



Opinion: Why size matters

Liz Thomson

Opinion - Publishing Friday, 19th June 2009

The trade talks endlessly about expanding the market, so what about those who'd like to buy books if only they were able to read them? Large print was once expensive and cumbersome, but digital technology has changed all that. It would be to everyone's advantage if publishers applied themselves to the needs of those who are sight-impaired. Amid all the trade's hand-wringing about the so-called missing millions and about social responsibility, not to mention its angst about the digital future and the impact of ebooks on traditional books, little time is spent discussing how those concerns intersect and how they might be addressed - to the benefit of all. I'm thinking of those readers lost to the book trade because they have poor sight and who are therefore unable to read standard books. True, the subject was aired at a London Book Fair seminar chaired by Penguin's Helen Fraser, but anecdotal evidence suggests it's not high on everyone's agenda. True also that the RNIB, acting as broker, recently launched the Focus large-print initiative, which makes some 50 new and recent titles available in large print in what is essentially trade paperback format. There are as yet no statistics, but early enquiries by BookBrunch and feedback to the RNIB suggest it has gone down well.

It is surely long overdue. For too long, partially sighted readers have been disenfranchised, able to read only the traditional large-print editions stocked by libraries. But they are cumbersome and look very other, which must make younger people self-conscious and they are rarely available simultaneously with general publication. The production in recent years of the Man Booker shortlist in large print and of the Royal Mail Awards for Scottish Children's Books is to be applauded except that such initiatives should be sufficiently routine as to pass unnoticed, except by those at whom they are aimed.

But the provision of books for the estimated two million Britons suffering from significant sight loss, including some 25,000 children, isn't merely altruism, though that would be a good enough reason for publishing them. After all, corporate social responsibility isn't just about green issues (and, anyway, how green or necessary are corporate limos?). We're not simply talking about those born with poor sight, or those whose sight is diminished by illness. Statistics show that one in five people aged 65+ has some degree of sight loss - in an industry that is heavily dependent on the 55+ age group, that's a sobering thought. Think how much extra money might go through publishers order books and booksellers tills if the partially sighted could avail themselves weekly of a range of new reads, just like the rest of us.

And in the brave new digital world they surely can. Focus is essentially print-on-demand publishing, a low-cost, low-inventory route to market that is transforming the business for newer, smaller publishers and academic houses and, more slowly, for large trade houses. The use of XML format - to which publishers are increasingly moving precisely because it allows for the repurposing of text - means that books can be made available in a variety of formats at no extra cost, including digital and large print (though there remain problems with reflowing in textbooks containing charts and diagrams, which means continued problems for schoolchildren and students).

As Lightning Source President David Taylor recently told BookBrunch, as a matter of principle, titles should be available in large print, and print-on-demand has the ability to unleash everything you want in large-print format. And not just large print. An Australian company, **ReadHowYouWant** and its R&D parent, Accessible Publishing Systems, has been experimenting to discover how very particular changes to formatting can benefit those with specific sight problems, such as macular degeneration, reading difficulties such as dyslexia, and conditions such as MS and Parkinson's. Four years of testing have led to award-winning



conversion technology that reformats text for optimum readability. PoD Braille editions are another possibility.

While take-up among booksellers for the Focus titles is encouraging, it is clear that, with the best will in the world, bookshops are going to be able to stock only a small range of large-print books. Space is at a premium literally, in the chains. Independents, who know their customers and who are part of a local community, will do better. Browning Books in Blaenavon, enthusiasts for the programme, are stocking the main titles and promoting the other titles in the list. And not just in store, but with leaflets at local opticians and doctors surgeries. Orders will surely come in.

But why not a large-print book club? Book Club Associates membership is not what it was, in-store discounting and Amazon *et al*/having siphoned off once loyal customers with more attractive offers so they should think creatively and repurpose themselves. Surely RNIB, Help the Aged, the Stroke Association and other relevant organisations would be happy to work with them, providing a direct route to those in need and, via their websites and print literature, to families and donors who could pass on the word and who would also see it as a gift initiative. Wouldn't it be great to be able to choose a book for a sight-impaired friend or relative just as one would for someone in possession of the full 20/20? And there could be a book club for children and young adults. Think how partially sighted kids must feel they're as keen to keep up with the latest fads and fashions as their sighted friends and family. The Focus initiative hasn't extended to them yet, but there's Living Pictures for example and the Tactile Book Advancement Group's recent competition to encourage publishers to design and publish books with which visually impaired kids can engage.

It's all easily possible today, if publishers can only think beyond supposed norms and enter into the right alliances.

And what about e-readers? Surely they present a heaven-sent opportunity to reach the partially sighted. Some repurposing would be necessary here too: screens would need to be bigger, landscape format the norm, in order to accommodate a sentence in larger font sizes than are currently possible. There should be fewer bells and whistles, controls larger (many users would be elderly and less dextrous), and the instructions should be written in large print: I recently bought a big-buttoned phone for my 88-year-old father, only to discover that I couldn't read the set-up instructions, even with my reading specs!

Here, surely, is a golden opportunity for Sony, Kindle, iReX, PlasticLogic or whoever to work with the RNIB and other organisations with a vested interest, at home and abroad, to come up with a gizmo that is user-friendly and not too expensive (though as RNIB executives point out, the blind are not necessarily charity cases in the true sense of the word). For those too long deprived of the pleasure of reading, any book, any time would be seductive indeed. However, publishers and agents need first to resolve the DRM issue, where controls mean that large print options are closed off - a hangover from long-standing contractual clauses which separate out large print rights. Of *course* it's necessary to protect copyright, but I'd bet that many authors don't realise that while (hopefully) keeping pirates at bay, DRM also restricts access for sight-impaired readers. Authors want as wide a readership as possible for obvious financial reasons but also for self-esteem and, in some cases at least, altruism and restricting font size is rather like limiting the volume on the iPod (though given the incivility of high decibels and leaky headphones that might be no bad thing). Surely it's possible for some geek to devise a way of separating the DRM issues in order that readers can adjust the font to one that best suits their needs rather than having to choose between the three essentially normal sizes currently offered by e-reading devices.

And why not bring all this into World Book Day which - as Victoria Barnsley, Chair of the 2010 event and CEO of HarperCollins, feels - is in need of some pepping up? Quick Reads are up and running, reluctant and slow readers are being looked after. Let's shine the spotlight elsewhere. If World Book Day can't happen on 23 April, when everyone else, including next year Beirut, is celebrating, we need to find other ways of defining the world and embracing those readers who have been disenfranchised from the reading world is one way. (Hay Director Peter Florence talked to me recently about the fact that the deaf are excluded from full



participation in literary festivals, but that's a blog too far for the moment.)

According to the Right to Read Alliance, five years ago a staggering 95% of publications were unavailable in large print or Braille, and the figure is little different today apparently. Audiobooks provide pleasure to many people, including the elderly and the sight-impaired as well as the sighted, but audiobooks alone aren't the answer. Those of us of a certain age - even those who started life with the full 20/20 - well remember the day we were forced to acknowledge we could no longer read unaided. For most of us it's a problem easily solved, even if vanity sometimes gets in the way. Yet even with specs we still struggle with maps, even in a good light, and with menus in restaurants I used to think of as being romantically lit but which, I now recognise, are merely dark - just as my mother always said they were. I suspect the first thing we all do when we switch on our new BlackBerrys is increase the font size, provided we can read the manual telling us how. Sometimes paperbacks can be a strain where a publisher has decided to force a blockbuster quart into a pint pot - small type densely printed is *never* an easy read on bouncy Tubes.

Imagine, then, how we'd feel if it wasn't simply a question of longer arms, better light or new glasses.

Imagine, for a moment, how we'd feel - all those of us who love books and reading and take it for granted that we can, indeed, read any book, any time - if we woke up one day to discover, sadly, that was no longer the case. To coin a phrase, it could be you or I. Every day, another 100 people begin to lose their sight. There's a thought to concentrate the mind, and the effort.

See responses to this article by and .

Source article: <https://www.bookbrunch.co.uk/page/article-detail/opinion-why-size-matters>