

THE CONVERSATION

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Publishing should be more about culture than book sales

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It seems too obvious to point out that publishing is a cultural activity, not just a process for corporations to make money. That being said, we rarely talk or write about publishing without talking about money, about book sales.

That's because, even though contemporary publishing has seen the emergence of diverse independent publishers and the self-publishing boom, it is still dominated by multinational corporations. And corporations are all about the numbers.

Most books are produced by one of the "big five" publishing multinationals (Penguin Random House, Macmillan, HarperCollins, Hachette and Simon & Schuster).

Katherine Bode of Australian National University puts this figure at 74% of books in Australia. These transnational corporations are, by their very nature, focused on the creation of profit rather than the creation of culture.

In fact, for some of those multinational corporations, books and writing aren't even the largest part of their business.

HarperCollins and Hachette are both subsidiaries of media companies (News Corp and Lagardère respectively). Commercial or "traditional" publishing is not so much aimed at telling a story and hopefully making a profit but at making a profit by telling a story.

In this publishing climate culture is always subsumed to business. The book and its story or narrative are merely a vehicle to generate sales and as such are understood as a unit of exchange rather than as an artefact of expression and/ or meaning.

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In other words, publishing is viewed as a business not as a cultural activity. This perception of publishing as a business, even a creative one, means that the question of book sales dominates our conversations about it, rather than questions around how readers use books and book culture to develop a sense of the society in which they live and/ or a sense of themselves.



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When we talk about publishing there is little discussion about the ways it contributes to culture, to the formation and expression of identity, to constructing notions of gendered, social, ethnic or national belonging.

Multinational corporations are not about culture, not about identity and belonging. And here lies the big problem. Culture (literature, music, cinema etc.) is about the mediation and expression of identity and belonging.

Although culture is sometimes, perhaps even often, accessed as part of a commercial transaction, it doesn't need that transaction to fulfil its purpose, which is to communicate, express or muse over something.

Culture can and does thrive without being bought and sold. The huge amount of free culture on the internet attests to that. More to the point, the thing we value about culture doesn't depend on a financial exchange but on a human exchange, an exchange of ideas and/ or experiences.

Most of us (the sane ones) do not value a cultural artefact or experience because of what it costs but because of the meaning we take or make from it. We also value it because of the effort, skill and expertise its creator put into it.

I appreciate Mark Rothko's painting *Untitled (yellow and blue)* because of its simplicity, skillful use of colour and the delight I get from it, not because it is worth US\$46.5 million.

I appreciate JK Rowling's Harry Potter books because the character *Hermione Granger* kills me, not because Rowling made her publishers a gazillion bucks.

The process of finding meaning in the books we read, or making meaning from them, is one that goes far beyond any commercial transaction. These days it also goes beyond the page.

Our experience of a book is now supplemented by perusing reviews and blogs, engaging with print and screen media items about the book and its author, viewing or reading author interviews, attending book and writing related events and festivals and, for many of us, by participating in fan communities.

Few of these engagements depend on a financial transaction (excepting a festival entry fee here or there).

Though high sales figures might give an indication of social significance in a specific (often passing) moment, it doesn't give us any sense at all of lasting cultural value.

The *Twilight* books by Stephenie Meyer were socially significant for a while, but it is doubtful that they will be valued (or even remembered) a hundred years from now, or even 50 years from now.

Not even the most ardent *Twilight* fan is likely to say that Meyer's books are great cultural works.

Likewise, consider *Peyton Place*, the 1956 blockbuster novel by Grace Metalious. *Peyton Place* sold 60,000 copies within the first ten days of its release and stayed on the New York Times best seller list for 59 weeks.

It was also made into a successful film and then a hit prime-time television series.

Even so, until you read Grace Metalious' name here it is likely you had never encountered it before. Grace Metalious is no Jane Austen, not even an Ernest Hemingway. Many books that are commercially and thereby socially significant for a time fail to find a long-term place of prominence in our culture.

When we talk about publishing these days, we have to talk about much more than book sales, even more than the written word and books themselves. We need to talk about all the things we do with and around books, our engagement with book culture.

In other words, we need to talk about publishing as a cultural practice, as something that contributes to or even constitutes who we are as individuals, who we are as citizens. We need to talk about publishing as a socio-cultural activity that helps us to understand our place in the world.

Publishing expresses and shapes our societies. It even plays a part in the kind of nations we live in. It would be wise, therefore, to broaden the conversation about it to more than sales figures.

In short, we need to shift our attention from publishing as a business process to thinking about publishing as an act of culture.

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