UK emerged triumphant from the Macdonald Futura shipwreck that followed Robert Maxwell's midnight dip in 1991. Pearson, of which Penguin is but a small part, marked the new millennium by picking up the pieces of Dorling Kindersley.

So publishing became big news and big business, the subject of wider fascination and scrutiny. When I was first at *Publishing News*, the sale of a first novel for £10,000 would make the front page. Soon one hardly blinked at deals worth ten times that. In counterpoint to the increasing conglomeration, independent publishing gained a new lease of life, with start-ups including the shortlived Sinclair-Stevenson Ltd, which spent all its money in no time at all, Kyle Cathie and Quadrille, both still flourishing, and, of course, Fourth Estate, which News International bought in order to install its founder, Victoria Barnsley, as Chief Executive of HCUK. Profile has blazed a brilliant trail, so too Quercus. They and other successful (often small and specialist) indies, prove there's still scope for those whose vision is not matched by their bank accounts.

But what else – apart from bookselling, obviously – has changed? Everyone appears to want a job in publishing, which should mean that HR departments (as we have learned to call them) take only the cream. So why does the industry employ so many clots? There are still, it seems to me, a bewildering number of people around the business whose ability to send out a properly punctuated press release containing all the relevant information or a useable photograph I weigh in the balance and find sadly wanting. When a member of the *Bookseller* team joined Penguin, the release announcing his hiring – sent out in the name of the Publishing Director – explained that Joel Rickett's brief was to publish “books that people want to read”. As opposed to all the others, presumably.

Meanwhile, editing, at least in the UK, is a dying art. Scott Berg's biography, *Maxwell Perkins: Editor of Genius*, should be the set reading of every aspiring editor, even though supporting authors in the way Perkins and Scribner did Fitzgerald and Hemingway and Wolfe is out of the question. But there are great lessons to be learned from it about editing - that is to say, working with the text itself.

The likes of Philippa Harrison, Joanna Goldsworthy and Geoffrey Strachan, who will forever be associated with one Adrian Mole, knew how to take a book apart and reassemble it, working with an author to polish and perfect a manuscript. To be sure, there are people at all ages and stages of their career who can and do edit – Macmillan's Maria Rejt is a great example - but increasingly few. As one agent told me recently, “I get rejection letters saying a manuscript needs work. I want to say so - that's your job. Work on it. But editors are paid to shop, not to edit.” They expect the written equivalent of the cook-chill supper. These days, it is the agent, not the editor, who's most likely to roll up their sleeves – though, of

course, there are now some agents who might as well be selling cars. But more about editing later on.

And let's not talk about publishing's fixation with celebrity, though it's less marked now than in the first decade of the new century. You are all too young to remember but, in 1994, Heinemann, then part of Reed, signed up so-called supermodel Naomi Campbell to write a novel. *Swan* was in fact written by editor Caroline Upcher, whose qualification for the project was probably that she'd worked with Julie Burchill on her first novel, *Ambition* (about to be reissued by Atlantic). Campbell supposedly burred vague ideas into a tape recorder for a few minutes then left her amanuensis to do her stuff. Nevertheless, the "author" was paraded at Frankfurt.

The trade regarded the project with derision and the public wasn't too enamoured either. Reviewers of course had a field day. When La Campbell let slip that she hadn't even *read* her novel, *Swan* was well and truly stuffed. The lesson, one hoped, had been learned. Putting your name to a novel you'd had so little to do with was really not on. It had been an aberrant moment. It wouldn't happen again. Except that it did, and for a time it seemed that every famous-for-fifteen-minutes, two-bit celebrity was "writing a novel". Blink and some have "written" an entire shelf-full. Editors who should know better talk about voice and style as though Katie or Kerry or Colleen has actually slaved over a hot word processor.

Kylie and Gerri Halliwell and of course Katie Price have all written children's books. Adding to the shelves just last month was Kimberley Quinn, the American businesswoman and publisher who, some of you may remember, encouraged then Home Secretary David Blunkett in some headline-making extra-curricular activities a few years back. She writes as Kas Quinn, and her second novel, *The Queen at War*, is just out. It's no surprise that she is agented by Caroline Michel of PFD – whose Chairman was once Andrew Neil, also Chairman of the Spectator, where Quinn was once Publisher. The deal, for three books, marked Atlantic's fist (and, who knows, perhaps last) foray into children's publishing, but Managing Director Toby Mundy is delighted, describing Quinn's work as "a sparkling modern combination of the work of C S Lewis, Mark Twain and E Nesbit." You have to laugh. As an amusingly un-PC friend of mine asked, "will it be in Braille?"

Then there are all those ghastly tales of military derring-do, which all began after the first Gulf War, which seemed to begin with Andy McNab's memoir *Bravo Two Zero*. It seems a spot of mustard gas can sometimes pay dividends...

There have always been ghosted memoirs and there's nothing in principle wrong with that. Why, simply because you excel in sport or film or music, should you be able to write? Provided the life itself is valid and interesting, there is surely no problem. However, the Nineties saw a vogue for stories by menacing ex-cons, a market cornered by John Blake and the now-defunct Smyth Gryphon. That too has passed, leaving editors in thrall to television presenters, the contestants of TV reality shows and the victims of abuse, each book more ghastly than the last. If an editor was really lucky, celebrity and misery happily combined in one volume - though with so much recessionary misery now filtering into everyone's daily life, that particular strand seems also to have petered out. But someone will pop up with a book on the Saville enquiry, or on Vicky Pryce and Chris Huhne. The only difference is that now such titles carry the colophons of Random House, HarperCollins, Penguin et al – “serious” publishers, all of whom sneered at John Blake's signing of *Being Jordan* – and that they have been bought for quite absurd sums of money.

In a sense, these once-serious publishers are behaving just like the BBC: paying vast sums for so-called talent, much of it "made" by television in order to compete in the ratings equivalent of bestsellers and market share with those publishers whose *raison d'être* is celeb crap and who (to be fair) know how to do it well and don't pretend it's something other. The Christmas bestseller, almost inevitably a so-called celebrity title (Peter Kay in 2006, Russell Brand in 2007), is rather like the Christmas No 1 single in the days of *Top of the Pops*. Only rather more costly when it fails to chart, as Jonathan Ross demonstrated. The bar was raised last year – Miranda Hart turned out to be a decent writer and Paul O'Grady's second memoir showed that the comedian formerly known as Lily Savage has a sharp eye for social commentary.

However, much has been debased in the process, not least biography itself. Celebrity is now an entirely pejorative term, which should be reserved for WAGs and famous-for-fifteen minutes TV “personalities”, but the opprobrium that surrounds these sorts of titles has, to a certain degree at least, infected the reception of memoirs by those individuals with careers behind (and in front) of them and a genuine story to tell - not least because the talented and the talentless get lumped together in those portmanteau book reviews of which the nationals are so fond.

These days, a book contract seems to offer assurance that one has “arrived”, which means that every so-called celebrity has a lawyer out there trying to

persuade a gullible publisher to stump up a fat sum for some paltry offering. The recession, which has depressed book sales, has thankfully put the damper on wilder excesses, but in publishing houses across London, there are still starry-eyed editors who can't wait to be on first-name terms with someone from the telly. Because they are often so in thrall to these so-called stars, neither the brain or the red pen is properly engaged, and the result is often a rag-bag of nonsense, bought sight unseen (that is, unwritten) and destined in no time at all for the knackers' yard of publishing. In this, as in so many depressing statistics, Britain leads the world. A visit to a US bookshop offers a far more uplifting experience than is available here (*pace* James Daunt).

But if books are now, to a quite unedifying extent, "personality-led", publishing itself is becoming personality-less. Arriving at *Publishing News* in 1984, I witnessed first hand the last years of a golden age. Publishers took what they did seriously - but not necessarily themselves. A good example is the Publishers' Panto: in the late Eighties, the likes of Livia Gollancz, Philippa Harrison, Liz Calder, Geoffrey Strachan, Clare Alexander and Gail Rebeck got on with the motley and prepared to send themselves up alongside trade upstarts such as myself. These days, with the notable exception of Patrick Janson-Smith (who, on-stage and off, always plays himself) and the redoubtable Jane Gregory, still a driving force, senior staff have no wish to be figures of fun, even in a good cause. The point of Panto is gone, the camaraderie lost.

A trade once peopled by characters is increasingly grey, the dictates of corporate life squeezing the last vestiges of individuality out of everyone, from editorial assistant to chief exec. Those who, after an extra glass of wine, dare to share a joke and an indiscretion are few indeed, and all the more refreshing for that. Fewer still are those who will talk off the record, which makes reporting the trade these days invariably difficult and inevitably dull. Each of the major publishers now has a corporate affairs director through whom all questions are supposed to be filtered – which, granted, is normal practise at Ford or Glaxo. But publishing does not and cannot fit the corporate mould. It is a cliché to say it is a people business, but the cliché, like all clichés, is true.

Despite all the aforementioned grumbles and disappointments, publishing – at its best – is an intelligent business which, by its very nature, throws up all manner of questions ripe for discussion, be it about a newly acquired novel or a newly acquired company. As a journalist, I want to be able to talk to the editor or the sales director or the managing director about whatever it is I want to discuss. I don't want a pre-prepared statement that is long on adjectives and short on just



about everything else. I don't want to write a story that is based entirely on a press release and will therefore be essentially the same as a story on the same subject elsewhere. I want to have a conversation with someone.

That is, of course, still possible – particularly given my longevity in the trade and the extent of my contacts book. But the fact remains that news is managed in such a way that the notion of being able to break a story is now quaintly old-fashioned. Too often, I phone an editor to say I hear he or she has bought a particular book and can we talk about it, or to enquire as to some new initiative – leads I've picked up in time-honoured journalistic fashion. More often than not, the response is that no, it can't be talked about – not because the editor concerned has a burning desire to stay silent but because there will be a press release next week and to speak out of turn will bring down the wrath of the CEO. That makes for a boring life all round: every journalist likes an exclusive and every editor likes to be able to say their piece unfettered by corporate correctness. Most announcements do not need to be so stage-managed – not least because they are usually of interest to so few people. And, sometimes, it has to be said, it's because the publisher is running scared of some showbiz lawyer or sports agent to whom no one dare say boo. National security is rarely at risk, though one could be forgiven for thinking otherwise.

So far so irritating... But it's a sad sign of the times that the book trade often feels a need to spin stories and sometimes to brief against individuals whom it believes have stepped out of line, or rather not toed the party one. A few years back, I got into particularly hot water with HarperCollins who'd lost Val McDermid, a high-profile author who'd been with them 17 years having followed her editor from Gollancz. No author leaves a publisher after such a long time without very good reason and, when I followed up a rather bland press release, I discovered from both the agent – whom I knew well and trusted - and the author that the publisher in question had been on notice for the last couple of books on account of poor performance by the sales department.

The response to my story was fast and furious – the BookBrunch email was still going out when first the corporate communications director came on the line followed swiftly by the CEO. The agent was politely called a liar, McDermid's work was rubbished: it was all about money – she would have stayed if Harper had stumped up half a million. But further enquiries corroborated my story. I understand that an email trail shows an offer rather in excess of £500,000 was in fact turned down.

I also had a run-in with the team behind the last *Richard & Judy* TV series following a story about viewing figures, which official data showed comprised only around 40,000 people. True the show is repeated, but fewer people watch a repeat than watch an original broadcast, so it was optimistic indeed to suggest that, one way or another, a total of around 100,000 people saw each show. Imagine my surprise, then, when I was asked to run a “correction” explaining that the total audience reach was 2.5 million! (Later research put the figure at just 20,000 viewers for the original broadcast.)

Part of the problem here was that, via the *Richard & Judy* Book Club and the Galaxy British Book Awards, which *Publishing News* originated and which Richard and Judy presented, I necessarily had a relationship with Cactus TV. Naturally, that relationship needed to be kept in good repair – and that meant my room for manoeuvre was severely constrained. Negative news – and, to be fair, there wasn’t very much as the Channel 4 show in general and the Book Club in particular was regarded as a success – was kept for small type. At BookBrunch, beholden to no one and with no relationship to either the show or the Nibbies, I felt free to write what seemed to me to be the real story – a fact which was overlooked when I was briefed, apparently on the record.

Another example: a few years back, I was at a party when an agent and publisher with whom I was chatting began talking, quite openly, about the disaster that was unfolding at Penguin’s new warehouse. Senior Penguin staff, the agent explained, had been in to brief on the scale of the debacle, which owed to the fact that stock had been moved from the old Harmondsworth HQ to a new state-of-art facility in Rugby. But the technology hadn’t been adequately tested and no one discovered until too late that it couldn’t find the books which were, almost literally, “locked in” the system. Nor was there any way that books could be picked manually. As a consequence orders were unfulfilled and authors were losing sales on brand new titles – hence Penguin’s need to explain itself to agents. A loss in excess of £20m was possible.

Naturally, back in the office next day I followed up on what I’d been told, speaking to representatives of the three major agencies Penguin MD Tom Weldon had visited. I called Penguin, where the corporate communications director told me that to ease the crisis, a marquee had been set up in the warehouse car park containing around 1,000 specially reprinted core stock titles which *could* be picked manually and dispatched. The story ran under the headline “Penguin could lose £30m. Agents briefed on warehouse crisis”.

The furore was instantaneous and the complaint went straight to my then managing director, who sent the Chairman down to interview Penguin's then Chief Executive. The following week, *Publishing News* carried a prominent story which declared that "normal service" would be restored to Penguin's distribution system by the end of the month. But six months later, booksellers were still complaining and Penguin rescued Christmas only by chartering a special fleet of vans to carry stock around the country. Announcing its results the following March, the publisher acknowledged that Rugby had cost them at least £9m but added "we will never know the total impact because it is impossible to know what our sales might have been had Rugby not been a factor".

That story demonstrates two things – aside from a natural desire to limit bad news: Penguin was anxious to keep the lid on the issue for fear of the damage such a situation could cause to the Pearson share price – and to the reputation of its staff. Agents would – rightly – be angry. Their authors stood to lose money and there was the possibility that the debacle would damage their careers in other ways. On the other hand, my Chairman was anxious to (as it were) make amends for fear of what it would do to the paper's relationship with Penguin – a withdrawal of advertising perhaps, a refusal to take calls from the news team.

But Penguin was living in cloud cuckoo land if it seriously imagined it could keep such a meltdown under wraps. How much more sensible it would have been to have held up its hands and acknowledged the problems and used the trade press to offer an apology to booksellers and authors, both of whom lost sales as a result, and to explain at the outset how they planned to work through the problems. Apart from anything else, the story was in the public interest, and by public interest I'm not talking about what merely interests the public. By "public interest", I mean it was in the interest of booksellers.

I still think I was right to run the story I did in *Publishing News* and certainly right to stick to my guns at BookBrunch over the *Richard & Judy* viewing figures. As to HarperCollins and Val McDermid, I trust my sources and believe the story I wrote was essentially correct – but in retrospect I should have given them the chance to respond in the original piece to the charges levelled.

So, why didn't I?

Well, first the pressure that day of an imminent deadline and the wish to run with a good story. Second, I judged that the chances of actually getting through to anyone who'd be prepared to comment there and then were non-existent. Third, I

knew all too well that if I did get through I'd come under huge pressure not to run with it. So I ran with it anyway.

Which brings us to the heart of the matter, which is that writing for or editing a business publication like *Publishing News* or BookBrunch is not like writing for a national. If I worked on the *Guardian* or *The Times* or, perish the thought, the *Daily Mail*, I would not be expected to go to the Prime Minister or the Chancellor and ask for a response to a criticism of government policy made by some inevitably nameless back-bencher. My story might displease any number of people who might decide that, in the short term – perhaps even in the long term – I would be punished for my perceived misdeeds by their not speaking to me. Certainly there'd be no exclusive interviews. But there would be plenty of other senior politicians to whom I could speak.

But in the much smaller but no less self-regarding world of publishing, an angered chief executive can make life very difficult indeed – not just by not speaking to me but by ensuring that day-to-day information is not passed along. Indeed, I'm sure it was no coincidence that three days after my story ran, the news of HarperCollins' new Sales Director was given exclusively to the *Bookseller*. The lesson here is that you have to pick your battles.

Years ago, HarperCollins, then under the direction of Eddie Bell, withdrew advertising from *Publishing News* because the company failed to win Publisher of the Year at the Nibbies. They withdrew it from the *Bookseller* every time that magazine suggested that News International might sell its book publishing division. And that's another problem: corporate ownership by touchy proprietors who must not be displeased, which means keeping the lid on all manner of perceived shit.

As Philippa Harrison, one of the people I most admire in publishing, noted in a letter to *Publishing News* about our closure: "two things beleaguer a good trade press. Firstly the economic power of corporations when threatening to withdraw advertising if coverage isn't changed to suit their purposes... Secondly, trade journalists coming and going with a frequency that will inevitably create a loss of connection between cause and effect in the news story of the day... For the story of significant change, context is all..."

Nicholas Clee, my partner at BookBrunch, are able to counteract that particular problem simply because, between us, we can recall sixty years of book trade history.

However, I have always been aware that some stories, however good, must stay under wraps. And I don't mean simply juicy gossip, though there's been plenty of that down the years. In publishing's small and fragile eco-system, you have to be aware that some stories could cause real damage.

So the question I always have to ask myself is this: if I run this story, is there a possibility I could do real damage? Not damage to someone's pride or ego – but real material damage? The comparison may seem laughable, but look at the way Robert Peston's reports for *Today* caused millions of people to withdraw their money from Northern Rock, so kick-starting the UK recession... Might it have been better if he'd been a *little* more circumspect?

Look at the glee with which the economic crisis has been reported: radio, TV, the newspapers – it's impossible to avoid hearing about the latest tumbles in share prices, the latest liquidity crisis in this or that company or bank, the debt crisis in Spain, or Italy, Greece or Cyprus. I'm not advocating censorship – but there is a line between freedom and responsibility and it can be very finely drawn, certainly in business reporting. During the slow and painful death of Books etc and Borders, Nick and I took care not to spread unnecessary alarm.

Rightly or wrongly, and I think rightly in most cases, I've mentally filed away things I've been told down the years. Details, for example, about what happened in the immediate aftermath of Robert Maxwell's late-night Atlantic swim. Information about the minutiae of dealings between a publisher and a distributor that would have seriously embarrassed both sides yet would have been hard to prove and publication of which would have advanced no one's case.

Covering the Woolworths' administration was not without its challenges. Deloitte issued occasional statements and updates but did not much want to discuss matters of substance. Managers at the two companies within the group whose activities most concerned publishers – EUK and Bertrams – were, understandably, fearful of speaking out of turn. That left the book trade journalist in search of an accurate story seeking clarification and comment from those in publishing closest to the coal face – that is, sales directors. But – guess what? Those at the major publishers were told not to speak, so it's back to the corporate communications directors – some of whom weren't too keen to speak either. Have you put Bertrams on stop, I remember asking one of them. She wasn't sure, and returned the next day with a reply that wasn't particularly helpful: no, we haven't – but we don't want to be quoted. That was because two

of their major competitors were prepared to say that, at that moment, they weren't trading with the wholesaler.

Negotiations in such situations are fraught and complex and it would be both impossible and irresponsible for anyone to try and second-guess. So you need clarification because publishers and retailers look to the trade press for a steer. I was lucky in being able to talk – not for attribution - to one experienced sales director who refuses to be muzzled entirely and who, knowing and trusting me, was prepared to keep me up-to-date.

Throughout the crisis, the nationals picked at the story, though inevitably the nuances and complexities of the Woolworths' Group collapse as it impacted on the book business went largely unremarked-upon. That fell to the specialist press – but how do you do it responsibly if those in the know won't talk? Speculation at best causes unease and can further destabilise an already precarious situation. My co-editor, Nicholas Clee, and I fared better than our competitors simply because our long years of experience gave us a greater range of trustworthy and trusting contacts to call on – and we understood the situation better.

Redundancy has also become a minefield. Job losses on a large scale, where there is an NUJ Chapel, follow a set procedure – the negotiation is about jobs not individuals. But where a senior figure is “let go”, departs to “seek new challenges” – the equivalent of politicians spending more time with their family – journalists find themselves adrift in a sea of euphemism. Three examples:

In December 2002, Kate Parkin resigned as Managing Director of what was then the CHA Division of Random House. There was then a restructure. Apparently. If the press release was to be believed. Or was there a restructure in which Kate Parkin was deprived of her role?

Clearly, the Random House spin machine had been in overdrive – key agents were remarkably unsurprised by the news and those who were prepared to speak on the record offered only praise for the new arrangements. None appeared keen to offer a word of support to Kate Parkin at a moment when she surely felt in need of a few friends. Neither were there many words of praise, however hollow, in the official statement.

Kate herself did take my call, which is unusual in such situations: “I have loved my time at CHA and I'm proud of the success of the Division. I wish my former colleagues every success for the future” she told me, and those two short

sentences spoke volumes. She had in fact been escorted off the premises and made to feel like a criminal, but all of that had to remain unsaid, for money was at stake – quite a lot of it one hopes. The cheque had probably not cleared when we spoke and there was almost certainly a compromise agreement. By such means is silence bought and as a journalist the last thing you want to do is jeopardise someone's pay off.

Sue Freestone's decision to leave Random House in June 2006 was very much her own – she'd endured months of painful recovery from back surgery which had made her rethink her life. But I knew, and she knew that I knew, that Random House had long wanted her to go. Only now the timing didn't suit them – plus they'd just paid her medical bills. She was seeking, she said, "a new adventure... to throw some chaos in my life, because chaos can be very creative". Working at Random House, and with her distinguished band of authors, had been "a huge privilege and one that will be very difficult to give up."

By that time Sue had become a friend, and I knew that she'd been unhappy with the way Random House had changed. But she wanted to exit with dignity and had no wish to diss her employers and, by extension perhaps, her authors. So I went to the files and to an interview I'd done with Sue when she first joined Random House from Reed. In it, she had described it as "my natural home". She relished its "nurturing atmosphere" and a "strong publishing culture" that wasn't dictated to by sales and marketing. Those quotes, worked into my report about her departure, said it all, provided you could read between the lines – what had drawn her to Random House in the first place was no more. A couple of days after the piece ran, Sue's husband, *Panorama* journalist Vivian White, called to say how delighted Sue and he were by my story.

A month later, Sue tipped me off as to the impending exit from Random House of Ravi Mirchandani. Again, it wasn't a surprise – senior management I knew had wanted him out and seemed to hope he would find a position elsewhere and leave quietly. In the event he was pushed and made no bones about it. "One's face fits, then companies change and one's face doesn't fit," he told me, happy to talk on the record. "I'm not delighted and it wasn't my decision... I had a fantastic 'click' with Caroline Michel [who by that time had left to become an agent], which was one of the best working relationships of my life. Others don't work out so well. I've known Susan Sandon since we were in our mid-twenties at Penguin and I like her. I'm not bitter – companies need to change to reflect the change in the market".

A press release was rushed out praising his contribution and wishing him well. I phoned Susan Sandon, who had by that time moved from her corporate communications role to become Publisher of what was then the CHA Division and with whom Ravi obviously hadn't clicked. She didn't want to talk on the record but she was happy to chat with me about his perceived shortcomings, much as she had done previously. When the piece ran, Susan rang to say we could no longer be friends. The subsequent high-profile exits from Random House of Mark Booth and Oliver Johnson, who were followed to Hodder by a number of their high-profile authors, among them John Grisham, further strained relations.

And just last year, I wrote and broadcast unfavourably - on *Today* and on BBC *World News* - about the proposed merger of Penguin and Random House, which has yet to be approved in Britain and Europe (but probably will be). The result was a summons from one of the chief executives involved to account for myself. Would I have preferred that Penguin be bought by Rupert Murdoch I was asked, in a meeting prefaced by the comment that, of course, we weren't actually having the conversation.

Another tendency of chief executives is to rewrite history in a broader sense: I remember that Gail Rebeck announced that Harvill Secker would celebrate its centenary in 2010. The imprint – an unnecessary amalgam by Random House of two distinguished imprints, Harvill Press and Secker & Warburg – was in fact just six years old. The claim to a centenary was tenuous indeed: Martin Secker founded his eponymous imprint in 1910, but it went bust in 1936 and was rescued by Fred Warburg, hence Secker & Warburg. La Rebeck was not pleased with my lengthy correction but history matters – as a project which Dr Rayner and I are poised to launch will shortly prove.

Trade papers, business publications – call them what you will – must report the good news as well as the bad. They must encourage as well as expose. They must earn and retain the trust and respect of their readers. And that means those readers must accept that journalists will not be uncritical of what they do. Journalists should not be expected to perform as adjuncts of PR departments, nor the papers they work for as extended press releases.

Still the problem today is less a withdrawal of advertising than a lack of it – a problem which I suspect is not unique to our sector. A world now shrunk and wired beyond Marshall McLuhan's wildest dreams offers a wide array of promotional routes for publishers. The booksellers to whom they advertised via



the trade press are now less important and anyway hear about publishers' plans via other means. Publishers' budgets go not into trade advertising but into cooperative marketing with booksellers and, increasingly direct to consumer. *Publishing News* felt this very acutely, but a flick through the *Bookseller* reveals they are as badly affected. In the United States, *Publishers Weekly* is battling the same problems.

The trade I entered three decades ago has changed almost beyond recognition in terms of the way it is organised and the way it functions. Hard as it is for you all to imagine, golf-ball typewriters and fax machines were the height of technology in those days. Who among you know much of either! The Sony Walkman – a high-quality tape recorder that allowed you to listen to music on the move - was the must-have gadget, but the idea that you would soon download music, much less books, was the stuff of science fiction, unless your name was Steve Jobs or Bill Gates.

I'm sure all of us here have bought books, print or digital, via Amazon, and downloaded apps. We will do more of that in the future, but that doesn't mean that books as we have known them since Gutenberg will cease to exist. Concern for the environment (though e-books aren't as green as everyone imagines) and, more significantly, the economic climate, will doubtless encourage us to do more of that. Print-on-demand will increase. Bookselling, whether in independent bookshops or via chains, will sadly contract. Publishers will increasingly reach out to potential readers and buyers via niche methods of communication.

Books are supposedly recession-proof, but neither they nor the industry have escaped unscathed from the financial predicament now engulfing the world. Almost two decades have passed since the Net Book Agreement was abandoned and the trade became fixated on selling more books at ever-lower prices as publishers obsessed about market share.

Publishing today is a much more retailer-driven enterprise than was once the case. The editorial function is now too closely aligned with sales and marketing for anyone's good and a vast amount of time is spent courting authors who can be merchandised – writes of genre fiction, celebrities and so forth – and surfing the net for self-published authors who've become Kindle bestsellers. Editors and those to whom they report are fixated on short-term front-list success rather than backlist solidity. The trade needs both, just as readers need both culture and entertainment – and no one should forget that every book is new to the reader who hasn't read it. Out-of-print plums languish on every backlist.

The great Peter Mayer, the American brought to Britain in 1978 to breathe new life into a dying (or at least very sick) Penguin gave a speech at the London Book Fair this year when he was presented with a Lifetime Achievement Award.

“Ideally, publishing is about aiming high but also wide,” he said, about “offering the public books that challenge prosaic reality”. It should take risks, make trouble. Indeed, Mayer suggested, “trouble is at the heart of what we do in the sense that worthwhile books trouble our complacency – sharpening our minds and senses. Some are dangerous, and they too must be published... The chips are now down, and the *über*-idealists need to examine their sense of superiority or hostility to the market, while at the same time to be wary of too great an attachment to market-determined measurements of success – the car and driver, the bottom line, the corner office. At the close of the day, one needs to remember why, when the sun came up, one chose to be a publisher.”