

Not going gently

How literary fiction survives in the UK

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‘Literary fiction is dead’, screamed the headlines. When I and colleagues at Canelo, the digital publisher, wrote a report for Arts Council England, we hoped it would make an impact. But even we were surprised by the response. Our sober and balanced report on ‘models of support for literary fiction’ started trending on Twitter and was covered extensively in the national press. As always though, the headlines selectively exaggerated; they didn’t tell the whole story.

The truth is that fiction as a whole has been through a rough time. After the financial crash, sales, which had been booming, went down markedly. What is called ‘Fiction General’ by Nielsen BookScan, whose data we used in the report, saw a paperback high of £199m in sales in 2008. But by 2012 this had collapsed to just £119m. Such falls were mirrored in the hardback Fiction General market as well. Across the entire market for fiction the growth and highs of the years 2000 to 2007/8 have never been recovered. A similar situation occurred in the US where the total value of the book market peaked at \$17bn in 2007 before plunging to just \$10.9bn in 2014.

There are rays of light though. From 2015 onwards there have been small but real gains. Although we haven’t fully regained lost ground, at least the trajectory is, once more, on the up.

There is a further twist to the tale, however. Not only have book sales, and those of fiction in particular, been hit in terms of sales numbers, they have also seen savage real terms declines in price over the last 20 years.

As much as anything else, it is price that has squeezed the financial lifeblood out of the literary world. According to the sales data the average real-terms selling price of hardback fiction is down 44% since 2001. The average real-terms selling price for paperbacks is down 25.2% in the same period. Roughly, if books had simply tracked inflation over this period there could be something like an extra £1bn in the overall book market. Moreover fiction has been hit by this price pressure more than non-fiction – and literary fiction is on the sharp end of these trends. It’s no surprise, perhaps, that the number of independent bookshops too has fallen: down to fewer than 900 in 2017, from 1,535 in 2005.

The economics for publishers, especially small and independent publishers that disproportionately work with literary fiction, are tough. Analysis of the finances of a print-run of 2,000, typical of a small press, show that, after printing costs, sales commissions, retailer discount (50% or even routinely 60% of the cover price), returns and some unsold stock, a book is almost certain to be loss-making even with tiny advances. On that note, and given confidentiality, we did not have definitive proof of whether advances were up or down, but we did have substantial anecdotal evidence that for most authors advances are down (while for a lucky few they continue to be very high). More than a few authors spoke to us of advances falling from the middling tens of thousands to the thousands over the last decade. Meanwhile

hot debuts are often ‘preempted’ by publishers for eye-watering amounts of money, whether wisely spent or not.

In the post-crash years ebooks have been a boom story for the book world, especially fiction. Yet our analysis shows that this has not benefited literary fiction. Commercial and genre fiction have flourished in the digital realm but as a rule people don’t read much literary fiction on the Kindle. What is more, ebooks have added to the price competition with print books.

Prizes have become more important in this tight market, with shrinking windows for publicity, but examining the sales reveals that the uplift from even major prizes like the Man Booker is uneven and varies significantly year on year: the nature of the winner, not just the prize, is hugely important. There is no firm evidence that publishers are marketing literary fiction less, and many publishers spoke to us of how they are working hard in this area. Yet in a survey of authors and other stakeholders, fully 82% of respondents felt there was less appetite for marketing than in the past. Rightly or wrongly, authors do not feel well cared for in this department.

It all adds up to a picture where we estimate that something like 1,000 writers of literary fiction, at the absolute maximum, can earn a living solely from writing such novels in English. In practice the number is probably a lot lower.

So, that’s the bad news. And that’s only a brief summary. Surely the headlines are right? Well, not quite.

Firstly, the report is specifically looking at models of support for literary fiction. The market and sales through the tills is one form of that. Commercial support is surely desirable and represents the best case. But the truth is that literary fiction has always been a hard sell; aside from a few golden decades in the 20th century there has never been an easy time. Which is why not-for-profit support has a re-emergent place as a means to buttress literary writing. Arts Council England itself, of course, is a key part of this, by funding writing bodies like regional literature-development agencies and the Writers Centre in Norwich. They also offer smaller, one-off grants for individual projects. I would urge writers to look at these; they could be invaluable lifelines when writing ambitious literary work.

Then there are charities and unions. The SoA has the Authors’ Foundation and K Blundell Trust which distribute awards amounting to over £250,000 a year. It also runs the P. D. James Memorial Pension Fund for writers over 60. The Royal Literary Fund (RLF), founded in 1790, is a charity working with writers facing financial hardship. The Royal Society of Literature offers Brookleaze Grants to enable authors to have time off from work. Other awards include the Deborah Rogers Writers’ Award, in memory of the legendary agent, which offers £10,000 to a debut unpublished author, and funds writers’ retreats like those at Cove Park, the Gladstone Library and Ardtornish Retreat. The British Library also has a Writer in Residence programme at its

Eccles Centre, as do many universities. For those authors willing to search them out and brave the applications process, there are options out there.

Beyond this there are further bright spots. Foreign rights sales are still incredibly strong for British authors. This has become more and more of a lifeline. Notwithstanding the difficult financial picture, this is an excellent time for new, small, daring indie presses. While the formerly reliable income stream of freelance journalism has probably become more precarious, opportunities have arisen as paid-for tutors in the burgeoning space of creative writing courses. Routes for crowd-funding through sites like Unbound and Kickstarter didn't exist a decade ago and tend to be a kinder environment for literary fiction than the world of pure ebooks.

Overall then it is a much more mixed picture than the headlines might suggest. But there are a few things to remember. Literary fiction is still utterly vital to our culture and national conversation. It still forms the bedrock of major TV and film adaptations, which again can be a major source of income for their writers. Throughout the financial and technological turbulence of the past decade it is striking that the book has remained; yes, it took a knock, but its sales are going up again, prices are rising again. Neither the ebook nor the smartphone heralded the end of the book, just a different ecosystem into which it has found a new place. Likewise the rise of 'long-form' box-set TV doesn't mean the end of the literary novel; in fact it suggests a continued demand for deep and complex stories.

Making a living isn't easy for writers of literary fiction. In many ways it has become objectively harder over the last 20 years. But positive signs also abound. We just have to make the most of them. ●

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