

## **PUBLISHING: Making the Not There, There**

John Mitchinson

I tried hard to stop being a publisher.

Don't get me wrong, I'd loved and still love the wonder of a holding a beautifully printed book, fresh off the press and knowing that only a year or two earlier it had been just an idea.

It's the publishing equivalent of the Incarnation – making ideas real, tangible things that you can hold. That wonder never fades – even if it's a Kindle you're holding.

And I'd published some wonderful authors at the Harvill Press; I'd bought the UK rights to *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* by Haruki Murakami, and *Independence Day* by Richard Ford and republished their backlists. At Cassell, I'd been fortunate enough to publish the huge and definitive *Beatles Anthology* – their own story in their own words, and paid the ex-Monty Python star Michael Palin a million pounds to write his bestselling book about the Sahara.

But twelve years ago, I left and vowed never to return.

This was well before the advent of the digital revolution, the collapse in advances, the terminal decline of the high street. I just felt there was something wrong at the heart of the traditional publishing model, a kind of bad karma that came from the wastefulness and lies we all dealt in.

Nothing was transparent. Everybody spent a lot of time saying 'no' to everyone else – publishers were turning down authors, booksellers were turning down publishers and agents were doing their best to make it all seem reasonable.

But it wasn't reasonable and it's only got worse. In the UK by 2010

- \* The average annual income of UK author outside the top 10% was £4,000
- \* average advances had declined by a third in the past three years
- \* only 20% of books published ever earn back their advance
- \* the average sale of a hardback book by a first-time writer was 400 copies
- \* 25% of all the books printed are returned to the publisher
- \* Two independent bookshops were closing on average each week, and almost a third had disappeared since 1999.

I'd had too many books into which huge effort and creativity had been poured, by author, editor, designer, and publicist, when the result was nothing except silence. It's that terrible kind of silence that haunts an author when their book gets no reviews, and doesn't appear in any of the bookshops they visit. It's as though the book had never existed at all. It's the opposite of what a *publisher* should do, in fact. The clue is in the name – our job is to make *public* the stories and ideas to our authors, not hand them the spade with which to bury them.

My creeping sense of futility helped me turn down a very attractive offer from HarperCollins. I'd become friendly with one of the most creative brains in British television, a man called John Lloyd.

John was responsible for *Not the Nine O'Clock News*, *Blackadder* and *Spitting Image*, shows that had changed our view of what was possible with the medium. And at a very long lunch in the pub in the village where we both live, he asked me to help him start a new company, one dedicated to transforming people's lives by showing them just how rich, mysterious and interesting the world really was.

How could I say no? And so I left publishing, as I thought then, forever.

Our TV show, *QI*, now in its 11<sup>th</sup> season is watched by about 6 million people, every week. It is hosted by the inimitable English 'national treasure' Stephen Fry and has become a much-loved institution. The books John and I have written together, beginning with *The Book of General Ignorance* in 2006, have been translated into 30 languages and sold over five million copies. So, I've come full circle from bookseller, to publisher and finally to bestselling author.

But that's not what I'm here to talk about. I'm here to explain how, despite my vow, I found my way back into the madness of publishing.

My success in writing and creating something that was both high-brow and popular convinced me there was nothing wrong with the audience. People craved intelligent content. And the statistics showed that despite all the pessimism that gripped publishing, people were reading more, and across a greater range of subjects, than ever before.

The UK now has 140 literary festivals, an estimated 80,000 reading groups and each week new literary salons appear. The advent of digital has once again put books at the forefront of technology and the ability to send a text simultaneously to millions of people at no extra cost is only deemed a 'crisis' by the very people who ought to be celebrating and exploiting it: the publishers. In contrast, most readers see it for what it is, the beginning of an exciting new way of gathering and exploring ideas and stories.

The mismatch between the rude health of reading culture and the gloom of publishing is what led me back.

When I was a bookseller, I'd always been buoyed up by contact with book buyers. Of course, many of them lived on a restricted diet of bestsellers, but most of them were far more adventurous. I can boil this down to a single maxim: the more diverse the range we offered them, the more diverse and interesting were their purchases.

This principle has been hijacked by internet theorists and called 'the long tail', but those of us who worked in large book or music shops in the pre-digital age, know it has been around a lot longer than the internet. Anyone who spends a day interacting with readers soon loses their cultural pessimism.

It was then that I suddenly realised the cause of my publishing malaise, and of the 'bad karma' had been a lack of direct connection with readers. Publishers sold to retailers not to readers. And it was readers that were the real energy source for the book industry, an energy source that is endlessly renewable.

It was from this insight that Unbound grew. What if you were able to reinvent publishing so that authors and readers – the two poles through which the industry's current flowed – were in a more direct connection? Instead of trying to force more and more books through the ever-narrowing slots retailers were offering to protect their own profit margins, what if you got readers to fund writers directly?

So I threw my lot in with Dan Kieran and Justin Pollard, two fellow writers who'd also had enough of the waste and the pessimism, and after a year of planning and trying to rid myself of this annoying idea, we started Unbound in June 2011.

The model is simple. Authors – new or established – pitch their book ideas on the Unbound site ([www.unbound.co.uk](http://www.unbound.co.uk)) and readers are invited to pledge at different levels, each one attracting different rewards appropriate to the book. If enough money is raised, the author goes ahead and writes it and the supporters get their names listed in the back of the book as patrons.

Readers who subscribe get access to the author's 'shed' during the writing of the book, a place where progress can be reported, early drafts circulated, cover roughs shared.

Unbound then edit, design, print, publicise and market the book just like a traditional publisher and the profit is shared 50-50 with author. It's a real joint venture, with much greater transparency and a much better balance between risk and reward. Writers get to write the books they want to write and readers get a chance to participate in the exciting process of making a book.

We are frequently compared to the US crowdfunding site Kickstarter, which last year enabled its users to successfully fund 27,000 projects (and recently raised a million dollars for a book project). But Kickstarter is a new way of raising money for all kinds of creative endeavours; Unbound is a new way of publishing books. And I mean *publish*, as in find a public for our writers.

We are still performing the function of gatekeepers, but we open the gate wider we invite readers in to join us; instead of just passively piling up books in bookshops and hoping that they might find them.

Building a base of engaged and articulate readers as your patrons isn't a new idea. It was how many writers funded their careers in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. We've just enabled a much greater number of patrons to become involved by using the web. It means a first time writer with a brilliant idea, like Paul Kingsnorth's *The Wake*, a great chance of seeing his book in print, or to 'sell' a topical book like Peter Jukes's real time record of the collapse of Murdoch's empire, *The Fall of the House of Murdoch* when the story is actually happening, not a year later. It encourages participation, but still requires the old publishing virtues of experience, judgement and, above all, taste.

So how are we doing? Well, we've survived the first two years, which is better than most web start-ups and raised \$1.5 million in investment. We've won the 2011 Futurebook Innovation Award for Best UK Startup and were shortlisted as Independent Publisher of the Year at the 2013 Bookseller Awards.

But much more importantly we've raised almost £1 millions in pledges, successfully funded 54 projects, published 36 of them and, as I talk to you today, have our first UK Top 10 bestseller with *Letters of Note*, edited by Shaun Usher, a beautiful coffee table book adapted from his brilliant website [www.lettersofnote.com](http://www.lettersofnote.com).

Shaun's book is emblematic of Unbound's approach. He had been approached by other publishers wanting him, asking if he'd do themed collections – love letters, political letters etc. But the joy of the site is his extraordinary ability to mix humour with tragedy, famous names with the unknown, the very old with the new. And it was the visual beauty of the letters themselves that made the site so mesmerising. So, the book we suggested was a large format illustrated book, a kind art gallery catalogue, where the featured works were letters. It would cost us at least £50,000 to produce.

Shaun was thrilled and his fans trusted his judgement. Over two years of wrangling over permissions, we raised £120,000 in pledges – 279% of the original target. As well as the UK, we have sold rights in the US, Germany, France, Italy, Brazil.

So, I'm beginning to learn to love publishing again. Making books is still about finding great ideas and working with authors to realise them, to sharpen and focus their trajectory into the world.

But what makes working at Unbound very different, is that we have contact with the other side of that equation. The constant stream of tweets and messages from readers, enthusing about books, sharing their recommendations, offering us advice, submitting ideas and – crucially – *sending us money*. We feel plugged into the tastes and passions of readers and that is both motivating and commercially invaluable. Not everything we do works, but we are able to change and adapt rapidly.

One of the things our subscribers want is more projects to choose from. So, this year we are opening our platform up to other publishers. In the coming weeks, a range of UK publishers - from established names like Canongate, to small independents like Cargo and Constable & Robinson - will set their own crowd-funding channels on Unbound.

We will take a commission, but they will use their channel to start connecting directly with their readers. Unlike through retailers, names and metrics will be shared.

We think this is the beginning of a real shift in the balance of power. The statistics for crowdfunding are impressive. In 2012 crowdfunding platforms raised \$2.7bn compared with \$1.5bn in 2011 – a growth of 81%. This market is expected to grow to \$5.1bn in 2013.

And from our experience crowdfunding a book isn't the same as buying a book. That's why our average transaction, at £35, is seven times the average price paid for a book in the UK last year. People are making a commitment, an investment, a statement of support for a writer's idea.

As we grow, we get less confused with self-publishing, which has its place, but isn't what we do. What Unbound does is the opposite of giving readers what they think they want. It's allowing them to glimpse books and ideas they might otherwise never have encountered, by moving their role from that of passive consumer to active patron.

The American novelist Thomas Berger (he wrote *Little Big Man*) once wrote: 'Why do writers write? Because it isn't there.' Like the rest of you, it's the 'not there' that we want to help make happen

So why not join us. I'm not here primarily as a salesman – although all publishers are and should be salesmen - but I do think a Spanish language Unbound is an idea whose time has come...

I'll end with one of my favourite quotes about why creative collaborations matter so much, from that great Irish salesman George Bernard Shaw:

'If you have an apple and I have an apple and we exchange these apples then you and I will still each have one apple. But if you have an idea and I have an idea and we exchange these ideas, then each of us will have two ideas.'

**John Mitchinson**

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john@unbound.co.uk

www.unbound.co.uk