

## Making Evaluative Judgements and Sometimes Making Money: Independent Publishing in the 21st Century

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### ABSTRACT

Independent publishing is a sector of the cultural field that is perceived to be threatened by market forces but also one in which is buoyed by critical and commercial success and a rise in the number of small presses. The article innovates by probing the oft-neglected matter of evaluative judgements as publishers, in their role as cultural intermediaries, negotiate aesthetic, ethical, commercial and temporal considerations in deciding which books to publish. Drawing on primary data from a study of independent literary publishers from six countries, I draw attention to how they justify their decisions in order to mark their distinctiveness in the field and distinguish themselves from the corporate houses. I find that field-specific aesthetic judgements assess the extent to which literary manuscripts contribute to the conversation by responding to developments in the field. In contrast, decisions made on this basis of ethical considerations mean that the publishers' output might veer from 'art for art's sake' towards more heteronomous regions of cultural production in order to contribute towards a sense of the common good. Finally, the temporal dimension of evaluative judgements distinguishes independent presses from their rivals by pointing to a distant future of literary fame that reaches far beyond the marketing schedules of the corporate houses.

**Keywords:** aesthetics, independent publishing, evaluative judgements, ethics, taste

### INTRODUCTION

Thompson (2012) identifies three key developments in trade publishing: the polarization of the field, with five or six big corporations taking a dominant position; the relentless pursuit of bestsellers; and 'shrinking windows', as publishers seek to publicise their books in an increasingly crowded marketplace. But whereas Thompson takes a broad view of the publishing field, this article focuses on the relatively under-explored area of independent literary publishing. It is a sector of the cultural field that is perceived to be threatened by market forces (Bourdieu, 2003) but also one which is buoyed by critical and commercial success and a rise in the number of small presses (Kean, 2017; Thompson, 2012). This article innovates by probing the oft-neglected matter of evaluative judgements as publishers, in their role as cultural intermediaries, decide which books to publish. There has been little research on the evaluative judgements made by those working in independent publishing. Publishers are inundated with potential book projects but on what basis do they make judgements about the titles they want to publish? What criteria do they deploy (or profess to deploy)? Drawing on primary data from a study of prominent independent presses from the UK, USA, Canada, Germany, Australia and Finland, the article draws attention to the aesthetic, ethical and temporal dimensions of evaluative judgements. A key finding is that publishers justify their decisions with reference to evaluative criteria that mark their distinctiveness in the field and distinguish themselves from

corporate, market-driven publishing houses. The criteria to which they refer derive from within the field but also from elsewhere.

The article has as its focus the analysis of forty-seven semi-structured interviews with independent publishers from six countries. Field analysis is applied because it provides a framework within which to understand and trace the power dynamics and practices of the independent publishing world at a macro level (Bourdieu, 1993, 1996, 2008). However, whereas field analysis enables a view from afar, the subject matter of this article requires closer proximity in order to gain a finer grained analysis of the evaluative judgments made by individuals operating within this field. This information is not obtainable using field analysis alone. Bourdieu (1998, p. 40) defines field as

a structured space, a field of forces, a force field. It contains people who dominate and others who are dominated. Constant, permanent relationships of inequality operate inside this space, which at the same time becomes a space in which the various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field.

He argues that society is made up of a number of fields, many of which overlap and all of which relate, in some way to the wider field of power, the field of fields (Bourdieu, 1993, 2014). As societies develop a more complex division of labour and as this in turn enables more specialisation, a number of unique fields develop, each with their own specific rules and logic which often run contrary to those of other fields. The longer a field exists, the more autonomy it is able to gain. For example, the most autonomous region of the field of literary production operates in accordance with its own rules (Bourdieu, 1996). Bourdieu finds that in this area of restricted production, the logic of the economic world is reversed and success is measured not by profits or book sales but by the degree of peer recognition and a logic of ‘the loser wins’, which is based on form of gratification that is so completely deferred that it is often posthumous (Bourdieu, 1993). Success, whether through awards bestowed by bourgeois institutions or expressed in hard cash is likely to be indicative of ‘selling out’. Each field is structured by power relations; fields are sites of struggle over its spoils. This struggle takes place between newcomers and those who are currently dominant (Bourdieu, 1993).

Thompson (2012, p. 4) takes Bourdieu’s insights on field and applies them to the world of book publishing. First, he argues that field analysis helps us to understand that book publishing does not consist of one field but a plurality of fields, from the field of poetry to the field of academic book publishing. Second, the relational emphasis of field analysis allows us to see that those involved in the field – whether individuals, institutions or organisations – are oriented in their practices, even if not always consciously - towards others (Thompson, 2012; Bourdieu, 1993, 1996). Third, field analysis can help us to understand the different resources possessed by the various participants in the field of publishing. These resources include, for example, cultural capital (cultural competences), social capital (networks, connections), economic capital (financial resources) and symbolic capital (prestige, renown) (Bourdieu, 1986). Thompson’s (2012, p. 11) fourth point is that each field of publishing has its distinctiveness, its own specific logic, that is ‘a set of factors that determine the conditions under which individual agents and organisations can participate in the field – that is, the conditions under which they can play the game (and play it successfully)’.

There are, however, limits to the analytic value of field analysis. First, there is a tendency in much field analysis to view the practices of the world from afar, without drawing attention to the actual moments of engagement between publishers and the manuscripts they read (Stewart, 2012, 2014). Second, the emphasis on power dynamics means that field-specific aesthetic criteria are often neglected (Stewart, 2019). Third, Bourdieu’s field analysis was conceptualised on a national scale and was predominantly concerned with French society. The challenge remains, therefore, to theorize the field of independent publishing on a global scale (Savage and Silva, 2013). Fourth, field analysis depicts ‘a Hobbesian power-struggle between interests’ and neglects the ways in which individuals cooperate (Garnham, 1993, p. 185). For example, Gonsalves’ (2015) research on the Frankfurt Book Fair finds that Indian publishers, as outsiders and newcomers to the field, deploy strategies of friendliness (rather than rupture and revolution) in order to make headway. Bourdieu depicts an ‘amoral economy’ and rejects claims ‘that certain actions can be disinterested rather than (subconsciously) instrumental’ (Sayer, 1999, p. 407). Fifth, with its focus on the interplay between habitus and field, field analysis often reduces cultural objects to little more than symbols in a wider game of power (Hennion, 2001, 2007). It is important, therefore, to consider the dynamic interplay between individuals and cultural objects as well as the materiality of the objects (Stewart, 2012; Rubio and Silva, 2013; Savage and Silva, 2013). Finally, and most relevant to this article, field analysis does not tend to give an adequate account of the evaluative judgements, whether ethical or aesthetic, that are made by individuals in the course of their everyday practices (Stewart, 2017). According to Bourdieu (1993b), the practices of agents are expressions of the interplay between habitus and field: their perceptions are adjusted on the basis of the ‘fit’ (or not) between the dispositions and capitals that they have developed and acquired through social origin and education, and the requirements of the field. However, beyond the notion of ‘semi-conscious’ practice, field analysis has little to say about normative judgements. As Sayer (1999, p. 404) points out, ‘even allowing for the

bodily, habitual character of much social behaviour, Bourdieu's deflation of the role of actors' normative often reasoned, judgements undermines his explanations'. It is the purpose of this article to examine the oft-neglected basis on which evaluative judgements are expressed. I argue that judgements are part of the struggles associated with social fields but not reducible to these conflicts. I contend that by considering the aesthetic, temporal and ethical aspects of judgements, we are able to draw attention to what Max Weber would call their value-rational aspects. Weber (1968[1913], p. 25) argued that value-rational social action, as an ideal type, is 'determined by a conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other form of behaviour, independently of its prospects of success'. Many of the independent literary publishers are driven, at least in part, by value-rational considerations even if these are commingled with other, more instrumental motives such as making a profit on the books they sell. It is difficult if not impossible to entirely separate these various dimensions of judgement. Weber (1968, p. 22) argued that it is rare to find an instance of social action in its pure form, as an ideal type, or where the intention and meaning of the action is fully conscious and explicit. Along these lines, I would suggest that it is hard to isolate a judgement made by the publishers in this study that is *entirely* rooted in aesthetic, ethical, temporal, strategic or economic considerations. Nevertheless, I argue that we can gain a finer-grained analysis by attempting to distinguish these various dimensions of evaluative judgements.

I find that the aesthetic values to which the publishers refer are rooted in the literary field. For example, the publishers place high value on field-specific stylistic innovation, making a significant *contributions to the conversation*, and demonstrating *charisma in the authorial voice*. These criteria all accord with the notion that the literary field has a cumulative logic to which one can only contribute by doing something new and innovative (Bourdieu, 1993). In staking out this claim, the independent publishers have to negotiate two key aspects of their trade, referred to metaphorically by one publisher as *the cathedral* and the *stock market*. In doing so, they are keen to situate themselves, rhetorically at least, in the cathedral. 'We are not in it for the money', is the common refrain, and here, they state that they are more interested in aesthetic (rather than market) values and these values accord with aesthetic criteria specific to the literary field. In contrast, the ethical judgements they utilise, including the assertion that their decisions are informed by a desire for inclusivity as they seek to combat the diversity deficit, are rooted in civic values that refer to the common good and derive from sources external to the literary field.

## METHODS AND ANALYSIS

I recruited my initial group of respondents at the London Book Fair and Frankfurt Book Fair in 2016. The recruitment process did not go well initially because the publishers' schedules were full. I did manage to speak to some publishers and contacted them after the conference along with others that I had been put in touch with through a colleague who works in this industry. After the first batch of interviews using this purposive method of sampling, I asked the interviewees to recommend two or three other publishers whom I might contact. This worked very effectively and the recommendations ensured that people were very often willing to return my emails and agree to be interviewed. In the course of the research, I was able to speak to senior figures at a range of independent presses.<sup>1</sup> They were mainly publishers of literary fiction and poetry, from the one-person-run small presses that operate on the fringes of the field to those that had experienced considerable financial and critical success on a global scale. The majority of the publishers to whom I was directed were English language publishers, so this limits the claims I can make in relation to the wider applicability of the findings. The sample was also skewed by the fact that, in the main, publishers recommended houses that were, in some ways, notable or successful. This notwithstanding, many of the houses, including those possessing considerable symbolic capital, told me that they faced a perpetual struggle to survive.

There are many different kinds of independent publishers who fit the key descriptor that they operate on their own and are not owned by another company. Many small presses might aim at a mass market and are commercially-oriented, whether they publish romantic fiction or popular science. In contrast, the focus of my study is independent publishers that specialise in literary fiction and poetry and, to borrow from Ken Gelder's work, occupy various positions in the field of Literature (with a capital 'L') rather than in the field of popular fiction. As Gelder (2004, p. 14) puts it, 'Literature shares many of Bourdieu's 'autonomous' characteristics, while generally speaking popular fiction rests fairly comfortably at the 'heteronomous' end of things'. In reality, this distinction is often muddled. For example, some of these independent literary houses, though oriented towards the autonomous pole of the field, adopted a *portfolio approach* (more of which later) in relation to commercial interests. In other instances,

<sup>1</sup> I conducted a mixture of face-to-face and Skype interviews, each lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. The vast majority of respondents were senior figures (e.g. publishers or editors) at independent houses from the USA (19), UK (16), Australia (4), Germany (4), Canada (2) and Finland (2). One of the interviewees ran an organization that promotes small presses in the US.

as we will see below, their ethical judgements sometimes pushed their outputs towards the heteronomous pole as they attempted to distance themselves from the white, male, middle-class dominated literary avant-garde scene.

I interviewed twenty-two women and twenty-six men (one of the interviews included two respondents). Their high levels of cultural capital mirrored those of cultural intermediaries documented in other research (e.g. on comedy scouts (Friedman, 2014) and television buyers (Kuipers, 2012)). Just as Giselinde Kuipers' (2012, p. 587) television buyers had in common high levels of cosmopolitan capital, with 'similar speech styles: similar informal, loose, pleasant yet business-like manners – even similar hairdos and clothing styles', the literary publishers in my study had high levels of academic capital and most were educated to postgraduate level. Some had doctorates and worked in academic institutions; some analysed their own practices through the lens of sociological perspectives, thus demonstrating familiarity with my game as well as their own. The interviews went well perhaps because their position as independent publishers is (relatively speaking) homologous with mine as a sociologist: we both occupy positions within what Bourdieu (1984) would call the dominated fraction of the dominant class.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen in line with an interpretivist approach which focuses on the subjective meaning attached to individuals' social action (Weber, 1968; Fielding, 2006). The interviews were not designed to discover a hidden truth behind the publishers' statements but rather sought to gain insight into how meaning is socially produced (Fielding and Thomas, 2008) and the how the publishers perceive their vocation (Lamont, 1992, p. 18). The publishers' responses in the interviews might be considered as 'practical accounts', which need to be considered in relation to their positions in the field (Bourdieu, 1993; Thompson, 2012). The interviews are also generative of boundary work, which is used 'when we try to define who we are: we constantly draw inferences concerning our similarities to, and differences from, others, indirectly producing typification systems' (Lamont, 1992, p. 11). With this in mind, we can see that there is not necessarily a correspondence between what the publishers say and their genuinely held beliefs or modes of conduct (Fielding and Thomas, 2008). Nevertheless, by understanding these accounts in terms of the logic of the field and each publisher's situation in that field, I am able to consider the wider structural issues that might impact on the judgements expressed. As discussed below, independent publishing is a field dominated by the well-educated middle classes (O'Brien et al., 2016). It is no surprise, then, that certain book projects are more likely to resonate with the publishers' habitus than others. We can also understand the strategies that follow from the size and scope of the publishing house. However, if we carefully probe the basis on which the publishers make evaluative judgements, we see various modes of judgement at play (Sayer, 1999; Stewart, 2017). Moreover, reference to the logic of the field helps to see why the relatively prominent, financially buoyant publishers might be more inclined to be pragmatic in their approach to balancing commercial and artistic considerations in deciding what to publish. It also helps to explain why those publishers situated at the very margins of the field, whose books of poetry might be expected to sell only a handful of copies, place aesthetic, temporal and ethical considerations at the fore. I was surprised about the remarkable similarities between similarly-situated publishers, from country to country. The main differences between such publishers lay in the different funding regimes to which they had to respond (e.g. the USA model of non-profit, which required a perpetual search for benefactors and philanthropists, as compared to the UK and Canadian models of State-funding, which required a lot of form-filling and waiting).

I conducted a thematic analysis of the interview data in order to identify significant patterns. In the process of coding, there was a degree of movement between deductive and inductive work (Braun, 2006). At times, my research was informed by field analysis and conceptual frameworks generated in my previous work on the sociology of taste and aesthetics (e.g. Stewart, 2012, 2014, 2017). But at other times, new codes and themes were generated from the data in a manner more akin to a grounded theory approach (McLeod, 2001). When presenting my findings, I have utilised striking illustrative quotes that highlight the prominence of a particular theme.

A prominent theme in the interview data is boundary work (Gieryn, 1983; Fournier, 2000). Gieryn (1983) originally deployed the term to describe how scientists ideologically differentiate science from non-science in order to protect their domain and increase symbolic and material gains. He cites several historical examples where scientists have performed boundary work. To take one such example, physicist John Tyndall made the case that 'science is justified by its practical utility when compared to the merely poetic contributions of religion, but science is justified by its nobler uses as a means of "pure" culture and discipline when compared to engineering' (Gieryn, 1983, p. 787). In independent publishing, similar boundary work is taking place and much of it is justified along aesthetic and ethical lines. In contrast to the big corporations, the publishers argue that independent literary presses have a higher degree of aesthetic autonomy, thus distinguishing them from what they portray as technocratic, money-driven corporations. This boundary work also distinguishes their inclusive, socially progressive approach from the cynical sales-driven strategies of the major houses. 39 of the interviews generated 105 instances of this kind of boundary work.

## FIELD-SPECIFIC AESTHETIC CRITERIA: 'CONTRIBUTING TO THE CONVERSATION'

It is primarily through *field-specific aesthetic criteria* that the independent publishers seek to distinguish themselves from the bigger houses. Aesthetic criteria are often neglected in sociology, considered only to the extent to which they are markers of class background or symbolic struggle (Hennion, 2001; Highmore, 2016), but they are prominent in the publishers' accounts of their evaluative judgements. A recurrent theme in the interviews is the need for a manuscript to 'contribute to the conversation'. This aligns very much with Bourdieu's (1993) observation that for a field to develop, its newest contributions must in some way respond to and react against the most recent developments in the field's cumulative history. New artists 'must inevitably situate themselves in relation to all the preceding attempts at surpassing which have occurred in the history of the field and within the space of possibilities which it imposes upon the newly arrived' (Bourdieu, 1993, pp. 265-266). Bourdieu proceeds to argue that if a newly arrived artist were to merely replicate (without irony or pastiche) something that has already been done in the field, then the artistic outcome will be kitsch. The respondents make it clear that the most significant field-specific aesthetic criterion is for a manuscript to be distinctive in the sense of doing something *new*:

[F]or me what's really important is that the work is distinctive and that it's trying to do something that other people are not doing. There's a lot of imitation particularly amongst some younger poets who might fixate on certain ticks of style or rhythm or forms of language or forms of imagery that have been developed in other people's practice ... And I'm really not interested in that, I'm interested in people who are trying to push their boundaries in their own way. And I don't mind if it's very experimental and it fails sometimes (Maria, Publisher, UK).<sup>2</sup>

Several publishers make the point that writers' programmes and workshops featuring a 'house style' leads to a lot of imitative writing. However, to imitate the work of a currently in-vogue avant-gardist is not nearly as lamentable as to imitate a long-dead Romantic writer or to submit Elizabethan-style sonnets. In the interview data, the desire for the new is often expressed as 'contributing to the conversation' in three key ways: first, *stylistically, through formal innovation*; second, *through charisma and a strong and distinctive authorial voice*; and third, as discussed below, *through engaging with pressing contemporary issues*. Crucially, the publishers favour writers with *a voice of their own*. The preference for formal innovation, which defines itself in opposition to writing that is merely descriptive, or which 'gushes' with subjectivity, can be seen in this response:

I have certain prejudices, in favour of a highly vocalic poetry, for example; a love of parataxis and a slight resistance to hypotaxis; I like enactive poetry and dislike merely descriptive poetry ... I guess I avoid gushing poetry, poetry which foregrounds an irritating 'I', poetry in which formal principles are not evident after a few lines (David, Publisher, UK).

Along similar lines, a 'normal love story' is out of bounds for the publishers unless it is 'very literary or ... experimental or [offering] a new approach to the language' (Paulo, Publisher, US). But there is more to this than merely demonstrating an aesthetic disposition and a formal mastery of language (Bourdieu, 1984). For many of the publishers, formal innovation is a key aesthetic criterion, along with newness, originality and risk-taking. What is significant is carving out a distinctive way of writing. As one publisher puts it, such writers are 'doing a good job of consistently implementing that which they're trying to accomplish' (Max, Publisher, US). The work should thus fulfil obligations only to itself: it is consistently developed and yet it also has some appeal that is inherently meaningful to the writer. This distinguishes them from writers who are pursuing a style that has been developed by someone else (Simmel, 1991[1908]), and it is preferable to have work that is exhilarating and imperfect than surefooted and safe (Silvia, Publisher, US). Curiously, this means that sometimes publishers take on work that they do not personally like but which they recognize as good because of its distinctiveness and originality within the field; it 'fits within the boundaries, within the kind of logic of that world' (Charlie, Publisher, UK). So, the cumulative logic of the field has some bearing on the field-specific aesthetic criteria to which publishers refer. For example, one publisher pointed out that one of his most significant books had made a contribution to the development of Caribbean literature even though it only sold a few hundred copies. This is because many of the purchasers of the book were poets themselves.

Charisma, an expression of distinctive authorial voice, is put forward as a further aesthetic criterion in selecting an author and/or their manuscript. This sense of charisma accords with Weber's (1946[1915], p. 295) notion of 'an extraordinary quality of a person' that goes beyond the ordinary capacities of a human being. Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) notion of an inspired order of worth works along similar lines and refers to the creativity,

<sup>2</sup> The names of the interviewees have been replaced with pseudonyms.

imagination, artistic sensibility and asceticism of those who ‘do not necessarily reject public esteem or money ... but who do not make these goods the very basis for the value of their work and for their worth’ (2006, p. 88). The publisher’s descriptions are not so other-worldly but they nevertheless they are willing to overlook holes in the plot, clunky or over-written passages and under-developed structure if they sense that the author’s voice is sufficiently *one of a kind*. It is argued that the various shortcomings in a manuscript can easily be fixed as long as there is a central voice that is able to dominate:

There’s a sense of authority in certain kinds of writing, that willing suspension of disbelief. That takes voice, I think, more than anything else. It takes that first paragraph maybe, not even the first page, to convince you that, okay, I’m with you, I’ll go with you, I’ll follow you, and it’s really difficult to do and difficult to say why in some cases I might get that feeling and a colleague might not (Silvio, Editor-in-Chief, US).

There is a sense that a distinctive voice will necessarily have something to say, and if this is not immediately forthcoming, it must be cajoled and delicately teased out. Where it does emerge, this charismatic writing, imbued with a sense of authority, is perceived to be *enchanting*. As a counterbalance to the more formal innovation that occurs at the level of language, this charisma is sensorial and conveys excitement. As one publisher puts it, recalling her encounter with a manuscript, ‘all the hairs on the back of my neck stood up, you know, it was really exciting to read’ (Katherine, Publisher, UK). In another account, there is a sense of intimacy and *presence* as the authorial voice works its magic on the body:

I want to feel that the writer is sitting right next to me and talking to me. I want to feel that I can get inside that writer’s mind and see that mind in action ... that writer might be somebody that’s spilled their whole guts ... there has to be a sense of some kind of intimacy (Alice, Publisher, US).

The *charisma of the authorial voice* is characterized above all by authority and presence. It commands attention and makes the reader feel as though s/he is in the presence of the author who speaks with a singular voice. It has an additional aspect: the authorial voice has a *vision* that actually changes the reader. As one publisher suggests, ‘[t]hat’s the ideal thing to have ... a book which actually changes you’ (Robert, Publisher, UK); the reader becomes a different person after the encounter. In order to achieve this state, there is a complete surrender to the voice. Here, one of the publishers refers to falling under the sway of the authority of the authorial voice:

What comes round to me is the word authority and just the complete trust in the author that I think the highest compliment I pay to them ... I’ll miss my subway stop, I want to be so engrossed in something that I don’t want to put it down, I lose time and perspective. I don’t care ... future, past, whatever genre it doesn’t matter to me, I just want to be completely swept into whatever world that the author’s writing about (Dylan, Publisher, US).

## ‘COMPLETE CRAP’ AND THE PRESERVE OF THE HOPELESS AMATEUR

When there is no such uniqueness, charisma or authority, writers are rejected. They are deemed guilty of imitation or of failing to ‘contribute to the conversation’. Other writing is rejected merely because it is prosaic: for example, a ‘straightforward novel’ with ‘a beginning, rising, confrontation, and closing’ (Leonard, Publisher, US). It is argued that adherence to such formulae leads to ‘straightforward descriptions’, ‘drudgery’, ‘earnestness’, ‘formulaic writing’, ‘detailed but uninteresting sentences’ and ‘work that is perfectly adequate but dull’. A more serious error is ‘confessional gushing’. In Bourdieu’s (1984, p. 44) terms, this is the least prestigious form of literary work because it reduces ‘the things of art to the things of life’. A common error is to submit manuscripts that have nothing in common with the ‘house style’. One publisher estimates that as many as 75 per cent of unsolicited submissions from UK writers commit this error, making this nation ‘the preserve of the hopeless amateur’. This notion of the ‘amateur’ lurks behind many of the pejorative descriptions. Unlike Antoine Hennion’s more progressive use of the term, referring to ‘any lay-person engaged in a systematic activity, which makes them develop, in various degrees, their sensitivities or abilities in that domain’ (Hennion, 2007, p. 112), many of the publishers associate the amateur with ‘terribly written books’ (Madeleine, Publisher, AUS). A failure to adhere to field-specific aesthetic criteria is thus a key characteristic of bad writing. As often with discussions of bad taste, a sense of disgust is invoked as a means of boundary work (Miller, 1997; Lawler, 2005):

I get physically sick when I have to read a book that is amateurish and lacks talent and total non-creativity. I could never publish that kind of book even if it were guaranteed to sell well (Hannah, Publisher, US).

[T]he dirty little secret of trade publishing around the world is that most unsolicited submissions are complete crap and it's not worth your time reading them (Nicholas, Publisher, AUS).

## COLLABORATIVELY FORMED EVALUATIVE JUDGEMENTS

The collaborative formation of such judgements is central to the process of deciding which books to publish. In the 47 interviews, there were 39 references to some form of collaborative decision making. There are some exceptions to this rule, especially among the presses where one person is able to hold sway:

I am *the* audience and my hope is that others can share in my sensibility. I have no readers and no discussion groups. In order to be published by my presses (and to date, incidentally, I have published about 600 books over the years), I have to be moved and enjoy the work (Leonard, Publisher, US).

I have the great privilege of running a small press where my own sense of judgement is really determinate of what we publish and it comes down to what wows me and what I personally respond to (Gemma, Publisher, US).

However, most of the publishers indicate a need to get a second opinion and this was true even for these publishers who have considerable editorial autonomy. For example, one literary publisher reflects on the need to get a second opinion on a book:

R: And often I sent it off to my fellow director and say, look, am I wrong here? And, nine times out of ten, he backs my judgement.

I: It's quite handy to have that sort of community judgement?

R: He tells me if I'm being a total idiot (Christopher, Publisher, UK).

It is made apparent that evaluative judgements are collectively formed by various members of the editorial teams. This is described by the publishers as an engaging and lively and sometimes feisty process, generating heated debate out of which collaboratively formed judgements arise.

In the main, the bigger-sized independent presses have institutionalized collective decision-making processes in place. At times, consensus emerges swiftly, at other times, it might be that the board is split between those who enthusiastically endorse a book project and those who remain to be persuaded. The virtue of these processes, it seems, is that when a final decision is made, the team can feel confident to put their energies behind the book. One USA-based publisher describes how this collaborative process works:

Most manuscripts that we end up signing on have at least two of the four of us read it, sometimes all four of us have to read it, usually that means the first few that have read it are on the fence ... our submission process is pretty drawn out and long and it's kind of frustrating and it's something we're always trying to figure out ways to improve, but, at the same time, because when we take on a book, then the six of us then work so closely and so hard on each one, it's really nice when all four editors have read something and are already excited about it before we sign it on and you don't have to convince them after making the contract, it's just better. It doesn't mean the book is going to actually sell better, but it just feels better in the office if there's a general amount of enthusiasm before we even start working on the book (Chrissie, Managing Editor, US).

This process is also used as a means of anticipating a book's reception in the marketplace. The idea is that the editorial team can make judgements that approximate those that will be made by the wider readership:

In a group of eight of us, if four people are very, very high on the book and four people hate it then that sort of tells me, well, 50 per cent of readers might fall in love with this book. Whereas if six out of eight are lukewarm about it, it tells me 80 per cent of people who read this book are going to be lukewarm. So that's not good enough, even if the total likes might add up to the same. Because you need a book that's going to come to the top of the bookseller's pile, it's going to come to the top of the reviewer's pile, it's going to come to the top of the reader's pile (Sylvia, Publisher, US).

In the bigger independents, the collaboratively formed judgements are passed on to the chief editors or publishers who make the final decision.

## A BALANCING ACT BETWEEN THE AESTHETIC AND COMMERCIAL

As part of the evaluative judgement process, 38 of the publishers made 91 references to a ‘balancing act’ that involves the creative and commercial aspects of publishing. There are considerable differences in the extent to which the publishers place economic criteria at the fore of their decisions. The bigger independents, those that have had the occasional bestseller, are more likely to be of this mind-set. Even if they are not actively seeking to publish a bestseller to support other titles, they make it clear that they make pragmatic decisions in order to put forward a selection of books that are likely to make a profit. One publisher states that it is a truism that 20 per cent of books carry the 80 per cent that fail (Daniel, Publisher, UK); another repeats a quote from a mentor that two-thirds of publishing is about failure (Sylvia, Publisher, US). According to a Finnish publisher, half of publishing ‘is the stock exchange, half of it is a cathedral’ (Elias, Publisher, FIN). At the more pragmatic end, many put forward a balanced selection of titles just as an asset manager might diversify her or his portfolio. These findings accord with research by Friedman (2014) and Kuipers (2012) which draws attention to the institutional logic that leads cultural intermediaries to make choices on the basis of what they expect will appeal to a particular market segment. This means that they often make judgements that run contrary to their own taste preferences. In the case of my study, what I term a *portfolio approach* is deployed. This is where a range of manuscripts are selected which range from those which accord with the publishers’ aesthetic preferences to those for which they feel no affinity but which are likely to appeal to existing markets. This approach, which blends aesthetic and professional *closeness and distance*, is common in the bigger independent houses. In contrast, in the one-person-led publishing houses, aesthetic considerations are more likely to be at the fore of evaluative judgements and here, economic success is regarded with suspicion (Bourdieu, 1993, 1996, 2008). One publisher, who has discovered several writers that went on to be famous authors, proclaims: ‘I stand utterly outside of the commercial world and its demands’ (Leonard, Publisher, US). One of the small poetry presses concludes that in order to reach new readers it is preferable to give away books of poetry rather than incur considerable expenses by having a stall at a major book fair (Andre, Publisher, US). That said, many of the presses are concerned about generating enough sales for their authors. Curiously, in line with field-specific expectations, the instrumental or formally rational element of publishing is often suppressed even if it lurks in the background of all decision-making processes:

[W]hen we’re making decisions about to publish or not [and presenting these to the owner of the publishing house], we’re not supposed to talk about the financial part. But at the same time we’re supposed to be thinking about what books can sell (Emily, Senior Editor, US).

A prominent Australian independent publisher laments that ‘the creative impulse triumphs over commercial considerations’ but unfortunately, her tastes as a publisher do not align with those of the public to the extent that what she considers to be a great book will not necessarily sell (Madeleine, Publisher, AUS). Expressions of creative autonomy, mirroring those made by the writers themselves (and in many instances, the publishers are also authors) are enabled by funding procured as part of non-profit status, or by the money that comes in from labour performed in other occupations.

What unites the responses of the small and larger presses is their belief that they are, in the main, able to publish books that accord, in some ways, with their personal preferences and value-orientation. They do not need to publish books purely for the sake of profit, regardless of qualitative considerations. In sum, such is their value orientation that (to return to the Finnish publisher’s metaphor) *they are in the cathedral more than they are in the stock exchange*. This allows them to draw symbolic boundaries between their position and the stances taken by those in the commercial houses:

I think one thing, we’re very lucky that we’re still in a position where we don’t have to publish something that we don’t like. And with all respect to larger publishers with different challenges that do have to publish things that maybe the individual editor thinks is crap but they know it’s going to sell, fortunately we don’t have to do that. And that’s a great position to be in because we can start with that very personal reaction to what you’re reading and whether you like it or not (Silvio, Editor-in-Chief, US).

I mean, you can just think of the whole 50 Shades of Grey phenomenon and all that stuff, I mean, we would never have published that. If that had been offered to us exclusively we would never have published it. We would just have said this is complete crap, go away. But other publishers think, wow, there are \$5 million signs here. We’re different in that way (Nicholas, Publisher, AUS).

## THE ETHICS OF INCLUSIVITY AND THE DIVERSITY DEFICIT

Ethical judgements have their sources outside the literary field and accord with the civic world described by Boltanski and Thévenot (1999, 2006) in their analysis of various orders of worth to which individuals refer when justifying their actions to others.<sup>3</sup> The need for justification occurs during particular critical moments or situations where, in order to resolve the dispute, individuals seek to find common ground in a principle that is ‘superior to persons and can institute equivalence among them’ (Boltanski, 2012, p. 14). Each order of worth provides common constraints when individuals are engaged in dispute and ‘they must base their arguments on strong evidence, expressing in this way their will to converge towards a resolution of their disagreement’ (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, p. 366). When referring to the civic order of worth, individuals ‘give up their particular interests and direct themselves towards the common good’ (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999, p. 371). Along these lines, respondents in my study appeal to the civic order of worth and, more specifically, to an ethics of inclusivity.

Claire Squires (2017a) draws attention to the diversity deficit in the world of publishing, finding that discrimination is implicit and explicit, institutionalized and systemic. These findings are reinforced by O’Brien et al.’s (2016) analysis of the 2014 British Labour Force Survey, which demonstrates that publishing is socially exclusive and dominated by those from professional and managerial backgrounds (2016, p. 123). Other research demonstrates that while white, middle-class writers are published across various genres, BAME writers are often pigeon-holed and expected to conform to an aesthetic of romantic fetishization that draws on their heritage (Saha, 2016). This is reinforced by technologies such as BookScan, which are deployed in order to predict the likely sales of books based on sales of ‘similar’ books (e.g. books written by other Asian authors) (Saha, 2016). This rationalizing attempt to anticipate the unpredictability of the book market relies on and reinforces essentialist notions of racial difference. Saha (2016, p. 2) refers to this as the ‘rationalizing/racializing logic of capital’. As Driscoll and Squires (2018a) point out, gender inequalities also need to be considered; publishing is an industry staffed, in the main, by women, but with men more likely to be occupying positions of power. Documenting their trip to the 2017 Frankfurt Book Fair, they argue that the publishing world is dominated by casual sexism; they ‘observed multiple moments of sleaze across the halls as men looked women up and down, and took advantage of their captive positions on stands to talk at them for extended periods; a casual appropriation of women’s bodies and attention’ (Driscoll and Squires, 2018a, p. 2). In another article, using games as metaphors with which to playfully critique book festivals, they draw attention to the ‘Anglophone and metropolitan dominance of world literary markets’ (Driscoll and Squires, 2018b, p. 24). In my research, 25 of the publishers interviewed made 56 references to diversity issues reflected on how these impact on their book acquisition plans. At the same time, if any of the publishers were resistant to confronting the diversity deficit, they would be unlikely to relate this to me in the context of an interview.

One publisher recounted an intense discussions that followed after one of their authors was arrested on suspicion of sex offences. How would they deal with this situation? This author had had a long-established and celebrated career. Moreover, the book that was due to be published accorded with the publisher’s criteria of literary excellence. However, the publisher vetoed the publication of the book on ethical grounds: it would not be appropriate to publish a book by a convicted sex offender no matter how good the content. In a comparable instance, a book dealing with a long-established author was called into question when the manuscript arrived: it contained sexist, misogynistic content and thus was deemed inappropriate for publication. Here we see the ethical dimension of evaluative judgements in play in this appeal to the civic order of worth. Another instance can be seen in relation to the principal of inclusivity. In deciding what to publish, the independent publishers seek to distinguish themselves from the large corporations through their attempts to address the diversity deficit. While corporate houses are deemed content with ‘their one black writer’, several of the independents outline how they are attempting to address the lack of BAME representation in publishing:

The small presses, yes, they’ve picked up a lot of stuff that the New York publishers just won’t do ... You know, our press was founded by a queer writer of colour, that’s not that common, and diversity is part of what we think about, all kinds of diversity, and it goes from everything to race and sexuality and gender, but also age, that we have a 91-year-old author, you know? People can forget there’s an older generation. I think sometimes the historical can be lost (Paulo, Publisher, US).

We don’t...we’re not looking to make a quick buck. We’re not looking to...for the huge best seller outside poetry as it were. So, yes, we’re constrained in that sense and we’re also constrained in various ethical ways which...well, we’ve always been that actually in terms of publishing a wide range of authors from a wide range of backgrounds and nationalities in fact (Alexander, Founding Director, UK).

<sup>3</sup> These six orders of worth are civic, market, industrial, domestic, inspiration and fame (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006).

Many state that they are taking steps to address the diversity deficit. These include hosting readings specifically for BAME and LGBTQIA groups, those with mental health issues, the homeless; creating screen reader adaptable books for those with visual impairments; and publishing anthologies of poems written by deaf and disabled authors. Such practices are often costly and only made possible by State funding or private patronage. Other measures include offering paid internships to encourage those not able to work for free; inviting younger writers and more women onto editorial boards; giving talks and seminars in schools to encourage careers in publishing; curating literary events whose invitees are not the usual crowd; pushing submissions from BAME groups to the front of the 'slush pile', and openly inviting submissions – on the website platform – from under-represented groups:

- R1: ... we were at a publisher's meeting, and the keynote speaker was ... giving this talk about diversifying. And ... she had this hashtag, like, Canadian publishing is so white.
- I: Yeah.
- R1: Which was like, right after the Oscars, with the Oscars' so white hashtag, right.
- I: Yeah, yeah.
- R1: And we were sitting in the room, and we were looking around, and we were like, you know, we were kind of...
- R2: White publishers all in the room.
- R1: Everyone, right, I think there might have been one person of colour, and one indigenous publisher in the room, and that was it.
- R2: Uh-huh (Lucy, Publisher, CAN).
- R1: And so somebody in the room said, well I only get manuscripts from, like, white dudes, like, what can I do, right. And [she] just said, well all you have to do is just ask, just let them know that you want to, that you're interested in seeing, like, you don't have to tell them that you're gonna publish them. But, like, invite them into the thing. Because often, people will come to your website, and look around, and then they'll just see nothing but white, and they'll be like, well this isn't for me (Louis, Publisher, CAN).

Of course, adding a message to a website only has limited value and cannot overturn major structural obstacles to access in the field of publishing. Nevertheless, this technique has apparently been very effective in encouraging minority groups to submit their work. Another strategy is reverse gentrification, which is justified in these terms:

Because the industry is ... run by such a kind of college educated upper middle class white that's reflected a lot in the books, and one of our conscious missions ... reverse gentrification ... is to try to publish books by authors that don't necessarily look like us, that maybe, you know, are not even the target audience for books that need a place and a voice (Chrissie, Managing Editor, US).

Carrying on as usual would be enough to perpetuate the diversity deficit. As one publisher observed, 'because of ... whatever kind of cis hetero circles I inevitably move in, if I allowed that to happen completely it would be an entirely male list probably, because almost everything I get submitted is from men' (Theo, Publisher, UK). Avant-garde poetry networks lack ethnic diversity and are over-represented by the white, university-educated middle classes whereas there is more ethnic diversity on the spoken-word circuit. Without actively intervening, there is a danger of all-male lists. Publishers expressed similar problems in relation to diversity of readership. As a senior figure at a German publisher puts it, 'we can see what is the average reader ... and he is male, he is between 50 and 60 and he has academic education. So that's what we have now and we must find ways where to get new readers, younger readers, more female readers' (Lottie, senior figure, GER).

Another means of 'contributing to the conversation' involves engaging with contemporary social and political issues:

- R1: ... in the early days, we were really excited about how the writer was experimenting with the genre they were working in. Now, what really excites us is that not only are they doing that, but they're also doing something that, for lack of a better word, is sort of political, you know. But, you know, this interesting mash up of an innovative novel that's also dealing with the questions of feminism, or an interesting book of poetry that's dealing with not only the question of how a poem works, but also, the question of, you know, the person's place within the world as... (Louis, Publisher, CAN).
- R2: As a transperson, or commentary on the environment, like, whatever (Lucy, Publisher, CAN).

R: I think it's definitely a sort of objective measurement, is around this idea of contemporary ... some larger canvas contributing to the über-conversation about how we're living now ... what does it mean to be human in the 21st century (Silvia, Publisher, US).

There is a sense among the responses that a pure aesthetic, formal innovation or even a postmodern playfulness is not enough in this era. This is because field-specific aesthetic criteria are augmented by criteria from outside the field, inspired by political, environmental or social issues and the intersectional dynamics of identity.

However, judgements placing value on 'diversity' are often commingled with consideration of aesthetic criteria:

So if you looked at Caribbean writing up to about the 1990s, it was very masculine ... so there is another story within that where there are a lot of writers who are exploring their sense of Caribbean-ness but their gendered Caribbean-ness. Quite recently, we've done a thing where Caribbean gay sensibilities have been part of the fiction and poetry we've been publishing ... [But] I wouldn't publish a book just because it was a gay novel or...it's got to be good (Larry, Publisher, UK).

Here we see that evaluative judgements are rarely if ever expressed as pure types but often consist of a blend of different elements. As Weber (1968, p. 26) pointed out in his analysis of social action, it is very rare that we find a concrete type that is characterized exclusively by one mode of orientation (e.g. *entirely* value rational, affective or instrumentally rational). Therefore, the identification of 'ideal' or 'pure' types serve as tools with which to distinguish between the various modes of orientation that make reality so messy and complicated. Along similar lines, evaluative judgements are often composed of a number of elements. For example, despite his civic-minded, ethically-driven stance on publishing authors from under-represented groups, Larry maintains that the work 'has got to be good'. At the same time, many publishers are categorical that there are certain things that they would never publish, no matter how good stylistically: these include works that are deemed to be racist, sexist, homophobic, right-wing, ableist, anti-Semitic, gratuitously violent or demeaning of a particular religion.

## THE TEMPORAL DIMENSION OF EVALUATIVE JUDGEMENTS: *IN THE MOMENT AND OVER TIME*

In the interviews, there were 25 references to the temporal dimension of evaluative judgements. This dimension is often neglected in analyses of taste that focus on its social determinants (Stewart, 2015). Sociologists have been attentive to the *sweep of time* that leads up to the moment of aesthetic engagement, to the intersection of habitus and field (Bourdieu, 1984; Stewart, 2015). However, this is not the whole story. The *particular moment* of aesthetic engagement is also dependent on a range of dynamic contextual factors that can sway an individual's evaluative judgements (Stewart, 2012, 2015). In the case of independent publishers, the extent to which they are drawn to a book might depend on contextual factors: the lighting, the degree of comfort in the room, their degree of affability with others present, their personal mood and the extent to which they feel under pressure. Moreover, the moment of engagement is characterized by the degree of intensity and this might be somewhere between passionate engagement (Benzecry, 2011; Hennion, 2001) and indifference (Ngai, 2012). Another dynamic to consider is whether the aesthetic engagement is *sustained* or *distracted* (Stewart, 2015).

Quick-fire judgements are significant when considering manuscripts for publication. They are indicative of the trained habitus of the publishers and their familiarity with field-specific aesthetic criteria. This kind of bodily judgement is referred to by Claire Squires (2017b, p. 29) in her research on publishers' tastes in the era of big data, where many of the respondents discussed their decision-making in terms of 'instinct' and 'gut reactions', and in Friedman's (2012, p. 32) research where notions of 'talent' are aesthetic judgements aligned with the personal tastes of scouts working in the more autonomous region of the comedy field. Here, the reputation of agents is gained on the basis of their ability to demonstrate the 'aesthetic capacity to identify and propel culturally legitimate comedy' (2012, p. 35). In my study, I argue that 'gut reaction' refers to a bodily-attuned familiarity with the current state of play in the field of publishing (e.g. knowing immediately what is trite, what is cutting-edge). This 'gut reaction' is expressed *in the moment* and enables the publisher to swiftly discard unsuitable manuscripts:

I always say that you can look and in the first five pages if something doesn't grab you it's out. I mean, really, you should love it, it should be amazing (Paulo, Publisher, US).

It doesn't usually take me long in a manuscript to know that I'm personally not interested in publishing it. Sometimes just a few pages tells me a lot (Andre, Publisher, US).

Because what happens is that, you can look at page one, and often you know at the bottom of page one that you don't want to do it (Christopher, Publisher, UK)

On the other hand, evaluative judgements are not just made in the moment. They also extend over time:

I think if I can go away from a manuscript and a couple of days later the poems are still bothering me and I'm still thinking about them and I can still actually remember them I know that's a good collection (Charlotte, Publisher, UK).

R: There will be some cases where I put it back in the drawer, kind of thing, because I can't make up my mind.

I: Aha.

R: And just wait, the drawer is a very valuable critic (Christopher, Publisher, UK).

Here, the drawer becomes a tool, an aid to critical judgement. Time thus works as a filtering process through which value is attributed. The process might take a matter of days, weeks or months. When more strategic, economic calculations are at play, different aspects of time are foregrounded. For example, in contrast to the more heteronomous sectors of the publishing world where a book is given a window of six to eight weeks during which it can expect the overwhelming majority of sales, many of the independent literary publishers project their expectations into the distant future. Here, they are referring to the importance of backlists and legacies:

What you want is these books that sell over time, these things that go out the gate, they get good attention, they sell well and then they never stop, and that's the dream of publishing is to have back list titles, and New Directions has the Tennessee Williams back list. How many people still teach *The Glass Menagerie* every year in schools? Or Grove Press, they have Beckett, you don't have to worry with Beckett. They have Beckett, they have Henry Miller, Burroughs, these guys that were barely sold in the first couple of years (Paulo, Publisher, US).

In this example, value is projected into the future and so gratification is deferred. Creating a legacy involves patience and a careful nurturing of authors with the awareness that they will need to be given time to mature and to find their voices:

I think for fiction ... we're definitely not looking for a one book project, we're looking for talented writers ... a person who has a lot of talent, and we can train or develop her or his talent. It might take years ... it might take two years before anything is published. We never, ever publish anything straight, like, this is good, let's go ... so we pay a lot of attention, and it takes a lot of time, the whole process of finding, as I said, the right direction for this person, or for the book, so I think the editors are very good at picking and recognising this kind of talent. It might be something that the writer doesn't recognise in him or herself, but there is this talent that needs to be developed (Sarah, Publisher, FIN).

Many of the independents are 'backlist' presses, confident that the value of their books will extend into the distant future. For example, several of them anticipate that the authors that they publish will still be read 50 or 100 years from now. As one publisher puts it, 'it takes a generation for these things to settle out' (Max, Publisher, US). Long-term legitimization is glimpsed when authors start to appear in handbooks and anthologies (Maria, Publisher, UK). A further sign of such legitimization is inclusion in academic curricula or institutional collections.

## CONCLUSION

At the end of *Merchants of Culture*, Thompson (2012, p. 380) reflects on what he refers to as trouble in the publishing trade, arguing that trade publishers, pressured by budgetary demands, fall into a mind-set of short-termism, and publish books that 'are not books that add much to the cultural well-being (or even, for that matter, the entertainment) of the human race'. However, even these measures might not be enough to cover up for the fact that growth targets have often been met through mergers and acquisitions without which the financial situation of the bigger publishers would look very different. In my research findings, 'trouble in the trade' lurks in the background, though I find that many of the independent presses are flourishing in spite of the existential dangers they face (Bourdieu, 2003). This accords with Thompson's argument about the polarization of the field which is comprised of 'a small number of very large corporations which, between them, command a substantial share of the market, and a large number of very small publishing operations' (Thompson, 2012, p. 147). With the 'shrinking of the middle', there has been some room for independents to thrive even if they face a perpetual struggle to stay afloat. This article highlights how independent publishers stake out their position through the field-specific aesthetic and ethical criteria they deploy when selecting books. Moreover, they are confident that in the course of time, their judgements will be validated as their backlists grow and the titles accrue further symbolic capital.

I have drawn attention to three key dimensions of evaluative judgements: aesthetic, ethical and temporal. Each of these clashes with modes of judgement that are based on economic reasoning though in many instances, the *portfolio approach* adopted by some of the bigger independents is favoured. This is where they publish books that accord with their aesthetic preferences *alongside* titles that are likely to appeal to particular market segments. I find that *field-specific* aesthetic judgements assess the extent to which literary manuscripts *contribute to the conversation* by responding to developments in the field. In contrast, decisions made on this basis of ethical considerations mean that the publishers' output might veer from 'art for art's sake' towards more heteronomous regions of cultural production in order to contribute towards a sense of the common good. Finally, the temporal dimension of evaluative judgements distinguishes independent presses from their rivals by pointing to a distant future of literary fame that reaches far beyond the marketing schedules of the corporate houses.

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