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[Article]

The Last Book Party

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Publishing drinks to a life after death

by **Gideon Lewis-Kraus**

The problem with publishing is the relentlessness of the apocalypse. Since the seventeenth century, catastrophe has desolated the book industry on a generational schedule, and the villains have been legion: a censorious Catholic court, Jewish moneylenders, the War of the Spanish Succession, the Gregorian calendar (which led, in its maiden year, to a disastrous misscheduling of the Frankfurt Book Fair), the railroad, the post office. Yet books, and the culture they prop up, have more or less survived, as publishing has always proven itself capable of repelling the barbarians.

The present onslaught, however, is perhaps different, having been launched not from without but from above. The barbarians have assumed positions as managers. They cut costs. Readers have no doubt heard the basic story, which is basically true as far as it goes. Publishing used to be a business of leisured



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gentlemen happy to make a profit of 3 or 5 percent. They came from money and often didn't need much more of it, especially the sort that might be gained through the sale of things. What they did instead was to turn their parents' financial capital into cultural capital. Then media consolidation arrived, and by the 1990s almost every big publisher was owned by a giant conglomerate. Knopf and Vintage are parts of Random House, which is owned by Bertelsmann (Germany); Farrar, Straus and Giroux, one of the last great holdouts, is now owned by Holtzbrinck (Germany), which also owns St. Martin's and Henry Holt and Picador; Little, Brown and Grand Central Publishing (formerly Time Warner) are owned by Hachette, which in turn is owned by Lagardère (France); HarperCollins and its subsidiaries are owned by News Corp. (Rupert Murdoch); Penguin is owned by Pearson (U.K.); and Simon & Schuster was bought by Gulf + Western, which became Paramount, which was bought by Viacom, which was bought by CBS, which then became a different version of CBS.

These giant publicly traded companies were insulted by margins of 5 percent. CEOs pressured editors to buy big bestsellers, which developed into the form of mutual assured destruction that is the book auction, a sales device that leads to insupportable advances and thus to virtually inevitable disappointments, followed by even larger advances and larger disappointments. As publishers are squeezed from one direction by their corporate overseers, they are gouged from the other by Barnes & Noble and Amazon, whose increasing domination of the retail market means they can demand ever deeper wholesale discounts and extort additional concessions for prime bookstore and home-page placement. At the same time, book sales are down, newspaper coverage of books is diminished, people

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like to waste their time on the Internet, and so on. Thus it augurs total collapse when, in an economic downturn, publishers are forced to shutter whole imprints, as Random House did in December; freeze acquisitions, as Houghton Mifflin Harcourt has; or lay people off, or cancel holiday parties, or fetter expense accounts.

But the problem with this standard story is that it refuses to ask what, exactly, is at stake. It assumes that decline and loss are self-evidently defined. It takes for granted that the mid-twentieth-century good fortune of publishing, held aloft by a peculiarly luxuriant middlebrow culture (and "middlebrow" is here employed in the most appreciative way), was natural, or was even somehow a necessary condition for the book's survival. Not long ago, *New York* magazine ran a competent version of this story, entitled "The End," and it trafficked in anecdotes like the following, about the novelist Richard Ford and the souring of his relationship with Knopf, his publisher of many years:

> "[Ford] never felt the money was commensurate with the work that was produced," says [one unnamed] colleague. It couldn't have been easy when the Lauren Weisbergers of the world were getting better deals than he was. "He's 64, looking for that one last score in the literary world." Knopf offered Ford roughly $750,000 per book, at which point [Knopf editor Sonny] Mehta capped the money, according to the source; Ecco offered $3 million for three books."

That is, contemporary late-corporate publishing is a fallen world in which Lauren Weisberger, author of *The Devil Wears Prada*, gets really rich, while Richard Ford, one of the indisputably important novelists of our time, the Pulitzer Prize–winning author of *Independence Day* and *The Sportswriter*, gets *slightly less rich.* None of the elegists say: What is coming to an end is the idea that Richard Ford is

going to be richer than Lauren Weisberger. None of them say: What is coming to an end is the wishful insistence—for it is, ultimately, a wish, deeply felt, by a lot of people—that Richard Ford is going to be rich at all.

One of the saner comments in the *New York* article comes from an agent named Ira Silverberg. "I'd rather have several soft years," he said, "when investors get out and people who care about the values in the business reinvest." I first meet Ira as he walks out of the Hessischer Hof hotel to have a smoke with a beautiful woman of indeterminate European origin. It's early afternoon in Frankfurt, a grimy transit hub for shiny banks, on the Monday before the Wednesday that begins the annual Book Fair. Ira, in a bracingly Windsor-knotted pink tie and smart blue sports jacket, just stepped off the red-eye from New York but looks as though he just stepped out of an extravagant shower. His gray curls, shot through with some black still, are swept back from his forehead in a way that seems both distinguished and boyish. Credited with looking like a Jewish Richard Gere, he is finer-hewn than that, his features sharper, more clever. He speaks in a nasal New York trill that harbors a cultivated louche sense of amusement, but right now, when he mentions the literary first novel he's just sold to a vaunted German house, his excitement seems secretly heartfelt. He is immensely pleased.

"Our roots are in literary books," Ira says. (When Ira was a teenager he went on a pilgrimage to see Burroughs.) "They're not our day-to-day business; our day-to-day business is disgusting. You'll be hearing a lot about vampires this year. But here is where we can at least remember what we think differentiates us from widget salesmen."

Today, agents, foreign-rights representatives, and literary scouts for foreign publishers—who are contracted to know everything going on in the American market as they help foreign houses make purchases—are holding forth in serial meetings. In these first few days before the Fair officially begins, foreign rights are bought and sold in a parade of half-hour intervals. Everyone's got a list in front of her. "A tremendous new voice." "Well, I've only read one story, but…" "It's all about how authentic it is." "This is upmarket, as opposed to literary." (Upmarket, somebody explains to me later, is code for "might actually sell.") "There've been some nice reviews; we're still hopeful." The cannier salespeople flick through their lists and say, *entre nous*, "This title isn't for your house, so let's just skip ahead to *this* one, which I really think you're going to love." Six foreign scouts make a noontime prosecco toast to "Guillermo del Toro and vampires": apparently the Spanish film director has written a supernatural thriller whose foreign rights are one of the Fair's hot properties; vampires are perennial winners. There's quite a lot of genuine-sounding "I *love* this book."

Between meetings, one agent introduces me to Michael Pietsch, the publisher of Little, Brown. Little, Brown is one of the few companies that have fared pretty well over the last several years, and Pietsch is the kind of man you would be chuffed to have as your uncle. He tears up as he talks about a Quaker-style memorial service he was at recently in Claremont, California, for David Foster Wallace, whom he edited and with whom he was very close. He says he's been crying for weeks, so we change the subject, but invariably we circle back to the funereal. I ask Michael why there's this chronic elegy for a business he claims is more or less fine.

He says that publishing is an industry founded on dissatisfaction. “There is a rich loam of disappointment.” He reconsiders. “It’s an industry built in a rich soil of disappointment.” He ultimately goes with “loam.” One can readily imagine this man actually *editing*, doing his part to help make those loam/soil calls. “Three out of ten books make money,” he says. He makes sure I understand that this means seven out of ten do not. “Most of the time a book never reaches the standards its writer, editor, and publisher have imagined for it. I tell writers not to come to Frankfurt,” he says. “This is all about the commodification of books. It’s a writer’s version of hell.”

Over the course of the week, I will hear a lot of this sentiment: that the stock should not be shown the abattoir. But the more I’m told that writers are excluded to protect their literary innocence, the more this begins to sound aggressive and suspect. It’s faux-apologetic, and I think its real point is not to deride the seamy flux but to flaunt it. The commerce is not the embarrassment; it is the pride. Writers aren’t invited or welcome because once their manuscripts are in the hands of their agents and their publishers and their foreign-rights reps, they are excused from the process. It is time for the professionals to take over.

Frankfurt is at least in part about the feeling among the professionals that these books are now, rightfully, *theirs*—theirs to talk about, theirs to own, and, most importantly, theirs to sell, if only for this terribly long week. They come here to see people with whom they have what’s constantly described as a familial relationship, though they see one another perhaps once a year and they sell one another books. They watch and cheer for these titles as they are bought and eventually land overseas in strange

foreign markets. The personal intimacy becomes evidence of, and a vehicle for, the broader potential of translatability; the friendships here enact the international market.

The great pleasure of these perfervid book-business friendships is the alignment of commerce and distinction. The sales are not just profitable but valuable. They are thick with shared passions edged with the anxiety and rush of commercial risk. Thus what's at stake is not only the usual business credibility but a credibility of *taste.* Relationships here are built not only on the promise of profit but on the history of joint sensibilities, in some cases over decades, and when you have your half-hour slot of "I love this debut novel and I think you will love it and your public will love it and there's even a chance you will make money on it, as we, too, are hoping to make money on it," you are holding yourself accountable not only to commercial but to aesthetic standards. This dual standard is fundamental to how book people see themselves. Each deal is a mutual act of aesthetic-commercial catechism; devoutly observed is the ideal junction of the remunerative and the good. In my father's house there are many mansions, and Richard Ford lives in one.

On Tuesday morning, small groups of people trudge through low fog along the loud and dirty boulevard toward the Fair's opening press conference. The Messe, or fairgrounds, is a recessed quadrangle a kilometer north of the train station, across from the squat yellow Hessischer Hof. Halls one and two run along a long corridor from the street entrance; they're filled with posters of painted Papuans, from a book some German house is doing about the last primitives. At the end of the corridor is a large, central reception building built around a movie theater, a floor plan that seems to reflect less

than perfect confidence in the isolated viability of the book industry. The press conference is taking place here, but I've got a bit of time to walk around first. Halls three and four, on the eastern and northern edges of the quadrangle, house the German publishers. From the outside, hall three is roofed in undulating metal-clad dunes, making it look like an aerated armadillo. Inside, the overhead light is reflected off a series of windshield-visor plates set into the arching ribs of the distant ceiling, as though it were Santiago Calatrava's dream Ikea. Hall four has the art books and the elaborate paper-making installations, the Gutenberg memorabilia, and the borderline pornography and the less borderline pornography.

A fit middle-aged man is sitting next to me in the cinema while we wait for the press conference to start. Halfheartedly he taps at a BlackBerry with one thumb. His jacket is black-and-white checked with a faint periwinkle stripe. His face has been harshly exfoliated, and his hair forms an obedient helmet of brushed-out grays. His pants are black and too shiny, and his tie, with purple and green diagonal stripes, makes me suspect it is one of only three he owns. He looks like the man ESPN might send to cover the Book Fair. He and I turn to each other, and I ask him in a collegial way what he's doing here. He coughs and looks at his shoe for a second, and then says he's "the, uh, new CEO of HarperCollins." I recall that some of the death-of-publishing articles mentioned HarperCollins had a new CEO; some deep browser cache obligingly whispers to consciousness, "Murray."

"Murray," I say.

"Murray, yes," he confirms. I can't remember his first name, but his last name has gone over great. He is there to support an author of his, Paulo Coelho, who

is opening the Fair with an address. Coelho is being celebrated for having sold one hundred million books. They are the kind of books some people would call new-age pabulum, but there are plenty of others for whom they must have the power of, say, *The Sportswriter.*

First, the Fair's German president opens with a talk in German in which he calls for a "civilized Internet." Then Coelho gets up and wobbles through a long digressive speech about the Internet and piracy and the future of the industry. His great dramatic flourish occurs when he declares himself to be a "pirate of myself." He has set up a website, he explains, where you can download his books for free; he says that the goal for a writer is to get his books into the hands of as many readers as possible. There is a pause in the speech for a Hewlett-Packard laptop commercial featuring Coelho as a futuristic shaman. He does a flashy sleight-of-hand virtual-tarot-card monte that is part Ricky Jay and part *Minority Report.* His speech resumes post-commercial, and he says that his tech person is just a phone call away from putting this speech on his blog *immediately after he is done delivering it.* But the characteristically overprepared German press officers have given us packets with a transcript of his speech, so if there were some danger of Paulo Coelho's speech leaking onto the Internet it seems as though it would have happened already. Murray leaves very slightly before Coelho's speech is over.

Later that day at the Frankfurter Hof Hotel, the hot center of the trade-division galaxy here (and, apocryphally, Hitler's favorite Frankfurt lodging), everyone is sitting around having some more meetings and maybe making some deals. A German security guard thinks I look aimless and harasses me; she says there are a lot of pickpockets around.

Motoko Rich, the publishing-beat reporter for the *New York Times*, has just arrived and is tearing around the lobby. I don't quite know how I recognize her, but it's immediately clear that it's her. Last year she spent the Fair tailing a young foreign-rights agent and her brother, an esteemed editor. What everybody remembers from the article is that the editor bailed on meetings to go apple-picking in the Rhine valley with an avant-garde poetry publisher. This apple-picking episode is mentioned with odd, sneering frequency. There is avid speculation as to whom Rich will be writing about this year; she's seen as some kind of haruspex, and everybody is wondering whose entrails she'll be reading this time around.

All these rumors have made me curious, so I follow her around for a few minutes. She's moving with real reportorial agility. She slices through the crowd toward the front courtyard. She pauses for a moment and looks out over the field of meetings with the ticcy swivel of a meerkat scout. I've been shadowing her for maybe five minutes and I'm worried that she's onto me; she seems sharp and full of purpose. She seizes upon something in her field of vision and starts off. She finds the table of the Wylie Agency and pays her respects. That errand complete, she comes back up toward the dais and checks her BlackBerry.

She looks around and I approach her, introduce myself, mumble that I'm writing something about the Fair. She looks at me as though I want something from her and then says, "I don't know what the big story of the Fair is yet."

"People keep coming up to *me* to speculate about what the big story of the Fair is," I reply, a little defensively. "They keep saying things like, 'The big story of the Fair is Guillermo del Toro's thriller.'"

Rich raises her eyebrows almost imperceptibly, lowers them, and runs off. I worry that I might have just invented the big story of the Fair. It seems irresponsible.

The first night is the Berlin Verlag party, back at the Frankfurter Hof. Everybody is speaking German and I don't feel up to it so I'm standing alone until I see Motoko, who does not speak German. Motoko also apparently does not drink, or does not drink on the job. We chat about her family and her work, and she's very solicitous, and then she kindly introduces me to Morgan Entrekin, a delicately bearish icon of shabby gentility who is generally known as one of the big personalities of publishing and whose Grove Atlantic, more importantly, is one of the last major independents. We are all waiting for the Booker Prize to be announced live from London on large monitors. Morgan says he's won two Bookers in a row—by which he means he was the American publisher of Kiran Desai and Anne Enright—and that he can't expect to win a third, but he's so pleased to be shortlisted. (His sister company in the U.K., Atlantic Books, in which he owns a large stake, has published one of the shortlisted novels.)

The announcement comes, and Morgan has, in fact, won his third in a row. He half-pumps his fist in a jerky and endearing way. Motoko asks a few questions of the you've-won-three-Bookers-tell-us-how-it-feels *Variety* variety, and he says that his sales aren't down at all and that he thinks publishing is a mature industry that never has great booms in the boom times or busts in the bust times and a lot of other boilerplate patter. He keeps stopping the waiters to refill his water. Motoko has a green reporter's notebook the size of a cafeteria tray, and she takes notes in a black marker, in shorthand.

A German publisher comes up to congratulate Morgan, who's still drinking water and seems both glad and now sort of drained, and they talk about the state of the business for a minute, and then the German publisher says, "Well, it is not like we are selling cars!" Morgan laughs and says, drily, "Right, books don't cost that much money." Motoko doesn't write that down. A few days later, a young editor will tell me that Morgan once asked a Frankfurt cabbie how he felt about the Book Fair and the cabbie said it wasn't good business for him. Morgan asked why. The cabbie said that he doesn't make any money on prostitution-related commissions. Morgan said it's because the publishers all sleep with one another.

Wednesday morning is the first real day of the Fair, and I head straight to the distant hall eight, where I look for Bob Miller. In the early Nineties, Bob Miller founded Hyperion, Disney's publishing company, where he became known for bringing out such inspiro-motivational titles as *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff... and It's All Small Stuff* and *The Five People You Meet in Heaven.* He left Hyperion this past spring and has since gotten a lot of press< for his new venture, a boutique imprint at HarperCollins called HarperStudio. One idea behind HarperStudio is to break the prisoners' dilemma of contemporary corporate publishing by doing away with the huge advance: the imprint won't offer any advances larger than a hundred grand. But any profits will be shared fifty-fifty with the writer. Nobody has any clue whether this will work, but everyone seems hopeful about it, and if Bob Miller shows even a little success there's a good chance other houses will follow suit. I've had two conversations so far in Frankfurt in which he has been called a "hero."

Bob is sort of my uncle. His mother is my grandfather's second wife. I was, for complicated and

typical family reasons, raised to be pretty skeptical of him, but over the past few years I've come to see him as a stand-up guy. His jokes aren't always hilarious but he's decent, supportive, and very well-intentioned, and I feel a touch of pride for all his book-business success, even if I probably won't buy HarperStudio's *The 50th Law*, a business-advice manual by the rapper 50 Cent. As Bob and I sit around at the HarperCollins booth, he keeps awkwardly introducing me as an "old friend," because he's not really sure about the protocol. I sit in on a few of his meetings and listen to him deliver his spiel to curious fellow publishers, most of them foreigners. People are consistently enthusiastic. Bob takes heart in the fact that he might help to reshape the industry along more reasonable lines. Also to his credit is the lack of vampire talk at his meetings, though at the surrounding tables there's a lot of stuff about dogs. ("Dogs are big every year," says Ira, bored.)

Bob and I head over to a meeting he has set up with Jamie Byng, the publisher of Canongate, a mid-size house based in Edinburgh. Jamie is sometimes called the "rock star of publishing," but he's a refined 1985 sort of rock star, like an Etonian Whitesnake. His father is the Eighth Earl of Strafford, and his stepfather, who ran the BBC for many years, is straight-up KBE. Jamie has a leonine aspect, with a high clear brow and soft curls eddying over his ears and along his collar. Today he's wearing a graphite suit with a steeply angled ticket pocket over an open-necked cobalt shirt. He's got a really plush lilt that approaches purring. The previous evening, when I first met Jamie, I told him that the only galley I wanted to take away from the Fair was Geoff Dyer's forthcoming novel, which Canongate will publish this spring, and Jamie took one out of his distressed satchel and gave it to me, along with a CD of his

favorite Nick Cave songs. He said that he and Dyer play tennis together, and that he read the first sixty pages of the acetate-wrapped, gold-and-black FSG hardcover of *Out of Sheer Rage* while half-drunk one late night in his library, standing up by the shelves, then sat down on the couch and finished the whole book in a "one-er."

Canongate's booth has a Chesterfield couch and a leather club chair, but Bob and Jamie and I are at a low table. Jamie's talking about having republished a cult cocaine book from the Seventies called *Snowblind,* and how "Damien"—Damien Hirst—designed a limited-edition version. Damien's idea was to use heavy steel-reinforced mirrors as the book's covers, and for each book to come with a real hundred- dollar bill in a compartment drilled out of the pages and a steel fake AmEx-card bookmark. This was all during a period when Damien was seriously, like, *interested* in cocaine "as a thing." They did a thousand copies and the book sold for a thousand pounds, though at Damien's recent auction some copies went for fifteen hundred. Now Jamie is talking about Marc Quinn's blood and more stuff about Damien—Bob and I are just rapt—and he interrupts himself—he is constantly interrupting himself—to say that he loves Bob's business model and really hopes they can do some business together one day, even though HarperCollins UK will be publishing all the British editions of Bob's books.

It's never quite clear why this meeting has been scheduled. Jamie is considered to be Morgan Entrekin's heir as the industry's boulevardier, the standard-bearer of unanswerable élan. (The two men are close.) He takes risks with strange books and has built a house that's got more brand identity than just about anyone else. He's also been shrewd in buying up and repackaging cult books—like a U.K. reissue of

Lewis Hyde's *The Gift*, with blurbs from Zadie Smith and David Foster Wallace—that can be had on the cheap, and he knows his market for expensive limited-edition widgets: Damien won't likely be designing any e-books in the near future. It is in some ways a rearguard maneuver, but a strategic one, and even if his Entrekinian antics are a bit self-consciously performative, they're still appreciated by an industry that misses the raffish charm of men like Roger Straus. My uncle Bob, on the other hand, is a corporate guy looking to adapt a system to function within a bottom-line framework. But each seems glad to see the other doing his thing, and Bob leaves the meeting in high spirits.

Eli Horowitz, an old friend of mine and the publisher of the small independent house McSweeney's, is in town, and the Wylie Agency, which sells McSweeney's foreign rights, is hosting a dinner in his honor. A dozen of the more stylish international publishers, those that do McSweeney's overseas, are there as well. With a few very notable exceptions, fashion at the Fair tends to be less than interesting, but most of the exceptions—Eli and your correspondent not included—are here in an Italian restaurant near the Hessischer Hof. (The most notable absent exception is of course Ira Silverberg; later that night at the Frankfurter Hof, in a baby-hedgehog-soft micro-waled chestnut corduroy suit over a pink-and-black striped shirt and an ascot-roll of gray-and-eggshell cashmere scarf, he will look around and say, regarding the general sartorial condition, "They try.")

The first time I saw Andrew Wylie in Frankfurt, the woman I was sitting with asked me if I knew who he was. I said no. She looked at me with deep theater. "He's the man they call the Jackal." Wylie has the polished-granite dignity of a Gilded Age financier.

His glasses are thin and gold. He's an ice sculpture of a tropic general, a moisturized fist of virile elegance. Tonight, he is grandfatherly and warm, and he can't stop smiling and radiating magnanimity to all around him. He flirts with the taxed Italian waitress and makes sure the distinguished and beautiful representative of Editions Gallimard is served her monkfish first. His handshake is firm but not distressingly so, and he treats me as though it's his pleasure to have me along. All of the Wylie subalterns are in dark suits with narrow ties and have impeccably deferential manners and floppy public-school haircuts, as though Wylie were staging a constant private performance of *The History Boys*.

I'm sitting with Oscar van Gelderen, a Dutch publisher who has the wan, jowly aspect of a Northern European mafioso and runs a house called Lebowski, as in the movie. He's telling me why he likes Frankfurt in general, and why he particularly likes events like this. "It's being here with my soul brothers and soul sisters," he says. "These are people who have the same tastes, who like the same books. In your home country, the people who have the same tastes and like the same books are people you are competing with for writers, but here I share my writers with German publishers and Italian publishers." He looks around at his friends. Across the table is Claudio Lopez, who runs Random House Mondadori in Barcelona and, with a shock of prematurely white hair and a taut double-breasted cardigan over a wide-collared shirt with a fine floral print, looks like an Iberian intellectual race-car driver. The consensus rumor about Claudio is that he's the only person in the entire world who is allowed to line-edit García Márquez. On his right is Simon Prosser from Hamish Hamilton in London, the only person besides me here in jeans, though his appear to be fine Japanese selvage denim. An ecstatic

and roundly disheveled Englishman who edited the winner of the Booker Prize has just returned to Frankfurt after a long night of revelry in London; he holds forth about books as the "last thick medium."

Oscar's international-brotherhood encomium is cut short by Jamie, who wouldn't miss this dinner for the world and is again talking about Damien's limited-edition, thousand-pound run of the cocaine book and how he, Jamie, handed a copy to the Queen one day, who accepted it with white gloves. Now Jamie is saying that before he was a publisher he was a DJ; this impresses somewhat less than do his other stories, since in Berlin, where I live, even the Turkish guys at the kebab stands moonlight as DJs. But Jamie used to DJ Canongate's big Saturday-night closing party at the Fair. One year an Italian publisher told Jamie that Umberto Eco wanted a personal invitation, so Jamie went up to Umberto and said that he should come along to the club, baby. It was just as Jamie was laying out his favorite Jay-Bees track, he tells us, that he saw Umberto and the Dutch novelist Cees Noteboom getting down together on the floor. He makes a rolling physical gesture to suggest the popular dance move of dyadic phasal flank-blamming. Jamie finishes by saying that being a publisher is a lot like being a DJ: "Building a list is like building a set," he says. I mention in passing to another U.K. publisher that Canongate has Chesterfield couches at their booth and he calls out to Jamie, "You guys have *Chesterfields*?"

"We always have Chesterfields," Jamie says.

At the Wylie Agency booth the next day, Andrew Wylie is presiding like a cross between Douglas MacArthur and the judge in *Blood Meridian*. He extends me a warm hello and I sit in on some meetings. Sarah Chalfant, the viceroy of Wylie's London office, is selling Samantha Power's most

recent book to a Munich publisher. The publisher thinks the book is a little too long. As the meeting gets pushier, I start idly leafing through the bound russet codex of clients whose rights the agency is selling at this year's Fair. It's a few hundred pages long and features pictures, bios, blurbs, and rights information. The innovation of the Wylie Agency, and part of the reason it is regarded with such awe and fear, is that instead of selling the rights to the original publisher, they typically retain them and resell them themselves. They use the leverage of their backlist—Nabokov Bellow Sebald et al.—to extract high prices. Shelves ring the booth: Waugh, Calvino (in Italian), Antonio Muñoz Molina (in Spanish), Samantha Power, Tony Judt, Roth, Oliver Sacks, Pamuk (in Turkish, the new one), Rawi Hage, Ismail Kadare, Eggers, Achebe, Ma Jian. Sarah is telling the Munich publisher that she's wrong about how many copies they could sell in Germany. "It will definitely sell more than two thousand," she says with utter confidence.

I join the athletically good-natured Scott Moyers, who worked in publishing for nineteen years before he went "from being a junkie to being a dealer" by becoming a Wylie agent last year, as he's selling some nonfiction to a Dutch house. One really can't get away from Dutch publishers this week. The Dutchman says he's going to think over some things and come back to Scott with some offers. Scott is supposed to send him a few manuscripts to read. He looks at Scott and says, "We won't have to chase you for these?" Scott might take this as an insult to his professionalism, but if so he doesn't let on. "Never," he says.

Behind us, Andrew Wylie is pulling out today's edition of the free and copiously distributed daily Fair supplement to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*,

a national newspaper with conservative sympathies. He's on the cover, glasses and tie off, combat-ready, his arms folded over his chest, his gaze cold and blue and implacable. Sarah looks at the German headline, der gierigste mann der messe, and asks what it says. Wylie glances at it and says, flatly, "The most powerful man at the Fair." Scott asks me if I've seen the newspaper and I say no. Wylie hands it over. Scott says to me, "It means, 'The most powerful man at the Fair.'" I must make some sort of dubious expression, because Scott looks piqued and calls over Wylie to say, "Gideon says it doesn't mean 'most powerful.'" Wylie asks me what it means. I pause for a moment and tell him that it's more like "most ambitious," but that it's not the easiest connotation to render in translation.

What it actually means is "greediest," but I'm not about to say this to Wylie. He asks me to translate the newspaper's introduction to a piece inside that he himself wrote, on the subject of e-books. (E-books are hot this year.) I am hesitant to translate on the spot for Andrew Wylie, mostly because I am nervous about seeming even more inept than I already do, and live translation of German's muddle-ordered clauses makes for an English of stilted foolishness. I begin, "Here writes the most feared agent of the industry . . . On Monday did he Nabokov's left-over novel to Rowohlt sell, yesterday in Ernos Bistro in a circle of a few chosens a new publishing era call out." Next is a clause about his lightly torturing or tantalizing publishers, but it's hard to fit into the sentence properly at this point and I skip right to the following clause, which says he makes publishers dream about him. It sounds awkward without the clause I've left out but now there's no way to retrieve it without admitting I've left out the allegation that his large advances are extorted through light torture. The intro ends with something about how Wylie has

a big plan for how e-books are going to save the industry. He raises his eyebrows and says, to Scott, "Do I?" as he collects his things and walks to the rear of the booth.

In the standard publishing story, men like Wylie are blamed for creating the huge-advance system. Philip Roth had been publishing at FSG with no agent for years until Wylie convinced him—at a party thrown by Roger Straus—that he was being underpaid; he probably was. He left for Simon & Schuster. But Wylie was just the first and the best to exploit the new corporate-publishing regimes; he wasn't the cause of it. He saw that a Simon & Schuster owned by Gulf + Western was going to be able to pay Roth a lot more than independent Roger Straus. And the system is great for a writer like Roth, or Rushdie in his prime. But it's not great for young writers who won't look attractive on television, or debut novelists whose sales fall far short of their giant advances, or second- and third-time novelists whose books have been "critically well-received." As Ira says, maybe the best thing for books would be wholesale corporate divestment. There wouldn't be nearly the same amount of money paid out, but neither would there be the same inequalities and neuroses. Literary careers would be more modest, but they would almost certainly be more sustainable.

It is an open question as to who would stick around for that scene. Publishing would be completely different. What really animates Frankfurt is that there *is* money involved, at times a lot of it, and the big game is figuring out how to do something both meaningful and profitable: how to make widgets that from time to time happen to change people's lives. Monetary greed aside, the greed that animates an industry-wide grudge against Wylie is his obvious and unapologetic canon-greed. If a writer has achieved

that rare confluence of commercial and critical success for which everyone in this twinned prestige-cash economy longs, chances are pretty good that Wylie owns her. Even his most vituperative critics are careful to register on record the observation that Wylie *really does care about good writing.* If he were just in it for the cash, he wouldn't inspire anything near the level of resentful admiration he does. It is crucial for everybody involved that he be recognized as a legit aesthete, or the whole edifice would totter even more. The real fear about Wylie's position is that his inordinate power over the consensus canon allows him a disproportionate role in creating the future one; all he has to do is yoke new writers to the juggernaut of estates he already commands. You are elevated in your listwise proximity to Bellow. And because of the intensely personal nature of this business—which makes it so pleasurable—his reach is vast and terrifying. The field of chase for everybody else is tilted. It seems, more than anything, unsporting.

Leaving the Wylie booth, I naturally run right into Motoko Rich. She asks if I went to the big HarperCollins party for Paulo Coelho, and I have to admit I did not; I never got an invitation. Bob was going to take me but failed to call with the details. He had said that Daimler AG was sponsoring the party and the guests would be ferried there in Mercedeses. Motoko says it's a shame I didn't go, because it "was such ridiculous theater" and "would have made really great material." My only recourse at this point is to say that the exclusive Wylie dinner I was at went long past midnight, and she says, sympathetically, "Yes, in Germany they hardly serve food before nine-thirty."

All of the Americans keep saying that I should take a break and go see the international halls,

five and six. They complain that they can't, they're tethered to their half-hours.

I walk over and begin in the European rows. They're a circus, but all the talk seems more muffled, perhaps due to the thicker carpets or the lower ceilings. (The Anglophone hall, by comparison, feels like an unswept dirigible hangar.) The Russia booth has shots of vodka, enormous glasses of white wine, small triangles of untoasted white bread laid with salami, and untoasted buttered white-bread triangles with large glistening globes of fluorescent-orange roe. There are also sugar cookies and paper-wrapped candies and palm-sized chocolates and sepia-toned poster-sized photographs of a six-year-old Solzhenitsyn holding a rifle. There is a poster of a Slovene poet that identifies him as "the predecessor and founder of the Slovene avant-garde in poetry" and "the first to begin introducing into contemporary Slovene poetry the 'inventions'of modernism, such as the abolition of punctuation." The covers of most Kazakh books have outsized eagle heads making mean biting faces. The Nigerians are boxed in between the Uzbeks and the Kurds and the Romanians; this is the area of least geographical coherence. A Shenzhen publisher shares a booth with the nation of Jamaica.

I pay attention to what's on the cover of English-learning texts. Estonia: a blurry red double-decker bus, English passing you by. Czech Republic: a glassy-eyed child hugging too tightly a glassy-eyed (real) bear. Finland: a man holding a European license plate in a matrix with a guitar, a ranch house, backpacks, an analog clock, and a ballerina. At a Japanese booth there are manga guides to statistical regression and Fourier analysis; cartoon schoolgirls make faces of lurid invitation to the higher math. It is tempting to think that the problem with publishing is just too

many awful books, but then again 99 percent of anything is mediocre, and people don't tend to complain that there are too many mediocre widgets. Books are something we have higher expectations for.

All over the place are the signs for this year's *Ehrengast,* or guest of honor, Turkey. The slogan in German is a clunky alliterative gerund phrase that literally means "fascinatingly colorful," though the English translation provided is "Turkey in all of its colors." The logo is a kind of rainbow labyrinth blocked out in Etch A Sketch worms, and due to an odd low placement of the "r" it looks as though the celebrated country is "Tukey." There is a special Epcot-style pavilion set up for Tukey in the middle of the quadrangle, across from the movie theater and near two German-media terraria; Germans love the spectacle of a live interview on a narrow sofa, especially if everybody is encased in glass, and every little nook has a conversation being broadcast. The Tukey pavilion has olive oil and baklava and bowls of nuts. It's whitewashed and peopled by bored-looking Anatolians and seems to represent Germany's attempt to show the world that, under careful German guidance, Turks can be very clean and well-behaved. Later in the Fair, Orhan Pamuk will blast the Turkish government for its repression of writers. I'll miss the event, of course, but my errand is to follow the Americans, and as far as the Americans are concerned, this week is about quick meetings and international good fellowship and devastating draughts of cheap prosecco and allowing the pleasure of talking about books to intensify into the pleasure of selling them. One night, too late and too late in the week, I'll ask some Turks at a kebab stand what they think of being the *Ehrengast* and what they think of what Pamuk says, and they will say that it's good Pamuk is famous but why does he have to say all of those things about Armenia.

The next day I go back to the HarperCollins booth and ask for Bob. All of a sudden there's a lot of champagne and CEO Murray is there, pinstriped and schmoozing. At the Russian and French and Italian booths the wine is opened circa 09h00, but when the American managerial establishment pops a cork there's got to be a reason for it.

They are celebrating their Booker win. This is at least the fifth different Booker-win celebration I've been to for the same book. Its original acquiring editor was at HarperCollins India, and she is here being feted. I realize that the Booker shortlist is six titles because that is the smallest number by which the industry can ensure, given today's tentacular corporate congestion, that every single person in English-language publishing will either win or just barely lose the Booker. It is a tremendous device for goodwill.

Bob and I complete our Booker celebrations—more precisely, suspend them until we next celebrate someone's wonderful Booker win—and head to the Frankfurter Hof to have a drink with a British publisher named Patrick Janson-Smith, whom Bob has known for a long time. Janson-Smith is like Eric Idle performing a one-man parody of *A Dance to the Music of Time.* His eyes are always having a lively turn on a bright piano, and his laugh is all rarefied deviltry. He's wearing a sort of heavy-linen safari suit with a tight small knot that thrusts his tie forward in a great ripple. He published Bill Bryson and, according to Bob, was responsible for at least one big bestseller a year for more than twenty years. He's just started a new imprint at HarperCollins UK and I ask what the gimmick is. "Eh," he says with an attempt at dryness even he can't quite sustain, "we mostly plan to just publish more books." He breaks into a grin.

Janson-Smith says he's got to pop up to the room to freshen up a bit before he leaves for the big Bertelsmann party, which people have been talking about all week. He says that it's probably the last big Bertelsmann party and that I ought to come along. I say I haven't been invited. He says bosh, he'll manage to get me in straightaway. I look at Bob, who's already said that he can't possibly bring himself to go to another Bertelsmann party. He frowns and makes a gross food-shoveling motion. I had dinner plans with Bob but I don't want to give Motoko the chance to ask why I missed another grand piece of theater, so I ask Bob if I can skip dinner and head to the party. Bob smiles and says sure, maybe we'll see each other for a family seder next year. Janson-Smith reappears twenty minutes later in a different single-breasted heavy-linen explorer's suit with an even more Gordianly arraigned tie, and we get into a cab with a woman who just won the Orange Prize and head to the hotel.

Security is looking tight at the last Bertelsmann party ever, but Patrick Janson-Smith is unfazed and just has to find Stuart Applebaum, a vice president and chief flack and oak-diametered legend at Random House in New York, and then I'm up the curving staircase and in. Stuart has a deep rumbling bouldery Bronx diction; he projects the anachronistic persona of a 1950s-Vegas Jewish gangster, thick pink lips and the neck of an ox. He stands with his arms down in a V in front of him, greeting the guests like a funeral-home director. He's been in the business for a thousand years. We're standing there and he keeps leaning in very close to tell me how well this party is put together, and then we're joined by Sonny Mehta, the editor in chief of Knopf, who's somewhat smaller and dapperer than I'd imagined him to be, and a moment later the most glamorous publisher I've seen so far, perhaps of all time, a tall Englishwoman in

décolleté black and a lush red arm-elbow-back slink, one of those boa jobs that's the women's equivalent, in symbolic terms, of a cravat.

Janson-Smith whispers to me that she's the daughter of wealthy Baltic-Jewish émigrés to Great Britain and her husband is a lord, Baron Gould of Brookwood. As we—Sonny, Stu, Patrick Janson-Smith, and this billowing cloud named Gail Rebuck—stand around in idle chat, Markus Dohle, the printer from Hamburg who's just replaced Peter Olson as CEO of Random House USA, is receiving new guests as they arrive. Olson had a reputation for being a little cold but being, at the very least, a voracious reader; Dohle has a reputation for being a printer. Rumor is that Gail was his chief competitor for the position, and it's very hard to look at both and not consider Random House's decision a grave mistake. Dohle is a towering wolfpack of muscles tapering to a freakish trapezoid; his suit jacket is tailored too tight across the bunchy expanse of his Teutonic Lou Ferrigno back, and he leans on the balls of his feet in an about-to-topple or -wrestle posture. These things conspire to make him seem elevated from a high rear center of gravity, as though he were hanging on a meathook between his shoulder blades. In this tableau, I realize, is the story of how slangy Jews and the landed gentry are ceding the book business to steroidal technocrats from Germany. There's probably an argument to be made that the chief engine of Anglophone high culture since Disraeli was the cheery antagonism and shared admiration of the Jews and the Wasps—the debate and friendship between Mailer and Buckley. But now, in place of Lord Weidenfeld and Roger Straus, we have an army of eager Visigothic accountant-printers. The very location of the Frankfurter Hof, in the overlapping deep shadows of the Commerzbank and the European Central Bank, seems a cruel and

heavy-handed reminder that while we were assembled at the Maginot Line they flanked us through Belgium.

Patrick Janson-Smith escorts me dutifully and with excellent humor into the main throng, where someone bumps into his leg and he looks down and it's Dr. Ruth, the famous diminutive sexologist! Patrick booms, "Dr. Ruth! Meet my friend Gideon! Dr. Ruth, you've just written another book. It's your thirty-fifth?"

Dr. Ruth says, "No! Thirty-first!"

Patrick crows with delight and replies, "And is it another one about *sex*?"

Dr. Ruth cries, "Yes!" and Patrick Janson-Smith grins with the pleasure of a moment of life gone perfectly to script and says "OUTRAGEOUS!" We all move on.

It's hard to concentrate in the glare from the hot, glowing mauve-jelly projections on the walls and the crowd around us is stuffing itself on dry roast beef and lake sushi. People are really digging in. Janson-Smith looks around and says with disgust that some of these people *aren't even going to go out for a proper dinner; they're just going to eat their fill here.* You can tell from how much people seem to be enjoying their buffet food that it's got to be a pretty heavily umlauted crowd. I look for Motoko, but there are hundreds of people here and she moves quickly.

I leave and make my way alone past the banks, along the dingy pedestrian thoroughfare of central Frankfurt to the Frankfurter Hof, which, due to its proximity to the villainous scalene fortress of the Commerzbank, whose yellow and red spires flash like the eye of Sauron, is easy to find. Right outside the door is Jamie again, and we're *in medias torrentes* as usual: "I'm at a stag party in Reykjavík thrown by DBC Pierre and it's been a few days and

I'm really just totally torched, on the flight home I'm reading the manuscript Ali Smith had sent us and I'm just weeping uncontrollable tears—
I *love* that book!"

It's getting later and drunker, and one young foreign-rights agent pointedly asks me how the late-night scene at the Frankfurter Hof could possibly be relevant to my purposes. Motoko, I say, told me I should hang out here. The agent says it makes her and everyone else uncomfortable that I'm hanging around when everybody's drunk, that maybe what I'm jotting down is that someone is flirting and then leaving with a married person. I'm pretty sure I know the flirtatious pair she's referring to, from the previous evening, though I certainly didn't know until now that they'd left together; I couldn't care less. Her pointing this out seems less defensive than insistent, as if she wants to make sure I register that despite the crisis in the industry, married people in Frankfurt are still sleeping with people to whom they happen not to be married. I take out my notebook and write, "Motoko useful again."

It's clear that there's life yet in this tired old publishing beast, at least for now and at least here in Frankfurt. It might be a fallow year, or a fallow time, a year of one small bump on a plastic toilet seat in the ladies' room and back up to the bar for Rieslings and, much later, competent fucking at the hotel where Abdullah Gül, the Islamist president of *Ehrengast* Tukey, is staying with his retinue; but it's something, the blaze of the brash and the derelict in the struggle against the actuaries has not ended in ash. There's a mean lambent glamour still, a stoic humor about the dog- and vampire-related widgets and a hopeful clamor for the kind of transformative widgets dreamed up by Nabokov and Wallace and

Richard Ford. Janson-Smith announces that he's going upstairs to wake his wife.

At a certain point it's maybe around three-thirty and the crowd is thinning and there's a faint sad subduedness and Simon Prosser is saying something about Jamie's wedding a few years ago, to the Curtis Brown power-agent Elizabeth Sheinkman, and Simon is saying how beautiful the ceremony was, in an English field ringed with high trees, and how Jamie and Elizabeth were standing together under that thing—what was that thing called? And Jamie leans over and carefully articulates the Hebrew word *chuppah*, the Jewish wedding canopy, and Simon slowly and carefully repeats *chuppah*, and here it is, this is it, a future for publishing, the promise that somehow it might resist the sober profit-and-loss accounts of the Australo-Hessian mentality: a landed gentleman joined under a *chuppah* to a brassy agentess. Damien Hirst and Nick Cave raise their glasses high in tribute. And those there begat will lead a new jackal cavalry against the technocratic sportscasters and the plinking pocket-calculator Huns. That rough new ignorant army may prove to be publishing's redemption, the belated return of its class. For if in the end the money disappears, and, sadly, it probably will, then so be it: there will still be a party, and maybe that party won't be in New York or in the displaced New York that is Frankfurt, but neither will the Rieslings cost 12 euros.

By Friday the end is near and everybody drags around—one editor tells me the Fair is part industry convention and part endurance trial—but the general mood seems to improve, as business can be set aside and fun unswervingly pursued. The time for business is mostly over, but people are still talking about books, now perhaps no longer the books they're selling or buying but the books they like, and

then someone initiates a round of Exquisite Corpse, the game in which each person adds a sentence to a story based only on the previous sentence, and when the wine bottles are empty the pages are passed to an Irishman who reads out the accumulated story in a velvety brogue. The story naturally makes no sense, but everybody laughs a lot in a spirit of exhausted fellowship, and then we are all in taxis en route to a party for a German publisher on the roof deck of an unhip club. As we enter, the DJ is playing commercial American hip-hop circa 1992. Some fat Germans bobble around to the beat like bumper zeppelins. A waitress idles through the crowd with a tray of cigarette packs. There's a smell of sweet acrid sweat and spilled Sekt, and the awful DJ puts on a Naughty by Nature song. But everyone dances sort of surprisingly well to "O.P.P.," and now I see Morgan Entrekin, his blue shirt sodden and stuck to his skin, his tie still on but loose, eyes closed, gray hair swept back, on the floor, dancing and looking like he and everybody around him just won the Booker Prize.

TAGS

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