

BOOK REVIEWS



Mick Herron

More Book Trade History

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BOOKS FOR SALE: The Advertising and Promotion of Print since the Fifteenth Century

Edited by Robin Myers, Michael Harris & Giles Mandelbrote

The British Library & Oak Knoll Press, hb, pp191

ISBN

'ALTHOUGH PRINTED books of the fifteenth century have been much longer and much better explored and recorded than those of any other period,' Lotte Hellinga tells us in the opening essay of this collection, 'we have to accept that much of what actually was produced is destined to remain unknown.' *Plus ça change*, the twenty-first century mid-list author might well chime in – unless, of course, he wins an award or two, as Peter Straus points out in his piece on the effect of literary prizes. From the anonymous to the feted: as usual in this estimable series, collecting papers given at the annual Book Trade History conference, the editors have gathered under a single title a wide-ranging array of articles.

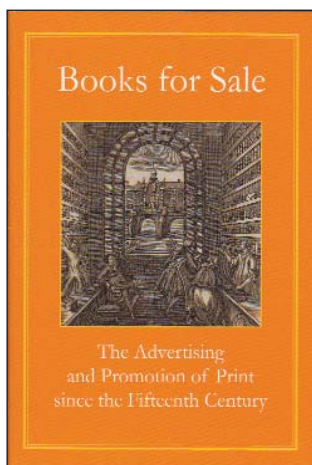
To begin near the end, Straus focuses on Salman Rushdie. Rushdie is, of course, the prime example of an author made by a prize, for while there's little doubt that he'd sooner or later have claimed his rightful place among the most celebrated of contemporary novelists, winning the Booker gave both him and the prize itself a huge leg-up – a marriage made in heaven, you might say, making it apparently unique among Rushdie's marriages. Straus analyses *Midnight's Children's* sales figures before and after the Booker, demonstrating what an impact the win had, though from a reader's point of view, even more interesting are some of the quotations he's dug up from Booker judges down the years. Malcolm

Muggeridge's view – '[the books] seem to me, by and large ill-written, squalid, shapeless and devoid of humour' – is particularly ridiculous: anyone who finds Mordecai Richler's *St Urbain's Horseman*,

which was on that year's shortlist, 'devoid of humour' isn't ready to read grown-up books, let alone judge a major prize. Not surprising, perhaps, that the Booker has had as many misfires (*Vernon God Little?* *The bloody Bone People?*) as successes, though with any luck, *Wolf Hall's* victory will herald another run of deserved winners. It's certainly about time.

But the Booker – now the Man Booker – isn't the only literary prize out there, and Straus obligingly provides a list of some of the others, amusingly including *The*

Literary Review's Bad Sex Award. This is famously intended to castigate bad books, not promote good ones, though perhaps I'm underestimating the power of publicity. It's clear from *Books for Sale* that plugging the goods has been a feature of the book trade for as long as books have been with us, though in recent times plugging the author has been just as important – though naturally, that depends on the author. Alan Powers's interesting look at the uses of the book jacket points out that author photos appear to have gone out of fashion, 'unless the author is famous enough to appear on the front of the book, often an indication that it was in fact ghost-written.' Both witty and true, though ►



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there's also the possibility that genuine authors just aren't – to use Peter Straus's term – mediagenic enough (a word he handily glosses as 'bodacious'). Powers also reproduces a spoof blurb ('All the Other Publishers commit them. Why Shouldn't We?') by one Gelett Burgess. I wonder if this was the basis of Anthony Burgess's claim that a forebear of his invented the blurb? Like most of Burgess's claims, it was best taken with a shovelful of salt (he was great at fiction; not so hot at facts), but the energy of his bygone namesake ('This Book is the Proud Purple Penultimate!') suggests a family resemblance, to be sure.

The promotion of books, though, is only one aspect covered by this collection. Michael Harris's study of variations in the use of printed advertisements takes a wider view, and contains an account of the enterprising John Houghton, whose puffed goods included 'A Witty arch Boy that is apt to play by the way when he goes on errands, would be disposed of to a Captain or Master of a Ship, if any wants such.' He later went on, in a hopefully unrelated development, to try his hand at matchmaking. Other essays cover the book trades in Paris and Ireland during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while Julianne Simpson focuses on the marketing and distribution of a single book: Christopher Plantin's eight-volume *Biblia Regia*.

As meticulous as Simpson's study is, there's an acknowledgement of the limits on what can be easily learned: 'It would

be a lifetime's work to trace the current location of all 1,158 copies.' In these days of print on demand, a lifetime wouldn't be enough; a development viewed with dismay by many traditionalists. But in his useful account of the online book marketing world – he takes as his paradigm the highly successful and very useful *abebooks.com* – Udo Göllmann encourages a positive attitude towards the new media: while acknowledging that some booksellers and publishers see the internet as an 'evil challenge,' he points out that the book has survived a lot of threatened extinctions already, particularly in the last century. And besides, he concludes, 'in a future where more and more texts will be read online, unique and superbly crafted books, such as a first edition of Tolkien's *The Hobbit* in the original dust jacket, will become even more sought after.' He's probably right. Mind you, if I stumbled across that particular example, I'd flog it online and buy something readable with the proceeds.

As ever, the editors have ensured that the collection is handily illustrated and comprehensively footnoted. And I won't be the only *Bookdealer* reader to be happy to find a photograph of the young Christina Foyle – long before she became a legend – leaning against one of her bookshop's shelves, its contents arranged in the traditional random order. ■

Mick Herron's latest book Smoke & Whispers is now available from Constable, and Reconstruction is now available in paperback.