

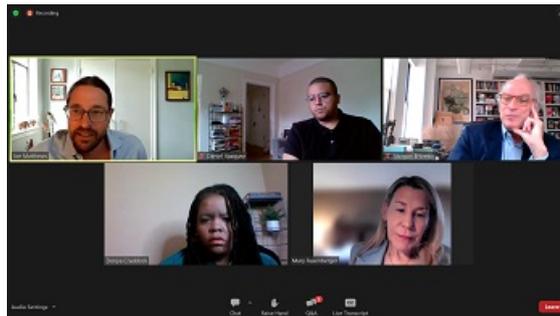
## US Book Show launches

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*Expert panel discuss big five dominance, burnout and the banning of books*



The 2022 edition of Publishers Weekly's Book Show launched its industry track online yesterday (24th May) with an expert panel discussing the many issues facing the book world entitled What Does a Health Publishing Industry Look Like? With the big five (possibly soon to be the big four) getting ever bigger, and Amazon ever more dominant, is this situation sustainable or even healthy? Are there parts of the industry that need more support, and what might the alternatives be?

Joe Matthews, CEO of the Independent Publishers Group which represents some 100 smaller publishers, argued that there had been an artificial lift during and immediately post pandemic for the industry, with books seen as helping people through times of crisis. Publishers were now, however, experiencing severe supply chain problems and this, together with a stagnating economy and consumers moving away from books to other forms of entertainment meant that the market could be down by as much as 10% this year. "The bigger players will continue to get bigger because scale is rewarded", he continued, "and technical innovations are harder for the little guys to harness."

Morgan Entrekin, CEO and Publisher of Grove Atlantic, agreed that the larger publishers had cut costs during the pandemic, partly because they had switched to more profitable digital products. However, publishers were now spending far longer than before on supply chain issues and staff were reporting burnout and dissatisfaction.

Mary Rasenberger, CEO of The Authors Guild & The Authors Guild Foundation, noted that the pandemic bump for publishers didn't translate into a bump for writers, especially for books that were published at the beginning of the period, many of which sunk without a trace, while contracts were cancelled, as were speaking engagements. A survey of Authors Guild members conducted in March asked about the impact of the past two years. In 2018, \$20,300 was the median amount earned by respondents, though only half of that came from book sales. By March 2022, 60% of the authors surveyed said they had lost around 50% of their income, mostly from speaking engagements.

It had been, agreed Entrekin, a real struggle in lockdown to get new books launched, with the loss of in-person events a particular challenge, although the virtual alternatives developed had proved helpful enough that many of them would continue to be used.

For Matthews, the pandemic had opened up conversations. "We need", he said, "to build a resilient rather



than a just-in-time supply chain. And we should stop pricing books, I'm glad that conversation is happening again, sticking thousands of copies in stock isn't an option any longer."

There was, said Rasenberger, an increasing focus on high profile, profitable books that will be surefire bestsellers, often by celebrities, something that wasn't good for a healthy society, and doesn't encourage diversity. "The winners are the big guys", agreed Matthews, "the losers are the public and literature, it's become much harder to publish some kinds of books."

Staffing has become a particular issue for publishers and booksellers. Donya Craddock, Co-owner of The Dock Bookshop, said she struggled to get people who understood the industry, and that there was a need to expand training programmes as well as pay better wages. "But bookshops aren't making enough to make these changes themselves, they're struggling to compete with Amazon pricing", she continued, "and while technology allows us to attract customers from around the country, even around the world, it means we need to have a hybrid online/offline model to offer, and it's not our core skill set."

Authors were reporting that editors are so overworked they have a hard time getting their attention, and other departments like publicity are also very overstretched said Rasenberger. Matthews felt that staff issues had been exacerbated by the pandemic, and that though everyone now agreed there was a need to offer flexibility, with some staff liking working from home and others preferring to be in the office, many companies were struggling to find the right approach. Overall, said moderator Daniel Vazquez, senior editor at Astra House, the industry seemed to be operating on fewer staff, with no time for training and a growing lack of institutional knowledge.

While many of these problems will be familiar to the UK book trade, there is another issue in the U.S. that isn't such a problem this side of the Atlantic, the banning of books. Craddock was particularly affected by this in her State: "Texas has, I believe, 800 books on the list," she said, while Rasenberger urged the industry to unite on this subject, feeling the "politically motivated banning of books in schools and libraries is damaging society and threatening the professional librarians who work there."

What solutions might be looked at to address these many issues? With larger publishers seeing ever higher returns, Entekin suggested that there was a need to look at how the revenue is being distributed through the industry, and how it could better benefit staff, authors, bookstores, while Matthew suggested that, as in other countries, the U.S. should look at subsidising authors and small independent businesses: "It would help us to have a healthier publishing eco-system."

To register for the US Book Show please go to the website, or for further information email [eventsupport@publishersweekly.com](mailto:eventsupport@publishersweekly.com) or call 212-377-5504.

*Clockwise from top left: Joe Matthews, IPG; Daniel Vazquez, Astra House; Morgan Entekin, Grove Atlantic; Mary Rasenberger, The Authors Guild; Donya Craddock, Dock Bookshop*

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