

## **Small publishers: Serpent's Tail and Fourth Estate** **broadcast on *Books and Writing*, ABC Radio National, 1988**

Why publish books when it's possible to make a fat living in any number of other serious industries?

Most interesting small publishers answer that the risks involved are themselves exciting. Especially with fiction, it's impossible to tell if even the most promising manuscript is going to go out into the world and find its true readers. If the big companies publish name authors in predictable areas, use market research, slick PR and have distribution networks that blanket major sales outlets, small publishers rely, at least initially, on a mysterious conjunction of flair, gut feeling and luck.

Or do they?

**Victoria Barnsley:** There doesn't seem to be very much editorial creativity around at the moment in the big companies. I think all the buying and selling and the mergers have rather squeezed out the role of the editor. And we felt that publishing is expanding, and there's a shortage of good product—which is why the big companies are endlessly buying other companies. They think they need more product, so they go and buy another company. But at the end of the day, someone has to feed those companies and produce the product. So we're a very editorial-intensive company. That's not to say we don't put marketing and things like that high on the list. But the cornerstone of publishing for us will always be the commissioning editor.

**Diana Giese:** Victoria Barnsley is the founder and Managing Director of Fourth Estate, the young British company which won *The Sunday Times* Award for Best Small Publisher of the Year, against 100 others. Two of her most successful authors are young first novelists. One of them, Adam Zameenzad, won the David Higham Prize for the best first novel, for his *The Thirteenth House*.

**Victoria Barnsley:** It came from an agent, in fact, but the agent as a last resort thought: 'Oh well, there's this small company [laughs] called Fourth Estate. All the big ones have rejected it.' And we spent a lot of time working on it and it's a *terrific* novel. And now it's been sold to Random House in America and lots of others,

everywhere. He is going to be a big, big writer. And he almost missed it. Because it did need some work, and he needed help; he's an author that needed editorial guidance. At the other end of the spectrum, not so much literary fiction, is a novel called *Milk, Sulphate and Alby Starvation* by Martin Millar, who's become a young cult writer. He's been taken up by the music press, the style press—*The Face* called him 'Britain's funniest writer'—and again he'd been rejected by a number of publishers because although the book was very funny, it didn't really have much structure.

**Diana Giese:** Another small publisher which has tapped into the work of new young urban writers is Serpent's Tail, best known for its eclectic and beautifully-produced works in translation. But they've also sold some 4000 copies of the young English writer Michael Bracewell's *The Crypto-Amnesia Club*. As John Hampson of Serpent's Tail explains:

**John Hampson:** It's a first novel set in London. And it's a sideways swipe at cultural values, lifestyle, general hanging out in chic brasseries and the like in London...But really, at the heart of the book, is this series of portraits, most of them very unflattering, of the new cultural norms, new social values. It's very funny—it all sounds rather heavy, but actually he has a very, very light touch and it's a very funny book...

There's a generation of people in their mid-to-late-20s who have been brought up during the 1980s on a diet of style magazines. And I think they realise the limitations of that sort of publication and they're wanting to go beyond into something that has rather more substance.

**Victoria Barnsley:** I'd say there's a gap which we spotted for young writers who appeal—they're not appealing to yuppies, but to the sort of kids who go into record shops, who are obsessed by music, who read magazines, but who actually enjoy fiction as well. Not very highbrow fiction— but they like a good read that means something and talks to them about their lives. So Martin Millar, for instance, comes from Brixton. It's a sort of street-cred novel. It's about bands and music and drugs and all the things which these kids come across every day.

**Diana Giese:** Small publishers rarely have the resources to splash out on publicity. In any case, with Martin Millar, Fourth Estate made the canny choice of a writer for whom the usual sort of treatment— launches, tours, signing sessions—would have been counter-productive.

**Victoria Barnsley:** Establishing a cult writer is a very difficult thing. You can't go at it heavy-handedly. I don't think you can just advertise, like you would with a lot of fiction. You can't persuade people to make something a cult: it happens by a lot of word-of-mouth. So it was quite slow. We published Martin and his book didn't really take off for six months. And then suddenly it went *wham*. And that was partly word-of-mouth and partly that *Melody Maker*, *New Musical Express*, the style press took it up.

**Diana Giese:** With their international list, Serpent's Tail has also made a virtue out of necessity.

**John Hampson:** We felt that we could make a virtue out of doing the things that other people found a bit difficult. And we felt that, by and large, to present ourselves as distinctively as possible, at as many levels of the operation as possible, would be to our advantage...

We knew that there were very large numbers of absolutely wonderful books being published elsewhere, that English and English-speaking audiences were deprived of. We took as our role models the smaller to medium-sized publishing houses on the Continent which have always managed to publish very high-quality literature in translation and have extremely impressive lists...

Publishers tend to slip translations into their lists. They don't like to draw too much attention to the fact that they're translations. And they try to make them as familiar as possible by identification with national culture. What we've tried to do is to go completely the opposite way, and to draw as many contrasts as possible.

**Diana Giese:** One of Serpent's Tail's most idiosyncratic yet considerable writers is the exiled Spaniard, Juan Goytisolo. Of his bizarre and wonderfully funny *Landscapes After the Battle*, set in the Arab quarter of Paris, John Hampson says:

**John Hampson:** He, the narrator, is an extremely bigoted, racist Parisian, and part of the book is a series of rantings and ravings of a more or less uncontrolled type

against the invasion of what are seen as alien cultures. And of course any straight reading of the book would leave the reader completely flummoxed. And there *were* people who were outraged by sections of the book, especially sections that had to do with sexuality and sexual perversion. There were people who felt he'd overstepped the mark there.

**Diana Giese:** Victoria Barnsley, too, has from the beginning sought work that is slightly different from what is being offered elsewhere. When I asked her what the major difficulties she'd had to contend with in running the company were, she said:

**Victoria Barnsley:** I think getting good enough books...When I went to Frankfurt, to the Book Fair, this year, I thought: 'There are very few good books around.' There's an awful lot of rubbish published. And I think if you're a big company, you can carry a lesser book more easily, because you ride in on the reputation of the company. You have a very strong rep force, and people will almost buy a book because it's published by a big company. So you've got to have a better product if you're a small company...

We spent about nine months collecting together some manuscripts so we had some books to launch with—because that is the biggest single problem when you start a publishing company. We actually found raising the money easy. The City seemed to be very pro-publishing. That was the easiest part. But then getting good books when you have no reputation: agents won't consider you. You've got to prove yourself. So those first few years are difficult...Now the reverse is happening. We're getting so much stuff that we call it the slush pile. Every day, hundreds of manuscripts pour in...That can be bad too, I think.

**Diana Giese:** Do you read them all?

**Victoria Barnsley:** No—we have readers. I read some of them. But we couldn't read them all ourselves. We try and look at everything, because of course that is the great thing: you can miss something, particularly if it's a bit off-beat. We quite like off-beat books. You have to look quite carefully. Things like *Watership Down* got rejected fourteen times. You can see why. Someone thought: 'This mad book about rabbits...' So you've got to look quite carefully.

**Diana Giese:** Writers and their careers are clearly important to Serpent's Tail and Fourth Estate, which are both publishing second and third books by their chosen

authors. Writer-centred publishing is also the secret of the success of the Cambridge-based literary magazine *Granta*. Fed up with watching authors they had discovered and fostered stolen by what they call the Soho Mafia, the staff of *Granta* are about to launch a small and exclusive list of six-to-ten titles a year. First authors will include John Berger and Amitav Ghosh. Granta Books will have ready-made distribution, selling directly to some 100,000 subscribers to the magazine worldwide. Although, as is *Granta* itself, a joint venture with Penguin, Granta Books will be expected to become self-supporting. There seems no reason why they can't be. Fourth Estate and Serpent's Tail, among others, show an appetite among readers for less predictable work.

When I asked what *The Sunday Times* found praise-worthy about Fourth Estate, Victoria Barnsley answered:

**Victoria Barnsley:** They said that we were very professional, although we were small, and that was something they were looking for. They said they thought the books all clearly had something to say; they were very lively; they all had an edge; they were definitely different. And they just said we were overall excellent [laughs].

Fourth Estate <https://www.4thestate.co.uk>  
Serpent's Tail <https://www.serpentstail.com>

continue to thrive. Granta Books, 'the Home of New Writing', launched in 1989, is another small publishing success story. See <https://granta.com/books>

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