



WRITERSWORLD Newsletter - Issue No. 89

A Week In Books

By Boyd Tonkin: First published in the Independent

Since public-private partnerships so excite our leaders, it's hardly a surprise that the publisher with the firmest friends in high places should try its hand at New Labour's formula of choice. Random House - surely the probable home of any Blair memoir - has just bought a majority stake in BBC Books, and plans to fold the corporation's publishing arm into its Ebury division. Now, BBC Books already ran as a commercial entity, part of BBC Worldwide (which retains a share). Yet the vast bulk of its titles, from Delia Smith to David Attenborough to Dr Who, still depend for their existence on programmes largely funded by the poll tax of the licence fee. So Random House (owned by the German company Bertelsmann) will be making money out of products developed by public investment. Nice work if you can get it. The relationship between the Beeb's spin-off books and the series that support them has caused muttering in the book business for years. After legal challenges, announcers can no longer advertise tie-in titles as flagrantly as they once did. Still, no one who has relished (say) the prime Venetian ham of Francesco's Italy on BBC2 will assume that Signor da Mosto's book of the same name has just cropped in the shops by chance.

Protests have also loosened the stranglehold BBC Books once held on all its top presenters. Michael Palin, for example, did the (rather good) books of Sahara and Himalaya for Weidenfeld. And, to be fair, BBC Books has issued a few outstanding works in the absence of a TV event to help flog them. Simon Schama, the imprint's brightest literary star, wrote in Rough Crossings perhaps the finest British history book of 2005 without (at that period) any film to partner it. Nonetheless, Random House stands poised to benefit routinely from TV spectacles - such as Alastair Fothergill's forthcoming Planet Earth, or Schama's own Power of Art - that the public has helped to fund. Some will call it synergy; some a stitch-up. The giant of Pimlico had been looking for an acquisition since the sale of Time Warner's book interests to Hachette Livre allowed the French group to leapfrog it and so become the largest UK publishing conglomerate. Random's seizure of BBC Books still leaves it (just) in second place, but the move might make a bigger strategic difference than raw numbers suggest.

Publishers have spotted the persistent British affection for broad-spectrum "event television", even in the age of DIY digital media - whether it's Sir David staring down a spider or the Doctor winding up a Dalek. Any nation that can recruit a third of its population to watch the stunned driftings of the England football team must still feel a yearning for the phantom togetherness offered by the big star or big match. Commercial publishers, who act and sound more like old-fashioned showbiz impresarios than freebooting new-tech entrepreneurs, tend to feel happiest in a drizzle of stardust. Random House has picked up a property that many others will have coveted. And the deal comes with safeguards. Optimists will note that BBC Books still has to apply the corporation's editorial guidelines and keep "appropriate controls" over the BBC brand. That branding, I hope, must imply fearless objectivity.

Just at the moment, I'd love to see a major TV investigation (with searching book attached) into the travails of the Airbus - a financial mystery whose tentacles stretch to the European summits of politics and industry. After all, we can never expect such a project from UK book-trade leader Hachette Livre. Why not? Because its ultimate boss Arnaud Lagardère co-chairs Airbus maker EADS, which is part-owned by his own group. In such times, perhaps we should feel less worried by the BBC's literary offspring getting into bed with a German than with a French patron.....**THE END**

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