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# UNDERSTANDING OUR PLACE

## Publishing's role in the reading ecosystem under neoliberal economics

Jasmin Kirkbride

### Introduction

In December 2018, I was asked to give a lecture as part of the Kingston University Masterclass series, examining key challenges publishing might face in its future. The topic brought together several thoughts I was having about what the reading ecosystem looks like, where its fault lines are, and what role publishing plays in it.

In this essay, the ideas from that lecture have been put into writing. It will examine the way that ecosystem works, and how it keeps books and reading alive. It will also explore a couple of ways in which this ecosystem is starting to break down, and what that means for the longevity of books. Because of its original audience, there are moments where the essay is aimed towards new publishers, but hopefully these moments will contain some value for old-hands of the industry as well.

Of course, this is a huge topic, so I will narrow it down by focussing mainly on traditional publishing and its authors. We will also be looking at the ecosystem through the lens of neoliberalism – the current economic soil which we all have to till, as it were.

### The reading ecosystem

I have worked with books since 2013, when I first graduated from university. During these five-or-so years, I have primarily been an editor and book-trade journalist, both freelance and in-house, with notable roles as a reporter at *Book-Brunch* and publishing director at Endeavour Media. I have also worked with social media, digital and marketing, for clients including Hay Festival. Currently,

I am developing my career by undertaking a PhD in Creative and Critical Writing at the University of East Anglia (UEA).

These experiences have given me a broad overview of the industry, and as a result I have developed a theory of the ‘reading ecosystem’. The reading ecosystem is a network of book production and consumption, of which publishing is a part, and is a helpful tool to look at how the culture of reading is maintained.

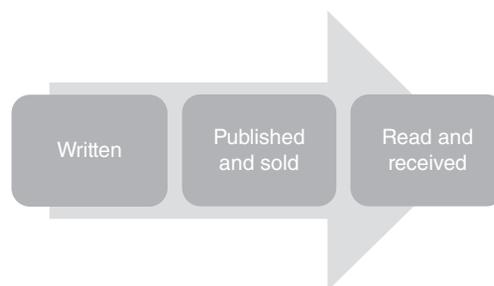
To explain the idea, let’s start with the very basics: tracking the journey of a book through its life, from beginning to end. In essence, the journey looks like this: first, a book is written by the author; then it goes through the publishing and bookselling process; finally, it is received and read (Figure 13.1).

As an identifier of the publishing process, this analysis works quite well because it is purely focussed on the product – books! However, in practice it quite an old-school way of looking at the ecosystem of reading, precisely because it is from that publisher- and product-centric perspective.

In fact, to look at the ecosystem of reading – at how the culture of reading is maintained – looking at the product won’t necessarily tell us that much. We need to look at the human beings around it. All the publishers, readers, writers, agents, critics, booksellers, and printers – the ‘book people’, if you will – and how the books are affected by them. The people, more than the product, will tell us how books are kept alive. So, let’s insert all the people into this book-creation process.

First, you have the writer, then the literary agent, the publishing house and production processes (which on their own have a slew of people), the booksellers (digital and bricks and mortar), the critics, and the readers.

This shows us that in fact the three phases we initially identified are complex and interrelated. They overlap in many places: an editor and an agent are certainly part of the writing process, but they are also definitely part of the publishing process; booksellers are often a book’s first readers outside of the publishing house, but they are also an integral part of the industry. The lines blur (Figure 13.2).



**FIGURE 13.1** A basic analysis of book production.



**FIGURE 13.2** Book-production process with the ‘book people’ added.

Now, in order to figure out how this ecosystem is perpetuated – how it continues year after year, decade after decade, generation after generation – we need to look at where the people fulfilling all these different roles are coming from.

There are many reasons that people become writers or get involved in publishing (though perhaps we can conjecture it isn’t for the money). For the vast majority of us, however, I think it would be fair to say a love of books is key. Publisher James Spackman once commented that publishers are ‘absolute freaks’: we finish a book in one sitting and read more than one book a month – statistically, most people don’t do that (Kirkbride, 2017c). There is something about books – for all of us – that makes us feel that they are worthwhile, even when we might be getting paid peanuts, or have dreadful managers, or miss the last free tote bag at the PRH London Book Fair stand. We publish because first we were readers.

Writers are also forever explaining that they were readers before they were writers. As Stephen King suggests, ‘If you don’t have time to read, you don’t have the time (or the tools) to write. Simple as that’ (King, 2012). The old adage that to be a good writer you must first be a good reader continues to be repeated by creative writing lecturers worldwide for a reason. Our writers too, then, emerge from being readers.

If we keep this view of the book-production process on a straight line it starts to look quite complicated and counter-intuitive once we add this in. That’s because the ecosystem of books isn’t a conveyor-belt, it’s a cycle; a complex ecosystem that continuously feeds bookish people through it (Figure 13.3).

It seems from this angle like a sustainable system, one that will keep feeding itself for many years to come without issue. That, unfortunately, is an illusion. Because of recent disruptions and the political climate in which we operate, I think we actually need to be careful and work hard to maintain this fertile soil from which books grow.



**FIGURE 13.3** A basic reading ecosystem.

### Neoliberalism: a threat to the ecosystem

I have to preface this next section by saying that, as with all opinions on politics, what I am about to say is not the last word on the relationship between neoliberalism and publishing. At the end of the day, this is just a bunch of stuff I think, and it should not be exempt from scrutiny and questioning. My purpose here is not to tell you how things are, it is to make you think about one particular angle on how things might be, and perhaps through that to offer you something new and interesting.

I am not necessarily an ardent leftist or a socialist. I am not even against neoliberalism as such – politically, I can be quite agnostic – however, I do believe that if we engage in any political or economic ideology without objectivity, scrutiny, and self-awareness, it can only lead to turmoil. If we look at recent social upheavals such as the vote for Brexit or the election of Trump – and the accompanying growth in societal anger that must define both of these things as poorly-handled political messes whichever side of the fence you sit on – we can note that they arose in a large part because society was not self-aware enough. We stopped communicating with each other, and therefore ceased questioning ourselves and the status quo. In all systems, I believe that kind of apathy and stagnation are where danger is born.

So, with that caveat, I posit that some of the biggest threats to the reading ecosystem today may stem back to the advent of a neoliberal political culture.

Though many of you will have an extensive understanding of neoliberalism already, it is a complicated topic, so it is useful to give a quick definition, specifically within the context of publishing.

Incredibly simply, neoliberalism is a political and economic theory that encourages a freer spirit in how things are regulated, which sounds very nice but actually isn't always a good thing. It favours privatisation, unregulated free trade, and reductions in government spending. It prioritises GDP – that is, the basic growth of a country's economy in terms of profit – as a measurement of how

‘well’ a country is doing. Lorenzo Fioramonti explained the biggest flaw in this plan simply:

If a country cuts and sells all its trees, it gets a boost in GDP. But nothing happens if it nurtures them... Preserving our infrastructure, making it durable, long-term and free adds nothing or only marginally to growth. Destroying it, rebuilding it and making people pay for using it gives the growth economy a bump forward.

*(Fioramonti, 2017)*

Roughly, neoliberalism as an economic theory was first put forward in the 1930s and 1940s but gained traction only among the wealthy and elite of America and Europe. After the Second World War, neoliberalism was side-lined in favour of Keynesian economics. Keynesian economics has a pretty different agenda to neoliberalism: its goals include full employment and the relief of poverty, high taxation on the wealthy, and governments seeking social outcomes without shame, developing new public services and safety nets for poorer socio-economic groups.

However, during the 1970s, Keynesian economics fell into crisis in America and Europe – even the most well-meaning of economical ideologies can be riddled with flaws. It was replaced with neoliberalism, a change spearheaded by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, though it is possible neither of them thought of the alteration in such conscious terms. ‘Neoliberalism’ rose without being referred to directly, which is one of the reasons it is so important now to scrutinise it: what have we been letting the silent ideology get away with right under our noses?

What followed this shift was tax cuts for the rich, the breaking of trade unions, deregulation, privatisation, outsourcing, and increased competition in public services.<sup>1</sup>

This shift in economic culture has been mixed for publishing, and it would be impossible to cover all the pros and cons comprehensively in an essay of this length.<sup>2</sup> However, many of the negative effects on the industry are still emerging, and some are even currently masquerading as positives. The issues I’m going to look at specifically in this essay are:

- an unsustainable growth-or-die attitude to business, resulting in increased corner-cutting in the publishing process;
- a ‘more books, more money’ philosophy that is resulting in a flooded market; and
- authorship as a career becoming financially unviable.

As we will see, these three issues all ultimately result in lower quality products and a breakdown in communication between these different sectors of the reading ecosystem, both of which will eventually result in dramatic discrepancies between what publishers create and what readers want to read. They will

also destabilise the supply of raw materials from which the industry draws its strengths – ideas and stories.

So, let us examine these threats in closer detail.

### Unsustainability of ‘growth-or-die’

The ‘growth-or-die’ economic attitude actually has its roots in capitalism generally, but neoliberalism has taken the ideology to new extremes. ‘Growth-or-die (or ‘expand-or-die’ or ‘grow-or-die’) is the theory that economic growth is inherently good, an adequate means by which to measure success of a company or country, and that economic growth must be achieved over other priorities.<sup>3</sup>

For a publishing house, this attitude means that they must aim to make more profit every year. For most, big, multi-national publishers, and also many independent ones, this is the goal of the company. Please note I said company, not individual. I think most people in publishing want to do well by their books and authors, but corporate culture is not detected in the individual, it is heard in the company’s collective roar. This goal of making profit is one that was designed by an economic system that wishes to reward shareholders. *Not* employees or, in publishing’s case, authors or even readers.

Since about 2007, publishing has been an industry undergoing enormous disruption, mainly from influencers outside the industry.<sup>4</sup> In situations like this, where profits stagnate or even fall, it is a well-documented fact across all industries, that there are certain tricks you can use to artificially increase profits. It is hard to pin down evidence of these tricks being used, but when you’ve worked in publishing for a while, you start to see the patterns and you know what’s going on under the surface. Though the following things are sometimes done for a good reason, I have also seen and reliably heard about all of them being done in multiple publishing houses for artificial profit-making purposes (Di Leo, 2014).

When a publishers’ income doesn’t rise year on year, artificial profits can be created by lowering outgoings. Technically, the amount of money a business is making in that year will go up, and shareholders will be satisfied, therefore maintaining the business’ worth and kudos. This is done in a number of ways:

- Employ a lot of young people, who do not expect high wages.
- Squeeze employee benefits (such as training) where possible.
- Pay interns minimum wage or travel expenses only – if they are paid at all.
- Squeeze excess staff out of the system – fewer staff means fewer people to pay.
- Use freelancers wherever possible, prioritising those who will charge less over those who have more experience or qualifications.
- Cut corners in the publishing process – for instance, commission fewer edits on each book, or cut the number of cover redrafts and redesigns.
- Cut back on ‘non-essential’ departments – and it’s amazing what some employers can find ‘non-essential’ when they really need to.

Publishing is not the only industry in which these kinds of shenanigans take place: it's an endemic result of neoliberal policies, which reward short-term profit over long-term sustainability. However, publishing is one of the industries where these kinds of cuts start to show in our products very quickly. Books end up riddled with typos, bearing dodgy covers, and storylines that just don't quite add up. What's more, these tactics lead to a stressed-out workforce that is not properly trained, and lacks mentorship from older employees; meaning legacy knowledge of the industry is lost.

None of this is good for a publisher's longevity: it does not attract new talent (certainly not diverse new talent); results in a higher than usual staff turnover (which annoys authors and agents); and drives the faithful of publishing to other industries (creating an industry 'brain-drain').

These cut corners also have an impact on books in another way: engagement with the text of the book within the publishing house is bound to diminish. Crucial decisions could even be made about the book – how it looks, how it should be marketed – by people who may not have had the time to read it. The more corners are cut and the more employees have on their plate, the less time they have to read. Then again, is it realistic to expect an employee to read every book they work on, when publishers are so focussed on publishing more books every year?

### **More books, more money...?**

This leads us into the next big issue neoliberal ideologies have assisted in creating: the attitude that publishing more books will therefore make a publisher (or an author) more money. This attitude has its roots in neoliberal and capitalist thought, but it has been over-developed and taken advantage of by large internet retailers, who, I think it fair to say, perhaps do not always have the deepest understanding of how to preserve the book trade in the long term.

As I mentioned previously, publishing has been unrecognisably disrupted over the past decade, almost universally by influencers from outside the industry. The biggest disrupter has obviously been Amazon, but honestly, with the advent of the internet someone was inevitably going to come along and do what Amazon has done, it is just a shame it wasn't someone with an in-depth knowledge of the industry. And a shame, perhaps, that it happened under a loosely-regulated neoliberal agenda.

I'm going to say Amazon a lot over the next few lines, because it is the multinational giant that happened to gain traction on our industry, but please in your heads think of it with just that flippancy – Amazon really could be anyone, and I don't particularly hold it against Jeff Bezos that this was the environment his business was birthed into. A lot of what has happened to Amazon is luck and chance, much as they would like us to believe otherwise.

Nevertheless, Amazon is now a fact of publishing and bookselling life, and it isn't going to go anywhere anytime soon. In some ways, it has been beneficial to

publishing: it has re-opened the doors to out-of-print and backlist books,<sup>5</sup> given authors who can't get past the old-school gatekeepers of traditional publishing a chance to self-publish,<sup>6</sup> and almost single-handedly brought about the e-book revolution.

However, just because Amazon is here and we have to be friendly with the giant in order to sell books, doesn't mean that we can't level some constructive criticism at its business policies at the same time.

First and foremost, Amazon was at the centre of the drive to create an incredibly low price point for print and e-books, which has not been wholly beneficial for the publishing ecosystem. Before the 1990s, in the UK book prices were kept at particular rates by the Net Book Agreement (NBA). In 1995, the NBA was largely abandoned and deemed illegal, which led to supermarkets taking a chunk of the bookselling industry, and a culture of discounting books. Though some independent bookstores closed, it is uncertain whether or not they would have folded anyway, so it's hard to prove that this in itself was a problem. That is, until Amazon's release of the Kindle on 19 November 2007, which forever changed the face of publishing.<sup>7</sup>

The Kindle had been foreshadowed by lesser eReading devices for a few years, but because of Amazon's already strong hold on the book market, the Kindle really took off. One of the ways this was achieved was by selling e-books at such a low price that it made the cost of an eReader seem insignificant to the consumer. This is well known to have had a negative effect on the industry for a number of years, though now some balancing out has been achieved – rather than e-books having the price point of 99p-£1.99, as they did when the Kindle was first released,<sup>8</sup> by 2018, trade fiction e-books most commonly held a price point of about £3.99-£4.99. This is a low, but not insurmountably difficult, digital price for publishers to meet.

However, it remains true that the Kindle store still gives a high preference to books that discount deeply on a regular basis. This means that you have to sell *more* books for *less* money, to make the *same* profit. Or, to put it another way, more *sales* does not necessarily mean more *income*.

This fits into neoliberal economic policies because Amazon wants a low, low price for its books so that people buy more stuff on their site, so that it is 'worth' more, and therefore its shareholders are pleased. Obviously there are more complex economic cogs turning in the background there, but that's the basics. Note I said Amazon wants people to buy more 'stuff', not 'books', because it is important to remember that Amazon makes money not just through books but via many, many different revenue streams, which books contribute to. To scratch the surface, more books means a greater offering for the Kindle Unlimited (KU) subscription service, and more reasons to buy a Kindle over a Kobo, or a Fire tablet over an iPad. Books are a small part of a much wider picture for Amazon.

Moreover, the way internet algorithms (and particularly Amazon's) are currently programmed rewards the neoliberal ideal. Authors who produce more products rank higher, and therefore sell more books. Publishers have tried to replicate

this technique in order to grab a bigger portion of the e-books pie, but I have actually never come across an instance when publishing more books was *necessarily* in the publisher's best interests, particularly if they are sold at a low price point.

This 'more books, more money' ideology bows down to that eternal growth scenario that neoliberalism upholds. Yet, it is completely irrational: you absolutely cannot grow every year, year on year, indefinitely. At some point you are going to hit that capitalist crash that the majority of economists understand perpetually waits in the wings.

For publishing, I also believe the inevitable crash is taking the form of a hugely flooded market. In 2017, Suzanne Baboneau, managing director of adult fiction at Simon & Schuster, said that there were too many books being published and that 'all of us in the industry are culpable' (Kirkbride, 2017a). Since then, we have seen a plateau in the e-book market – and with over 50,000 books published each year in the UK alone, who can blame consumers for being overwhelmed? Indeed, the UK publishes more books than any other country in the world (Flood, 2014). There are not an unlimited number of readers, and therefore a nigh on unlimited supply of books is bound to end in upset. Publishing fewer books, but doing it really well, offers both publishers and readers a more intellectually profitable (and therefore in the long term economically stable) scenario than publishing many books badly. More on this later.

However to me, the most dangerous part of this ideology is that Amazon – and even some publishers – doesn't seem to care whether books are *read* anymore, only if they *sell*. That cheap price point Amazon strives for might sell a book, but it by no means guarantees engagement with it. Indeed, with so many e-books being purchased on the attitude that 'gosh, at 99p it's basically free, why shouldn't I?' readers' devices are being flooded with books they will never even open.

This means that it's a short-lived success: yes, someone bought this author's first book, but if it isn't read, will they really bother buying the sequel? This method doesn't create a fanbase of readers, but a cult of purchasers, and these are two very different things.

### **Authorship: an unviable career?**

On that note, let's take a look at how authors are faring under neoliberal publishing ideologies.

Not only does the 'more books, more money' ideal mean that authors are often not growing a genuine fanbase alongside their sales, there is an additional problem that a lower price point does not consistently work out in every authors' favour. Midlist authors, for instance, have by and large disappeared from traditional publishing, partly because at this lower price point, a mid-lister's 10,000 readers are no longer making their publishers enough profit, so the authors are being dropped.

Back in 2014 the Society of Authors' general secretary, Nicola Solomon, put quite well what it feels like for many author's in the age of Amazon when she said

that, ‘Amazon are treating [authors and books] like they treat other commodities, but books are not like that. You can’t switch authors like you switch washing powder’ (Garside, 2014).

What’s more, it isn’t an attitude Amazon appears to have altered over the past few years. It has even aggrieved the self-published authors it works with by unleashing the KU subscription service. Using this service, which also requires the author to publish exclusively with Amazon, many self-published authors have found their revenues diminishing, and book sales plummeting in tandem. Many of the top self-published authors, who once advocated for Amazon-only publishing, have now aggregated their distribution base to include iBooks and Google-Play: for example Mark Dawson (‘Alli Admin’, 2017).

Mark Coker, founder of Smashwords, spoke out about this in 2014, saying: ‘Authors are in a difficult spot at Amazon. A few KU authors have publicly reported increased sales and readership, but that appears to be the exception rather than the norm... No other retailer makes authors play Russian Roulette with their books and careers like this’ (Coker, 2012).

Yet, unfortunately, it seems this assumption that you can switch authors on and off can be found in publishing houses too – and it is a problem across the board. Every publishing house must be culpable in some way – how else do average author earnings drop by 42% in ten years, while publishers have reported growing profit margins? In 2016, Nicola Solomon reported that trade publishing was becoming more profitable, possibly by as much as a third – a ‘spookily similar’ figure to the 29% by which author incomes had fallen at that time. Moreover, that same year, when publishers reported an average 13% profit margin, up from the 10% it once was, authors received only 3%–5% of publishers’ turnover (Solomon, 2018).

Worse, in 2018, traditionally published authors’ median income was £10,500 per year. It strikes me as poor long-term planning for publishers to reward their silent shareholders whilst starving those who create their natural resources of funds. Writers cannot become another commodity to be squeezed by neoliberal ideologies – yet, that is exactly what we appear to be seeing.

Of course, the Publishers Association and Amazon both offer competing viewpoints on this issue, and there are no doubt other sides to the story.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, there has clearly been a breakdown in communications here, as authors remain ardent they are not being paid fairly for their skills. Author and president of the Royal Literary Fund, Tracy Chevalier, spoke out on the matter in the summer of 2018, alongside many other authors, saying, ‘I think writers starting out are getting less support from publishers – not just financial, but a commitment to develop them and see them through several books to build up a readership and steady sales’ (Kean, 2018).

Writer and critic Philip Womack and author Joanne Harris agreed that publishers invest more in ‘a shrinking pool of established writers and celebrities’ rather than investing in the long-term careers of their authors as they used to (Kean, 2018). This is a devastating blow for the ecosystem of reading: if new

authors are not nurtured and developed into established authors, this will undermine the long-term stability of the industry's supply of reliable, high-quality raw materials.

Indeed, we only have to look at Chevalier's closing words to feel the chill of what might be afoot if the industry does not treat its authors with more respect: 'Most writers cobble together a living from several sources: teaching, journalism, and odd jobs. Writing is just one shrinking source of income. Shrink it enough and people will stop writing altogether. It literally won't be worth it' (Kean, 2018).

That, we can all agree, would be a terrible – if not insurmountable – blow for publishing.

## **Combatting neoliberalism**

I've tried to cover a lot of complicated ground here. I've probably made some vast generalisations, but hopefully I have also acted as a bit of a devil's advocate for some of the often-overlooked issues in publishing.

Ultimately, I am not calling for everyone to become idealistic publishers who don't give a fig for their profit margins. But there needs to be a tension between commercialism and intellectual idealism – one sells books and the other keeps them alive. Without one or the other element, the cycle will stop turning. To me, it seems that crucial tension is out of whack.

Before we finish though, let's go back to our cycle and insert a few of the topics we've talked about. First of all, authors are generally not making ends meet, which means that our raw materials are under threat. A blight on the harvest, if you will, but one that publishers are currently failing to treat. Publishers themselves are being squeezed, by Amazon's 20% share of the market on one side and shareholders on the other. (Not to mention the well-known side-effect these price squeezes are having on our bricks and mortar bookstores.) Meanwhile, the market is being flooded with books, which are deluging a finite audience, and this is resulting in a plateau we have yet to witness the full ramifications of.

In the wider view, answering to shareholders means publishers are also increasingly unable to justify 'risky' books, which is resulting in a lack of diverse publishing in every sense. This, in turn, leads to a lack of diverse publishers, which leads to even less diverse publishing, and so on.

This means that let alone seeing books that are increasingly compromised in terms of quality, readers are seeing the same kinds of books over and over again. Entire undiscovered markets are being missed because publishers feel unable to take the leap of faith required to try to discover them.

In the long run, these combined factors of a lack of diversity, compromised product quality, and passive reader engagement are likely to lead to a stagnant market, one that risks decreasing people's interest in reading generally. We might also conjecture that readers are buying more and reading less, meaning they are more engaged with the purchasing process than the actual ecosystem of books.

By digging these fault lines, we are, it seems, draining the pool our future authors and publishers would otherwise emerge from.

Of course, there are other factors at play in all this. Neoliberal politics cannot be blamed for all the world's sins, and I wouldn't want to try to form that argument. However, without examining the basic tenants on which we form our industry, how can we ever hope to effect any real change? And what would that change even look like? How should we go about trying to right the wrongs within the industry? To reconnect these dislocated parts? What is our role – individually and collectively – in the ecosystem?

First, and most obviously, we cannot turn neoliberalism on its head overnight. But we can be aware of the pressures that are exerted over us by forces outside of our control. Simply being aware of it, allows us to see those tiny steps we might be able to take that will eventually turn into a landslide of change.

My top tip for this is to develop mindful noticing habits. Keep a list of things about publishing you think aren't right, to remind yourself to work against them. Try to phrase it positively. The longer you are in publishing, the harder it will be to see the industry objectively, but it is never too late to start trying. I was recently reading through my own list and it includes notes on the mundanely simple to the very complex, such as:

- publishers should always provide milk, tea and snack budget – hungry people cannot work;
- never let 'to do differently would be difficult' stop you;
- design Excel sheets with Mail Merge in mind;
- always check lead times;
- pick up the damn phone;
- always get labels which fit the printer; and
- love the books, even the ones that don't love you.

This last point is my favourite. You have to love every book as if you were its midwife (or, in an author's case, its parent).

Once your internal noticing habits are up and running, break out some pleasantries: in an economic culture that is constantly squeezing all of us, civility and patience are often the first things to go – and that is inevitably followed by problematic breakdowns in communication. Here's a list of things you can do to combat this which are really simple:

- One day you might be the author, so don't badmouth them. One day you might be the publisher, so don't badmouth them either.
- Be honest, not cruel: constructive criticism should bruise, not stab.
- When you're an intern, make everyone tea. When you're the boss, still make everyone tea.
- Say good morning, good evening, and how are you. Then listen to the answer.

- In fact, listen to everyone all the time – even if it's the fifth call from this particular author/manager/bookseller in an hour. Listening is 90% of communication.
- Always follow up emails, even if it's been three months.

Yet, civility alone will not effect change. Once we have identified areas for change, we have to fight for them as well. And I have some top tips for that too:

- Fight like you're fighting your grandmother: be kind and polite, but firm and crystal clear. This will get more results than bull-in-a-china-shopping.
- If you are not sure, sleep on it. Giving your brain time to think is crucial to making balanced decisions. Similarly, uncomfortable issues with a project or situation do not always present themselves immediately: your feelings, like your intellect, can take time to process.
- On the other hand, if you are shaking with fury, breathe into your tummy, not your chest, and exhale to the internal count of five. This could save your career, and your plan of retaliation will be that much stronger (and objective) for the moment of thought.
- Wage your battles through bureaucratic violence, not insults. Paperwork is very powerful in an industry that runs on words. In any case if you're right, you should not need to fling barbs.
- Pick your fights. Some have more long-term effect than others. These are the ones to stick to your guns on.
- Pick your moments, too, you will know them when they appear, but as an example, it's probably best not to talk to a person you need money from directly after a Book Fair, a meeting with shareholders, or before they've had caffeine! Also, don't be afraid to contrive these moments yourself by organising a small meeting.
- If it needs doing and no one else wants to support you doing it, go out on your own and do it yourself. 'Become the change you want to see in the world' is a cliché for a reason. (Though you should also be aware of whose toes you might be stepping on and whether the project is worth it.)
- It's publishing, know that if you burn a bridge people will hear about it – don't be afraid of the gossip chain, but do be aware of it.
- Finally, be brave without becoming arrogant.

### **Conclusion: inhabiting the quantum state of bookishness**

Ultimately, our place in publishing is defined by the moment and what it requires of us. Book people are simultaneously many things at once. Of course, everyone in publishing is also simultaneously a reader, whatever their job, title, or sector. But many of us exist in two or more different roles at once. For instance, I know book critics who are also literary agents, book-trade journalists who are also ghost writers, and every one of us knows at least one publisher who is also



**FIGURE 13.4** We all exist within a quantum state of bookishness.

an author. Many of us are writers by night, editors by day, and readers on our morning commutes. Critics by dusk and literary agents by dawn.

Each of us inhabits a kind of quantum state of ‘bookishness’ that is expressed by the job we are currently in, the readers and writers we are surrounded by, our moods and desires as we browse bookshelves.

What’s more, publishing is one of those incredible industries where as you move through it, over the years, you will probably work in nearly every sector. By the time you retire (and bear in mind I have never actually met a retired book-person, I suspect we just keep booking about until we pop our clogs) you will probably have touched every aspect of the book ecosystem in some way. It’s worth remembering this every day, because it helps us remain humane. Today you might be an author, tomorrow you could be a publisher. Next year, you might be a bookseller. Keeping the ecosystem going is not just keeping books alive for other people: it’s keeping them alive for different aspects of ourselves, that we have been, are being, and have yet to be (Figure 13.4).

There is a theory of design principles in gardening called ‘permaculture’, which essentially tries to put into the soil as much as it takes out by harnessing the natural ecosystem. Our place as publishers – whatever we’re doing, whichever hat we’re wearing today – is at that metaphorical plough, putting in more than we can draw out in the current moment, tilling the earth and sowing seeds for the next generation of readers. And that, in these neoliberal times, is a very rebellious thought.

## Notes

- 1 This is a vastly abridged overview of neoliberalism’s history. For more in-depth analysis, I suggest the neutral definitions in Roy (2010) and the less politically agnostic but gripping analysis in Chomsky (2011).
- 2 For further reading, see the incisive insights and brutal honesty of Di Leo and Mehan (2014). I am deeply indebted to this work in my research, particularly Chapter 8 by Di Leo, ‘Neoliberalism in Publishing: A Prolegomenon’.
- 3 For a history of the term, see Schmelzer (2014).

- 4 For an overview of specifically digital disruption, see Gilbert (2015).
- 5 For more, see Kirkbride (2017b).
- 6 For more, see Liu (2018).
- 7 See, for example, Fishwick (2008).
- 8 See, for example, Shaffi (2015).
- 9 For example, for the PA's response to Solomon, see Campbell (2018).

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