

On The Matter Of Books

Naim Attallah, a Palestinian and chairman of independent publishing house Quartet Books in London, outlines his view of the new challenges facing the book industry today.

Christmas 2009 will, in the annals of the book trade, be the one that never happened: a low, dark point in publishing history. The lead-up to the holiday is traditionally a season when publishers and booksellers can anticipate the boost of Christmas buying. This time, it simply did not happen and the whole book industry is in turmoil.

In part, this can be attributed to the recession, but there are various other factors in play, not the least being the demise of small independent bookshops that have kept the focus on the book as an individual product rather than a mass commodity. Among the chains, Borders and Books Etc. have tried to do the same, but they have failed to stay the course and have gone into receivership. The result is a knock-on downward spiral, damaging to the small independent publishing houses, which have to carry the brunt when they can least afford it. The effect is then to limit hopes even further for individualistic originality in the marketplace.

Within this crisis, the short-term drive has naturally become to focus all sales efforts on those books that are "sure to sell". This is not the same thing as a measure of worth or quality. In the long term, it points towards an arid future where creativity is suppressed and excluded. There is also an inverted snobbery in the air, with attempts to brand a concern for books and their value as a form of élitism. In this atmosphere, with local bookshops and small publishers doing their best to develop survival tactics by whatever means

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are at their disposal, newcomers on the writing scene already find it extremely hard to gain space or recognition. Literary consideration and the encouragement of budding talent are left far behind in a scramble to promote solely what is seen as commercially viable.

Where does the blame for this lie and what is commercially viable in any case? There are many factors. One, probably inherent in the book trade for many years, is the problem of a lack of efficiency. The arrival of bookstore chains in the high streets of the UK highlighted the problem as they mushroomed at an alarming rate with the advent of former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Her monetarist gospel spread like wildfire across the UK, making the new religion of greed and profit a marker for business success, irrespective of its other effects. It gained a new momentum from an unlikely source. The Blair years proved even deadlier than those preceding them. The Blairite government, in its masquerade as New Labour, not only pushed the gospel of moneymaking to disastrous limits, but also, as we have seen, gave greed and gain a false respectability that entrenched a routine corruption of attitude among certain of our politicians on both the left and the right.

Another feature of Thatcher's dictates was the starvation of funding for the public libraries. This funding was diverted instead to the grandiose service industry in the City of London. Literature and the arts were left to fend for themselves. It was all an erosion of the financial underpinning that made it possible to maintain diverse publishing programs and the principle of free access to the printed word at what had been an enviable level in individual communities. The attack on the public libraries has by no means ceased under New Labour, and local authorities have often been positively encouraged to close some

of the libraries in their care and, for those remaining, create commercial incentives that have little to do with books.

Running parallel with this process, the book chains elbowed small booksellers aside and started many a gimmick to at-



tract the reading public. "Buy two books, get one free" became a common slogan. A war of discounts followed, and with it, the industry's efficiency sank to ever lower levels. The standard of sales staff employed became a joke, since it was evident in many cases that their knowledge of books fell below the national standard.

We should not be ashamed of preaching a different gospel, one that celebrates informed service, efficiency and the importance of the written word. The publishing of books was once considered to be among the most noble of professions. It helped to develop the mind and the cultural life of the nation. To divert, entertain, inform and self-educate are the truly democratic uses of the book as social artefact.

Where the large chain bookshops are concerned, questions begin to arise over how helpful they really are to the book trade in the forms they take today. They seem to have produced a situation not dissimilar to the supermarkets' relationship with agriculture, where the profits belong to those a long way further along the line from the primary producers (for "growers and farmers" read "authors and their publishers"), who are squeezed into accepting lower and lower returns on their labor. Inevitably, this involves devaluations of quality and lowered expectations on the part of the reading public.

There will be little prospect of recovery until the book trade shakes itself clear of practices that wrongly target money instead of improving services. Let us hope Christmas 2009 was some sort of turning point for the book trade rather than a one-way street sign. Personally, I think it could be. ■