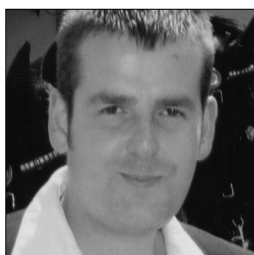


The British Society of Young Publishers

Sixty years of an extraordinary collaborative, self-help network



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In a land replete with clubs, societies and associations built round common interests and shared aspirations, the publishing industry is no exception. The warp and woof of British social fibre, collaborative institutions range from formal associations of companies, with constitutions, bylaws and substantial fees, to groups of friends who meet occasionally in pubs to celebrate their fellowship. They range from elite dining clubs like the Society of Bookmen (to which women are admitted) to the members-only Garrick Club (women not admitted), where applicants still run the risk of being blackballed.

They all have some element of exclusivity, implicit or explicit. The institution whose history I explore in this article has only one basic rule: you cannot be a member if you are aged over thirty-five or under eighteen. It is called the Society of Young Publishers (SYP), a collaborative, self-help network of young British publishers.

Members must be either working in publishing or taking a course to enter into a publishing career. Formed in 1949, its aim is to provide a gateway into publishing through voluntary, mutual help.

When SYP was founded, almost all British book publishing houses were family-owned, in which novitiates no doubt found their status not far removed from apprenticeship. They felt professionally isolated. Universities then had no centres for publishing studies, and publishing was not unionized.

Today much of publishing takes place in a corporate atmosphere, in which young aspirants may feel better informed than their predecessors of sixty years ago, but they are still on the fringes of their profession. The SYP offers the companionship of peers on the lonely road to career building.

It was more a matter of good intentions than performance at first. Tom Rosenthal, distinguished graduate of Thames & Hudson and André Deutsch, now a critic in the arts, was SYP chairman from 1961–1962. He told me: "When I joined the society

in the late 1950s, straight out of university, it was presented as something of a ginger group. It seemed to be very much a talking shop.” Rosenthal and others invigorated the group and set it on the path to being the proactive organization it is today.

Twenty-five years ago the SYP had 373 members; today, 452, of whom 80 per cent are female. Almost all its members are British, but wider horizons are suggested by its sixteen members in other countries. For example Shireen Kreidieh, at the age of twenty-one, set up as a children’s book publisher in Beirut. Today she has a catalogue of two hundred titles. Melanie Michael-Greer works in New York for the Bloomsbury USA imprint Walker. Burcu Ural, who like Shireen Kreidieh was a finalist for the British Council’s Annual International Young Publisher of the Year Award, works in the Turkish book industry. Members such as these suggest that the idea of the SYP is applicable in any publishing country. In fact Ireland established in 2002 its own Society of Publishers in Ireland (www.the-spi.com).

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InPrint, the society’s bi-monthly magazine, benefits from the services of a member who is a professional book designer and has achieved reduced printing and binding rates. Mailed to all members, *InPrint* contains reports of speaker meetings, guest interviews, industry news and a careers advice column.

The magazine has evolved from its early garish-green format. Sadly, there is no designated archive to consult for the very first editions. In fact, there is no historical evidence of who founded the magazine or indeed the organization itself, but I was fortunate to find in The British Library a fruitful entry point for my research in the issues from 1980 to 1983. Then, as now, the editorial team were all volunteers. In those days they did not have the benefit of typesetting templates and electronic workflow. One editor from the late 1970s, Nicholas Jones, founder of Strathmore Publishing, remembers:

In the days before page layout computer programmes and Postscript, everything had to be typed on an IBM golfball typewriter and stuck together as artwork with Cow Gum. (How many of the current members will even know what this is?). Illustrations

had to be processed to size on a galley camera — fortunately, Michael Joseph had one in their production department which they did not mind me using, and they would give me the keys to their offices, which were then in Bedford Square. Quite spooky, on your own at midnight, which it sometimes was as press day approached.

Other editors from the past included Philip Gwyn Jones, managing director of Portobello Books, and children’s author Terri Paddock. The July 1980 edition gives insight not only into the workings and endeavours of the society at that time, but also a window on the attitudes of the whole publishing industry. A report on an SYP study tour to Italy included:

Day one: Visit to and lunch at Mondadori.

Day two: Discussion with Erich Linder (agent) and members of the Italian Publishers Association. A visit to Milan’s principal bookshops — Hsepli and Messaggiere Musicali — and to Euroclub, a subsidiary of Bertelsmann.

Day three: Morning and lunch at Mondadori’s printing plant. The afternoon with Martino Madersteig, who runs his own publishing company, as well as the Officina Bodoni, a house started by Madersteig’s father.

Day four: Venice, sightseeing.

Total cost: £120.00. What a bargain! The Italian tour was not an isolated example of international reach, yet there has been no SYP study tour within the last decade. Were they more adventurous then, or are we too busy now? Tom Rosenthal and David Whitaker recall that in the early 1960s they “drummed up money by approaching senior publishing figures to fund a trip around America, visiting publishers as a kind of scholarship.” As a result Rosenthal and David Kingham toured the US “making a nuisance of ourselves for three weeks”.

International cooperation takes different forms today, for example the link with the British Council to run the International Young Publisher of the Year Award, which started in 2004. SYP committee

members attend the awards ceremony, and finalists and winners write for *InPrint*.

InPrint issues of the early 1980s reveal an interesting way of collecting members' dues. Every issue listed the names of all members but cut out the names of those who had not paid their subscriptions — until they did. New members of those days came from companies such as Newman Books, Evans Brothers, Academic Press, Batsford, University Microfilms, Association of Book Publishers, New English Library — names now all absorbed through mergers. What became of these hopefuls? Perhaps, as a society for the next generation of publishers, we should not look too deeply into their fate.

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Today the society has its own website (www.thesyp.org.uk/), which carries the latest industry news; members' profiles updated; member-only offers; and, of vital interest to young publishers, a careers section with links to publishing courses and related organizations, and, of course, bulletins of the latest vacancies. The website also features *InPrint Magazine* online (<http://www.thesyp.org.uk/inprint.php>), with an archive of back issues. To help members find jobs, or better jobs, the SYP has close working contacts with employment agencies and human resource departments of large publishers and independent houses. No fewer than 84 per cent of members receive the weekly jobs bulletin by email.

The SYP also has an annual careers conference, a day-long programme of lectures, panel discussions and training seminars. In 2006, the conference debated the present and future of book-selling. SYP delegates could choose from workshops on understanding rights and contracts; the print process; the writing of CVs; editorial; and marketing and publicity.

The society also helps its members to find out what they might get paid, or should be paid, by conducting an annual salary survey in conjunction with *The Bookseller*. This survey owes its existence to Tom Rosenthal and David Whitaker. Rosenthal recalls: "Today, as in those days, money is still an issue in a badly paid industry. When results of the first survey came in, Tom Maschler and I were embarrassed to find ourselves the highest paid for the jobs which we were then doing!"

The speaker meetings, held every month in

London and Oxford, are what the SYP is best known for. Subjects in 2006 included marketing, literary agents, production, literature in translation, selling rights and how to be self-employed. The final speaker of 2006 was the Orange Prize winner Lionel Shriver, who provided a frank account of her life after the commercial success of *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. At a meeting in Oxford, Dr Laurence Goldman spoke about the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, of which he is the current volume editor.

David Whitaker is emphatic that the speaker events were *the* key factor in making the SYP influential. He recalled hearing speakers like Sir Stanley Unwin; J. B. Priestley; Basil Blackwell ("a marvellous host, well-read, erudite", whom publishers "were in awe of"); Bruno Brown of Oxford University Press; and other heads of houses. With such speakers it became easier to attract others of equal eminence. Whitaker remembers Robert Maxwell becoming involved in a heated exchange with an SYP member concerning censorship: "Maxwell was adamant that publishers should be self-censored, and the young chap responded that he had no right to insist on this as the only fiction he had ever published was his balance sheet."

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Readers will have noticed that these early anecdotes about the SYP are told by men about men, which no doubt reflects the male domination of the industry in those days. Possibly the 80 per cent female membership of today reflects not only the achievement of a better balance of women in management of publishing houses, but presages their greater presence and influence in the future.

There is also the question of romance, of which I have been able to unearth one notable instance. Norman Franklin, one of SYP's earliest members, relates:

In the early 1950s, I was a junior editor and dogsbody at Routledge and Kegan Paul, then one of the last remaining publishers located in the shadow of St Paul's Cathedral, where British publishing had been based from the time of Wynkyn de Worde until the Second World War. I knew next to no one in publishing and

joined the SYP [and met] this beautiful and fiercely intelligent young woman. Jill Leslie was a junior designer (a typographer, as they were known in the 1950s) working at Chatto & Windus. Her boss was the celebrated Norah Smallwood, ferocious and terrifying to anyone young.

This chance encounter at the SYP between junior editor and junior typographer might have come to nothing had we not bumped into each other again three weeks later. We saw each other again after that and, as was the way in the 1950s, it was not too long before we announced our engagement. But then came the shock: Norah Smallwood insisted that Jill resign as soon as we were married. It wasn't just that married women were expected not to work at the time, but also that Norah Smallwood fretted that trade secrets might pass across the marital bed. While Jill was working her notice at Chatto, one of the secretaries asked her how to join the SYP, obviously thinking it a superior marriage bureau!

Norman's son, Andrew Franklin, MD of Profile Books, explained to me his unique connection to the SYP:

I owe my existence to the institution where my parents met ... By the time I joined publishing (via bookselling in Hatchards, Faber and Faber and then Penguin), I was already happily married, thus my motives for joining the SYP were entirely professional. I wanted to learn more, make publishing friends and contacts, and understand what other people in publishing did.

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Understanding the various roles within publishing houses has been an ongoing concern for the SYP throughout its history. *InPrint* editor Nicholas Jones commissioned a series of articles entitled, "What does a [job title] actually do?" The purpose was to remove the barriers between different departments

and provide an overview of publishing and the careers available within each:

That sparked the formation of a team to produce an SYP handbook with articles about each part of the process. The leading writer in that project was Giles Clark, and he grew the project to such an extent that his work finally appeared as the first edition of his excellent *Inside Book Publishing*.

Now due for publication in its fourth edition in 2008 by Routledge, under the joint authorship of Giles Clark and Angus Phillips, the book has become recommended reading in most publishing courses in the UK. Clark explained to me the genesis of *Inside Book Publishing*:

Meeting after work, often in the boardrooms of Michael Joseph and William Heinemann, the group conceived an original career book to reveal the mysteries of the industry. The high reputation of the SYP and its members' connections allowed me to interview the managers of the major publishers. Former SYP members and continuing supporters such as Tim Rix (former CEO of Longman) and Paul Hamlyn opened doors.

Although Giles' first manuscript draft was rejected by his first publisher, Unwin Hyman, following a company takeover, the SYP influence arose again. Clark recalls: "The book was saved by Gordon Graham, then president of the Publishers Association and CEO of Butterworths, who enabled its publication".

Four books were commissioned and published by the Society in the 1960s: *British Book Promotion House: A Proposal by the Discussion Group of the Society of Young Publishers* (1965); *A Policy of the Writer: An Open Letter to Jenny Lee* (1965); *Book Week at Kidbrooke School* (1967); and *Books Girls Read: Report of a Survey Conducted by the Society of Young Publishers* (1967). The first and last of these books arguably paved the way for marketing and market research methodologies that are integral to publishing practice today.

British Book Promotion House addressed the need for a collective book publicity organization in the UK, and appears to have been a forerunner of the Publishers Publicity Circle. Proposals were drawn from investigations in Denmark, Finland and Holland. The upshot was a list of fourteen potential activities ranging from book fairs to TV and radio campaigns, from promotion kits to seasonal publicity. Suggestions from the two-year investigation included:

- The preparation of comprehensive mailing lists available to all members.
- Research into book-buying habits and the compilation of statistics. Regular publication of information on the book trade in other countries.
- The encouragement and possibly provision of funds, to enable training colleges to give more attention to the use of books in schools.

All of these subsequently came to pass. *Books Girls Read* also investigated reading habits, albeit with a distinctly sociological angle. Drawn up by Michael and Katie Furness-Lane, the survey uncovered concrete, empirical facts about: "What children read, why children read and all the subsidiary questions that these arouse ... issues of central concern to publishers, educationalists and practising teachers alike."

The Furness-Lanes administered a questionnaire to the girls of "Eastedge", a pseudonymous comprehensive school. By today's standards they compiled a well-intentioned yet simplistic questionnaire dividing girls' reading habits into age groups: eleven-to-fourteen years old and fourteen years onward. Results were obtained by asking them to respond to classifications such as books read, intelligence, library membership, preference

for illustrations, hardback or paperback, and so on. Rather elementary, but certainly solid indicators for future market classifications. The findings of the first group were unremarkable: Enid Blyton the most popular author, followed by Dickens, Louisa May Alcott and Anna Sewell (at that time Dickens' works were being televised, and cheap editions advertised in newspapers). Rather more surprising to me were the results for the girls of fourteen years and over: Ian Fleming was the preferred author of choice. Again, I presume this was largely due to film and television spin-offs, but I would have anticipated this result for boys rather than girls.

Books Girls Read touched on issues which remain topical today. "Impulse buying", the authors reported, "is an important feature in the lives of many of our respondents, and they have the ready money to be able to indulge it. Until there are either more bookshops, or at least more points of sale, publishing will never benefit. Another precondition will be that books are given an image that makes them a desired and sought-after good on a level with gramophone records, clothes and make-up; this is surely not beyond the ingenuity of the trade."

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These are samples of ideas which have not faded with time. I also chanced on the name of one woman who was a committee member in 1967 and who was to win fame as a publisher: Carmen Callil. She would go on to found Virago Press, and become publisher at Chatto & Windus and the Hogarth Press.

The Society of Young Publishers has experienced varying fortunes and popularity since its inception, but it continues to function in the best interests of those whose potential is yet to be fulfilled. □

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Further Reading

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