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## **On the World of Book Publishing**

Review: John B. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture. The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*, Plume, New York 2012, 456 pp.

John B. Thompson, a sociologist from the University of Cambridge, has spent about fifteen years studying various sectors of book publishing in Britain and the United States. After exploring the industries related to academia and higher education, he turned to trade publishing, which encompasses books (both fictional and non-fictional) intended for general readers and sold primarily in non-specialised retail outlets, as opposed to more specific institutions such as university book stores. His current work concerns the digital revolution in book publishing and the influence of this change on the future of the book.

*Merchants of Culture* was first published in hardcover by Polity in 2010; this paper refers to the revised second edition released in paperback. The book presents the results of Thompson's research on general interest trade publishing. While at times a little clumsy and somewhat dubious in methodological terms, it is still an informative work and a valuable resource for anyone interested in today's cultural industries.

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Basing on about 280 interviews, observation, and a number of statistical data (both published and unpublished), Thompson has set out to analyse the trade book industry in the US and the UK. The bulk of this research was conducted in the years 2005–2009 and funded from a grant of the Economic and Social Research Council. Roughly in keeping with the author's own presentation,<sup>1</sup> the book — barring a theoretical introduction — may be divided into three parts.

The first part (chapters 1–3) describes consecutively the rise of the three types of institutions that Thompson considers crucial to contemporary book publishing. These institutions are retail chains, literary agents and agencies, and publishing corporations. They

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<sup>1</sup> J. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture. The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*, Plume, New York 2012, p. 22.

all started to grow in the 1960s or the 1970s and their advent has been reorganising the Anglo-Saxon field of trade publishing ever since.

The second part (chapters 4–8) inspects the joint impact of those three developments on the trade book industry. The author depicts subsequently: (1) the polarisation of this field into big corporations and small publishers, with a very narrow middle ground; (2) the drive to release bestsellers which leads large publishing houses to pinning their hopes on a select set of “big books” (in other words, envisioned hits); (3) the added expectations that corporate owners tend to express after seeing preliminary budgets, thus forcing the staff of big houses into an expedited search of new big books; (4) the shrinking time frames in which newly released books have a chance to prove themselves and earn the publisher’s support in terms of better distribution, stronger marketing, etc. The final chapter here summarises the logic of the studied publishing field and names certain key differences between its British and American domains.

The third part (chapters 9–10 and conclusion) begins with presenting the digital revolution that has been gaining traction since the mid-1990s. Then the book undergoes a change in perspective, moving from an entirely detached study to a more concerned analysis of three unsettling issues: short-termism in publishing, threats to writers’ careers, and the possibility that the decreasing diversity of visible, well marketed titles will also bring a reduction in the total variety of published books. The part concludes with a brief, balanced look at possible future scenarios for trade publishing.

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It seems worthwhile to examine the usefulness of the book for Polish readers, comparing it to two recent works on publishing available in Poland. Perhaps this comparison will also be helpful to readers from other countries in post-communist Europe, which share important aspects of contemporary Polish history (i.e., the socialist economic past and the following transition to capitalism).

A book by Marcin Rychlewski is an attempt “to work on the language of the traditional sociology of literature and to verify its utility in describing the mechanisms of today’s book market [in Poland].”<sup>2</sup> The other publication, a research report prepared by five scholars from Cracow, purports to offer “a summary of the twenty-five years of development of the literary field in Poland (1989–2014).”<sup>3</sup>

In some respects these two books and Thompson’s work are similar. First, they all employ the field theory of Pierre Bourdieu (the Cracow report does so in the most rigorous manner). Second, they share Bourdieu’s preoccupation with cultural producers — writers, publishers, or editors — while saying virtually nothing about the vast category of amateur readers. Third, they all emphasise the need to carry out research on the social context of literature (be it a field, a market, or a publishing business), for the most part abstaining from the study of actual literary texts.

<sup>2</sup> M. Rychlewski, *Książka jako towar — książka jako znak. Studia z socjologii literatury*, Gdańsk 2013, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> G. Jankowicz et al., *Literatura polska po 1989 roku w świetle teorii Pierre’a Bourdieu. Raport z badań*, Kraków 2014, p. 10.

What, then, is the particular value that comes with reading *Merchants of Culture*? First, the Anglo-Saxon publishing world is in many ways unlike ours, and some of these differences — like the role of literary agents — may be surprising to scholars in our part of Europe. This reading experience can also help us look at our own literary fields from new angles. Second, Thompson's account is highly dynamic. He has taken pains to ensure that we will really get a grasp of chronological transformations, and he has managed to weave his numerous threads into a coherent narrative. And third, the book is very systematic. It covers an array of topics ranging from the effects of the "hardcover revolution," to the means editors use to convince other people in their organisations that certain books will sell well, to strategies in online marketing. This work is an unusually comprehensive study of literary institutions.

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As mentioned before, Thompson's writing can be a tad clumsy. One example of this is the recurrent phrases, such as "achieving growth in a market that is largely static" or small publishers' "living from hand to mouth." In a similar vein, there are occasional repetitions of content, which may be irksome if not very significant.

A much more serious question can be asked about the methodological approach of this study. A note on research methods at the end of the book will tell us that the author has mostly relied on semi-structured in-depth interviews, tailored to the particular individual and organisation. In some cases, Thompson was able to get back to his former interviewees. Yet the exact figure of such second or even third conversations is left unclear, described only as "many... chances to ask questions I had failed to ask the first time around."<sup>4</sup> In the preface we will learn that the author returned to "around 20 of my sources in London and New York" when working on the second edition of his book<sup>5</sup> but this is another matter altogether.

An analogous doubt is related to Thompson's sources. True, we will find a good deal of information on the professions of people he has talked to, including mostly the staff of publishing houses of various size, literary agents with different degrees of experience, and bookselling employers or managers (other interviewees were writers, book review editors and fiction editors in diverse media, producers working for television programmes, freelance designers, etc.). However, there is no numerical breakdown; we cannot know how many sales managers at large corporations have been interviewed, how many established or beginning writers have agreed to speak with Thompson, and so forth. This is in part justified by the need for anonymity, but just in part. Another issue is the rather casual way of referring to interviews throughout the book: general remarks about the industry often seem to be based on single quotations, coupled with the mostly unspoken premise that the author has met enough people to capture dominant moods and prevalent ways of doing things.

All this means that there is no discussion of the difficult problems of representativeness and saturation (the latter being the point in data collection when new and relevant information ceases to emerge in qualitative research). The author would have done well to consider these matters more carefully, especially in a book written partly for a non-ac-

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<sup>4</sup> J. Thompson, op. cit., p. 417.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. xii.

demic audience (which is evidenced, for instance, by the praise cited on the first few pages, coming partly from publishers or writers — not just from scholars). Evaluating the strength of Thompson's claims may be more difficult for readers unaccustomed to the methodology of the social sciences.

Still, *Merchants of Culture* is a significant work. Despite its shortcomings, it may well be considered mandatory reading for all academics who are eager to know more about the realities of Anglo-Saxon trade publishing. And I will venture to say that this certainly includes many researchers of popular literature.

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### Approximating Slipstream

Review: Martin Horstkotte, *The Postmodern Fantastic in Contemporary British Fiction*, Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, Trier 2004, 224 pp.

The scholarly discourse on the broadly understood “fantastic”<sup>1</sup> or non-mimetic literature has long become dominated by the authors from either the USA or the United Kingdom. This, obviously, was unavoidable due to both the special position of English language culture in modern world in general, and the fact that such popular literary non-mimetic genres as SF or fantasy came into being and evolved largely in England and the USA. It is, however, regrettable that academic works from other countries usually go completely unnoticed even if they have been published in English and demonstrate unquestionable merit.

Such is the case of Martin Horstkotte's study which explores a very interesting and topical issue and — despite several weaknesses — definitely deserves the attention of all scholars interested in non-mimetic literature, and, particularly, in modern fiction usually denominated as the so-called “slipstream” (or the “postmodern fantastic” as Horstkotte proposes himself) that lies somewhere on the border between mainstream, postmodern and fantastic literature defying simple genre classifications.

The whole study, as the very title suggests, explores the connection between the two key terms — the postmodern and the fantastic, and, subsequently, attempts to approximate the specific category of the “postmodern fantastic.”

The book roughly falls into two parts. The first, mainly theoretical, encompasses chapters 2 to 7. Its structure may seem a bit chaotic, perhaps, as it addresses several various and not necessarily directly related issues. And, thus, chapter 2 — *Theories of the Fantastic* — summarizes classic proposals by Tzvetan Todorov and Rosemary Jackson,

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<sup>1</sup> The term “fantastic literature” does not refer here to any specific definition of the fantastic but simply denotes a very broad, cultural rather than theoretical label, encompassing all literature that does not pretend to describe phenomenal reality and includes some at least elements perceived by readers as “fantastical.”