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Andrew Bibby

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New Development: Doing it Ourselves the Co-operative Way

Andrew Bibby

Anyone who aims to make their living professionally from writing knows that books are not the way to make a speedy fortune. Calculate the hours taken to research and write even a modest title and you'd almost certainly find yourself working for far less than the minimum wage. The Society of Authors' latest survey (May 2015) found that average authors' incomes in Britain, including advances, royalties and collecting society payments, is about £12,500.

It doesn't help that the publishing industry is increasingly driven by commercial pressures. Perhaps there really was a time when literary gentlemen (and a few ladies) sat in offices in Bedford Square in London reading typed manuscripts to decide which books caught their fancy and could be added to their lists. These days, publishing decisions are led much more by the views of sales and marketing staff than they are of the editorial departments.

In general, the size of publishers' advances — when offered — are falling. I received a little under £10,000 ten years ago from a publisher for an outdoor title I wrote for them — nothing like what I could have earned if I had spent the time involved in newspaper journalism or indeed almost any other sort of work, but still not too bad in the circumstances. I suspect I'd be lucky to get a fraction of that for the same book today.

We do have in Britain some long-established independent publishers who care about their books and try to care about their writers. However, they are also obliged to operate in a tight commercial market.

So are there any alternatives? Self-publishing is certainly no longer dismissed as being simply the province of vanity writers, and indeed both the Society of Authors and the National Union of Journalists offer advice to their members on successful self-publishing. The rise of the e-book has helped. I find it hard to think of many things about Amazon that I like, but the modest monthly royalties I get through from the company for the e-book sales they make for me are certainly better than nothing.

However the real difficulty with self-publishing is the marketing aspect of the process. Writing the book is the easy bit. Finding a printer is not too difficult. Getting the published book into the shops and into the hands of book-readers is the challenge.

So in mid-2016 four of us who earn our living professionally from writing decided to come together to try to develop a better way to market self-published titles. What we have done is to set up a marketing co-operative. It's based on the way that artists and craftspeople sometimes collectively market their works (it's also exactly the same method that dairy farmers have traditionally used to sell their milk, of course). Gritstone Publishing Co-operative Ltd is, to the very best of our knowledge, the first writers' co-operative in Britain. A company limited by guarantee established using fully mutual co-operative rules, Gritstone provides a marketing vehicle to enable us to bring our own books (and only our books) to market. There is a shared logo and a shared website (www.gritstone.coop) where our books can be purchased. Gritstone specialises in books about landscape, the countryside and outdoor pursuits.

There are four of us who came together to create Gritstone. Chiz Dakin is the author of several books, including *Cycling in the Peak District*. Chris Goddard is the author of two exceptionally well-researched and exquisitely hand-drawn books, *West Yorkshire Moors and West Yorkshire Woods: Calder Valley*, as well as a practical guide to the Wales Coast Path. Colin Speakman has a host of published books to his credit, including the definitive *Dales Way* guide. Gritstone has just published his latest book, co-written with his wife Fleur Speakman, *The Yorkshire Wolds*.

Gritstone has also published my book on southern English landscape history, *Back Roads through Middle England*, and two crime novels of mine, *The Bad Step* and *In the Cold of the Night*, set in the Lake District.

Gritstone, we believe, gives us a credibility which we wouldn't necessarily get if we self-published alone. But there is also something more: writing can be lonely, and Gritstone provides an informal way to receive support and encouragement from our peers. The guidelines we drew up last October talk of one of our objectives being to "encourage members to take an interest in each other's work and to offer informal support and solidarity". We have, for example, read each other's work and have also sometimes helped with proof-reading and copy editing.

Gritstone is a marketing vehicle and not a traditional publishing house and we will not be in a position to publish books written by non-members of the co-operative, no matter how good they may be. We are however actively considering expanding the size of the co-operative, and are in informal discussions with another professional writer who we think would fit in well.

We're only just past our first year of trading, so it's early days. But I think the consensus among the four of us so far is that we've hit upon a model which brings us definite advantages. We're not sure why nobody has started an authors' co-operative before, and we would certainly welcome being joined by other similar co-operative ventures if others choose to come together in a similar way to us.

The Author

Andrew Bibby is a writer and journalist, writes on a range of other issues around co-operative forms of business, community-based social enterprise and mutuality. He is also author of several non-fiction books about the English landscape and outdoors, and two crime fiction titles set in the Lake District.

For more information about Gritstone Publishing Co-operative, visit www.gritstone.coop