THE PUBLIC GOOD AND PRIVATE PLEASURE OF READING

ABSTRACT

The Canadian publishing industry offers little financial rewards. It is a difficult enterprise for even the most talented and resourceful publishers. So why would anyone choose publishing as a profession? The passion for books, Gibson suggests. The intense pleasure that is derived from the process of turning the life of a character who only exists in an author's mind into words printed on the pages of a book, glued together and bonded, a life that then finds its way into the living rooms and bedrooms and reading rooms of people around the world. Therein lays the miracle of books.

Reading is a solitary vice that is good for you. Conversely not being able to read is bad for you, leaving you swimming upstream in a literate society. Democracy as it has evolved even in our Friendly Dictatorship requires an informed citizenry and so the public good involved in reading is indisputable. All of these points are so obvious as to be boring. But another key point is that it is good for any society to produce writers who can entertain and inform and move readers, in that society and beyond. And in turn it is important for that society to have publishers that can bring these authors to the attention of readers.

The chief problem of Canadian publishing rests on one iron economic law – the law of economy of scale. To illustrate this law, I'll provide two publishing examples: one micro, the other macro. The micro example is that on a print run of 2,000 copies of a book, the printer will charge the publisher roughly $7.00 per copy. Yet, for a print run of 20,000 copies of exactly the same book, the printer will charge roughly $4.00 per copy. The economy of scale involves other factors that work against the publishers: in addition to the increased cost of printing, we must take into account all of the internal publishing costs, such as editorial costs and design costs and sales costs and salaries and heat and light and, ha! profit – and when all of these costs are applied to a 2,000 copy print run, small publishers find themselves in terrible trouble. Unless, of course, the publisher is able to charge a very high price for the resulting 2,000 copies.

Well – and here the argument turns macro – in Canada publishers can't charge what my colleagues in English Canada – and in Quebec – would describe as realistic prices. The prices of Quebec French language books are on average at least $5.00 per book higher than in English Canada. Why? Because Canadian readers of English are the best-served anywhere, enjoying the chance to read more new English language titles than any other people in the world. In a nutshell, few U.K. titles make it to the U.S. market. For historic reasons – specifically the existence of "Commonwealth rights" – British publishers made sure that all of their books were sold here in Canada, a tradition that continues. Similarly, few American books are published in the U.K. But for geographic reasons they all flow across our border. In the words of Ted Mumford in a recent review in the *Globe and Mail Report on Business:* "This happy fact leaves Canadian publishers struggling to achieve economies of scale in a small market that foreign publishers, their overheads long covered, can serve just by keeping the presses running a bit longer."

All true. This influx of books from abroad is regulated by a system that subsidizes their prices; but this system demands that Canadian publishers price their products competitively, but in the process preventing them from pricing their books at a high enough price to make it profitable. Quebec publishers, however, protected by the Atlantic Ocean and the associated shipping costs of French books, can afford to serve their even smaller market by charging prices of at least $5.00 more per book.

It may not be possible to legislate genius – and I'm speaking of authors familiar to you and readers around the world by surname alone: Atwood, Mistry, Munro, Ondaatje, to name but a few – but genius can certainly be encouraged, as the Government has done for many years by its wise support of authors and of the publishers who nurture them, through the Canada Council and the Department of Heritage.

DOUGLAS GIBSON

Douglas Gibson entered the world of Canadian book publishing in 1968. Since then he has had great success as an editor and publisher, working directly with authors like Robertson Davies, W.O. Mitchell, Alice Munro, Pierre Trudeau and Alistair MacLeod, and becoming Publisher of McClelland & Stewart (M&S) in 1988. Under his leadership, several M&S authors have won major international literary prizes as well as national awards, such as the Booker Prize, the Giller Prize, France's Prix Medici, and the Governor General's Literary Award for fiction.

One would think that Canadian publishers are doing really well outside Canada as a result of Canadian authors winning so many prizes abroad. Indeed, the current crop of Canadian authors has made our country the envy of the literary world. However, the rise of the literary agent has meant that, increasingly, Canadian publishers only are granted rights to famous authors' books in Canada. From all of these international successes they make nothing; not a nickel. And we know for a fact that these revenues can be significant; we were able to acquire world rights for Alistair MacLeod's first novel *No Great Mischief*. And after having sold these rights to over twenty other countries, our share of the proceeds was quite considerable.

Most everyone would agree that it is very important for our Canadian authors to be able to tell and publish their own stories. If denied this opportunity, they may be compelled to go, cap in hand, to foreign publishers who are likely to tell them to change the setting. But sadly, there are so many English language titles coming out every year that if every Canadian writer in English stopped writing and if every Canadian publishing company went out of business next month, Canadian bookstores would still be stuffed full to bursting with fine new books to tempt Canadian readers. This is a sobering thought.

We're not pouring water into a desert; we're pouring it into a lake. That certainly is the impression we get when we consider the distorted retail scene in Canada. Since Indigo acquired Chapters (which in turn had acquired the three earlier chains, namely Smiths, Coles and Classics) one single giant chain now controls 60-70% of the book market in Canada. That's not healthy in any retail sector, in any country. I've been in the business since March 1968. In fact, back in 1988, when I succeeded Adrienne Clarkson, I was already referred to as "a publishing veteran." Yet I've never seen conditions as difficult as they are today for Canadian publishers. There are other factors contributing to this difficult situation. In my friend Peter Gzowski's heyday, CBC Radio was a major force in bringing buyers into bookstores across the country and in making books the topic of conversation around the dinner tables of many households. CBC Radio has not exactly turned its back on books, but it is considerably much harder to get an author on the radio now.

Book publishing in Canada has always been an uphill battle, so why do people do it? Why do bright young people keep enrolling for the Masters programme in Publishing at Simon Fraser University, signing up for courses like the one I have been teaching? It's certainly not for the money. I'm embarrassed by what we, at McClelland & Stewart, mindful of those damned overheads, can afford to pay our highly trained, many-extra-hours-a-week-with-no-overtime-pay staff. Just recently, we lost a good person because he stepped out of the book publishing world, choosing another career that allowed him to increase his salary by 50%. So why do we do it?

Books are magical. Authors like Alice Munro and Alistair MacLeod and Mordecai Richler remind us of the great paradox that the local is universal. The more precisely Alice draws the life of small-town families in southwestern Ontario, or Alistair takes you into the life of people wrestling with Cape Breton for a living, or Mordecai took you into Jewish Montreal, the more recognizable their characters are to readers sitting quietly in rooms large and small around the world. That's magic.

I think the answer someone like myself in the publishing and editorial staff might give is close to the answer that a writer would give when asked why he or she writes. I certainly share in the creative thrill that an author feels when the first copy of his or her book comes to hand. In publishing, that's a special moment. "Hey," someone shouts in the corridor, "the new book by Margaret Atwood or Elizabeth Hay or Alan Cumyn or Jack Hodgins or Andrew Cohen or Susan Delacourt or Rex Murphy, or in the past Pierre Trudeau and John Crosbie and Preston Manning, is here" – and people pour out of their offices. And they cradle the book and open it and riffle through the pages and take off the cover and smell the glue – and if they're like me, they go back to their office and think fondly about the marvel of literary birth and their own helpful part as a midwife; about perhaps wresting the manuscript from Alistair MacLeod; or marveling at finally pinning Rex Murphy down in one place long enough to get him to sign a contract; or about persuading Andrew Cohen that a photo of the dawn light striking the East Block was the perfect cover for a book called *While Canada Slept,* or suggesting to Susan Delacourt that Juggernaut might be a good title for her book about Paul Martin's campaign.

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