

Brought to book?

JOHN RADFORD argues that academic authors are not adequately remunerated for their contributions to publishing. **JOYCE COLLINS** explains the economics of book publishing and considers reward for academic activity in general.



JOHN RADFORD

I AM negotiating to do a second edition of a well-received book I wrote a dozen years ago. It is strongly supported by three very distinguished referees. I estimate it will take me the equivalent of six months' full-time work. The publishers offer a return on projected sales, of around £1500. Everyone else involved will of course be paid at normal commercial rates. And they want it on disk, fully word-processed – formerly the work of typist and compositor.

I am asked to write a chapter for another book. I am told: 'Due to the costs of production, it will not be possible to pay the authors anything.' My work is not a 'cost of production'.

A journalist telephones to ask for material that will form a major part of an article. Myself: 'Are you going to pay me anything?' Journalist: 'I'm afraid not'. Myself: 'Will you get paid?' Journalist: 'Oh, that's quite different!'

A publisher asks me to review a lengthy manuscript, and offers a nominal fee, or a parcel of books. Try handing these over at Sainsbury's check-out. But books are payment in kind and subject to income tax.

These are all true stories and common ones. When I object, I receive only specious answers. 'We can show you where all the money goes.' I know where it goes – into every pocket except the author's. 'Academic publishing is a risky business.' Not so risky when it fails to pay your salary. 'Academic books have small returns.' Then you are



publishing the wrong books, or your production costs are too high.

There is an assumption that academics are a kind of free resource, available to all without charge, or almost so. Try asking a lawyer or a plumber to work on such terms. Academics in the UK are notoriously underpaid and grossly overworked (a recent survey shows 50 to 70 hours a week). Apart from publishing articles in prestigious journals, none of these ancillary activities is rewarding. The system is indefensible and something has to give. Perhaps it will.

Having tried it once, I discovered that it is quite simple and relatively cheap to produce a book. The difficulty is marketing, but the internet may solve that. Technology for printing on demand is well within the compass of a university, or even a department.

In the meantime, word processing pays about £20,000 a year. I cannot see why I should be paid a fraction of that for the same work, plus researching and creating a book. Why should I supply my professional expertise for derisory sums?



JOYCE COLLINS

As a publisher, married to an academic with a long and distinguished publishing record, whose father was a printer, I am familiar with all of John Radford's grievances (and more). I am also greatly admiring of authors. So, at the risk of sounding specious and convincing no one,

I will try to put the other side of the argument.

It is true, of course, that editors, typesetters, printers, distributors, bookshops and marketing personnel all make a regular living out of publishing. It is true also that, unlike most authors, they all incur overheads and risk capital well in advance of sales. This is the familiar response, but I want to go further and suggest that a good publisher – author partnership can add value to a book in all these spheres by moulding it to the marketplace. If we think of publishing as an activity like staging a play, then web publishing may not be as easy as it seems.

But to address the money question directly, where does it all go? Give or take a bit, the general picture is this: production 22–25 per cent (John's main accusation);

John Radford is Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of East London.

Joyce Collins is Head of Publishing (BPS Books).

If you have an idea for a 'Head to head' debate that would interest our readers and you can suggest two people (psychologists, other academics, practitioners or policy makers) to take part, please e-mail your suggestions to the Editor on jonsut@bps.org.uk.

marketing 6–10 per cent; distribution 11–15 per cent; bookshop discount 25–35 per cent; and the poor author royalty of 8–11 per cent. This leaves a margin of anything between 28 per cent and 4 per cent to cover the rest: unforeseen permissions fees, indexes, external proofreaders, extra editorial costs and other ‘miscellaneous’ waste, complimentary copies, returns from bookshops, publishers’ general overheads and risk on capital.

John points out quite rightly that, with authors required to submit on disk, the profile of costs is changing all the time – yes, but in both directions. Typesetting costs have never been lower but the cost of sales and storage is increasing, whilst sales per title are dropping for most categories of book. Perhaps too many titles are published.

Let me turn John’s question round and



Like Joyce, I have heard it before, and there is a danger of going round in circles. I’ll make five points.

- It isn’t only books. It is the whole range of expert contributions to the media. In nearly all cases the financial return to academics is derisory.
- Contribution of publishers. I have published books with ten different houses. The best have produced my texts quickly and efficiently. The worst have caused endless delays and hassle. None has contributed significantly to the actual book. What they do of course is invest capital, and market the product,



I cannot, and will not, attempt to convince you further that there is no hidden pot of

gold in academic publishing – bar some general textbooks, of course. Academic publishing is a game entered into by all parties, of their own volition, and played largely on goodwill and trust. But the basic principles of exchange theory should alert us to the fact that all parties must gain in equal measure for the game to continue.

A more fruitful line might be to widen the debate and consider why academics, and teachers in general, are rated so low? As John mentioned earlier, academic salaries, once on a par with professionals such as lawyers and accountants, are now about half. And this perception

ask: Why do academics choose (for that is what they do) to write books? Your head of department, fearful of the RAE, is unlikely to encourage such self-indulgence. But, as every academic knows, there are other gains, of a non-pecuniary kind. Journal articles cannot slake an author’s thirst and are read by few; books can bring fame and a wider network; they can even bring career advancement. Foreign sales expand the contacts and spawn invitations abroad. Books line the office walls and emblazon your name; they are that little bit of immortality.

But the rub remains: the author’s recompense. Academic books do, indeed, bring small returns. John’s response to this is: ‘Then you are publishing the wrong kind of books.’ Equally, I could reply: ‘Then you are writing the wrong kind of books.’ Both statements are too simplistic, of course.

sometimes well, sometimes not. Stephen King is publishing a book entirely on the internet. Admittedly he can afford to experiment, but others may follow.

- Royalties. It is interesting that these come last in Joyce’s list; 8–11 per cent may be optimistic. I recently declined a final offer of 10 per cent on the net price – effectively about 6 per cent. Joyce also allows for publishers paying for permissions and indexes. I have always had to pay for these myself. And I have overheads too.
- Job satisfaction of writing. This, when it occurs, is irrelevant. The same argument has been used to justify low pay for

of low value extends also to academic products and, in particular, books. Why is it that a textbook or a research monograph at

teachers and nurses. It is not quoted much by lawyers and consultants who are paid professional fees.

- Academic writers (not alone) are primary producers, and like farmers they are being squeezed to penurious levels by wholesalers and retailers. The Society, our professional body, should, and I hope will, fight for something better.

£15–£20 is regarded as expensive when it is normal to pay the same sum for a restaurant meal or a theatre ticket? Might it be that, with free education and a free library system, we put no real value on education? If books could be sold at two or three times the price, then authors would be paid well and this debate ended.

The Psychologist would be interested in hearing your views on reward for publishing and academic activity in general.

Send your ‘letter to the Editor’ to the Society’s Leicester office or by e-mail to psychologist@bps.org.uk

MIKE THOMPSON

Printing and writing – Are they both ‘costs of production’?