

Literary festivals and the author

Literary festivals that do not pay authors are... like file-sharing and piracy sites, helping to devalue the role of the writer, demanding that writers work for nothing.

Recently I was approached by the organisers of a well-known literary festival, asking whether I would be prepared to chair an event or three this year, as I had done regularly in the past. No financial remuneration was on offer, they said, but I could have eight tickets for other events, which I would have to book in advance. As it happened, this year was the first since 2007 that I had not been a speaker at the said literary festival: normally I would have had a free pass to all events as a participating writer but this year I had not been asked to participate, probably because I did not have a new book out. Being the sort of person who likes to decide at the last moment what I want to see and do, I asked for a writer's pass to all events. I offered to pay my way by chairing as many events as the organisers wanted me to. They refused. One of the organisers explained:

The difficulty is that it is a real problem to have too many people on passes as we have to leave free seats in all events in case they come and want a place. We have to keep strictly to the numbers in the venues. Consequently we offer 8 comps to chairpeople however many events they chair. These days we make 3 events the minimum chairing number for admin purposes; I have some people who chair about 8+ events. I don't want to make exceptions for one person but not others so I'm afraid we can only offer 8 comps.

I have spoken at this festival each year for free for the last five years. One year I did an extra talk at very short notice when a speaker dropped out. Most literary festivals pay a nominal £150 for such presentations, but this one does not pay at all, even though I have regularly filled the 400-seat main venue. I have also chaired about a dozen events there over the same years. On no occasion have I even sought reimbursement of transport costs from the festival, which is a 50-mile round trip. At 45p per mile, I have therefore foregone £405 in transport expenses and £900 in speakers' fees (had I been paid the sum on offer at some other festivals), so I can claim to have foregone a total of £1,305. That wasn't a problem while I believed such goodwill would be reciprocated; I didn't work out that sum until now.

The organisers, of course, have every right to make the decision they did, and I don't condemn them for it. However, it raises a fundamental question about literary festivals, namely: who are they primarily for? The authors, readers or the organisers? Some, like Appledore in North Devon, were set up for a specific cause (to pay the running costs of the local library). Others are non-profit-making bodies. But some of them (like the one mentioned above) are private profit-making businesses: why should authors work for them for free?

After I'd replied, and expressed my disappointment with the decision, I received the following acknowledgement:

I fully understand your position. I try very hard not to make exceptions. That wouldn't feel professional. Like most arts organisations we rely on the good will of many people to whom we are very grateful. In return we offer what is manageable for the business – financially and practically. We feel this careful thought and planning is what has kept [*the literary festival*] going for over 20 years.

The business side of her argument – the 'financially' bit – was demonstrably wrong. I'd previously advanced them £1,305 of credit, about four times the face-value price of a pass. Not to acknowledge any indebtedness at all was guaranteed to rule out me doing anything freely for them ever again. Also their claim to be an 'arts organisation' rather than a profit-making company was decidedly dubious: it permits them to justify regularly not paying for services that most people would provide to a limited company for a fee. Most disconcerting of all was the view that their model for running a literary festival should not be altered, even though it is twenty years old. This is madness. The reading world is changing rapidly and profoundly. Literary festival organisers cannot hold back the waves – no more than Canute could – and they need to move with the times or they will lose the support of authors.

Over the last six years, readers have increasingly chosen to buy electronic books. Not everyone, certainly; some genres are affected more than others. History readers tend to want hardcopy books rather than ebooks; only about 20% of my sales in 2012 were digital. But things are swinging rapidly towards ebooks even for historians; in a couple of years time it will be much more than 20%. In twenty years time I expect that the hardcopy-ebook balance will be well over 50% in electronic form. This is important, as ebooks themselves represent a different form of doing business. Obviously it is very difficult to police ebook licenses and electronic loans. It is hard to force people to report ebook printouts or the equivalent of 'photocopying'. Most authors receive a lower royalty from each ebook sale. But most of all, an ebook can be pirated – and it only takes one pirated version for the dispersal of electronic copies to become unmanageable. Regularly I am informed by Google that one of my books is now available to download for free on a file-sharing website, provided by some kind soul who believes that I should not benefit financially from my own work. This goes for audiobooks and apps as well as ebooks. The 12,000-word app that I wrote to accompany my recent TV series has already been copied and given Italian-language supertitles for the Italian market. No digital text is secure.

A few writers see a positive side to piracy. 'Pirates do my publicity for me' declared Stephen Leather at the 2012 Harrogate Crime Writing Festival, apparently suggesting that writers should not only accept piracy but be grateful for it. The more common reaction is to see the negative side of piracy: to acknowledge there is nothing that can practically be done to stop it while at the same time wondering what might be done to make up for declining royalties. Whichever view the author takes, literary festivals are affected in both regards. For a start, both legal and illegal websites (including blogs) are beginning to do what literary festivals traditionally have done in terms of publicity, and on a much larger scale. Second, the sustainability of authors' careers is under threat, and literary festivals that do not pay authors are doing nothing to sustain the business. Indeed, by not paying authors they are, like file-sharing and piracy sites, helping to devalue the role of the writer, demanding that writers work for nothing.

The music industry offers some possible glimpses of the future. People started copying, sharing and pirating digital music files in the late 1990s. Successful musicians have been able to capitalise on the Stephen Leather approach. In this model, the pirates do the publicity, and make the band

so popular that you simply *have* to see them live. The royalty that used to come from the sale of a £13.99 CD is foregone but the freely shared tracks encourage fans to see the band in concert, handing over £45 for a show, and often going to see the band more than once. However, this model is only good for bands that can pack large venues; it cannot help sustain the vast majority of writers. Very few of us can attract more than a very small audience at £45 per ticket. The market could not sustain it on a regular basis for even a major name. It is unusual to pay more than £12 to see a writer, and most of this fee goes on the venue and organisation. Literary festivals pass on no part of their profits to authors. The loss of a 10% royalty from the sale of a £8.99 paperback is thus replaced by – what? The invitation to give up a day and perform for nothing at a literary festival, selling perhaps a few dozen copies of a hardback book at best. The live-music payoff for a foregone CD royalty has no equivalent in the publishing world.

Even if a festival pays an author £150 for attending, as a few do, it is hardly a game-changer. If an author spends a couple of hours preparing the talk; three hours travelling to the venue; four hours setting up, delivering the talk, answering questions and signing books afterwards, and three hours travelling home, then on top of the royalties for the books sold he or she will have earned £12.50 per hour. If he or she has to spend a couple of days revising the talk, or writing a new one – say, fourteen hours – then the fee will equate to only fractionally more than the national minimum wage at the time of writing (£6.19 per hour). And this is the *minimum* wage; most readers would expect their favourite novelists or non-fiction writer to earn more than the legal minimum paid to shelf stackers in supermarkets. From October, the minimum wage will be £6.31. A payment of £150 for a new talk timed as above, written in (an exceedingly brief) two days, would thus be less than the minimum wage. In any other business this would be illegal.

It all adds up to poor strategy on the part of festival organisers: a failure to invest in their main assets: the authors. As ebooks cut deeper holes in authors' pockets, there will be fewer well-known authors prepared to do the talks for free. Festivals like the one mentioned above will be less concerned with literature and more about yesterday's politicians trying to sell copies of their memoirs or biographies of their heroes. Is that what literary festivals should be about?

What are the alternatives?

To answer that question, I think you have to look at why the big festivals are successful. They draw in the big names and, just for a short while, allow the audience to see them thinking aloud, and to engage with them. Most literary festival organisers I have met are obsessed with 'the new book', as it is on the back of having to promote a new book that publicists encourage their authors to head off to Hay/Edinburgh/Cheltenham/Ilkley/Dartington/Oxford and give a talk. But the success of an event is not really about the new book. It is about the author and the resonance of what he or she has to say with the audience – often things that are *not* in the book. It's about the special event that you cannot simply pick up off the shelves of your bookshop: the asides, the jokes, the anecdotes and the passion underpinning the author's description of his/her work, regardless of whether he/she has a new title out in hardback.

With this in mind, there is surely scope for a new business model for the literary festival: a series of events run with writers in mind, paying a proportion of the profits. There ought to be a 'royalty' on each ticket sold. Why not? Perhaps the Society of Authors should consider having an approved list of festivals that meet a series of standards – with one requirement being that authors are paid a royalty for speaking. Alternatively, speakers could be paid 50% of the receipts on the door. Or, on a small scale, writers could run such events for themselves. For example: if four historians were to join me in providing a weekend of ten events, we could organise events

for, say, an audience of 200 each day and thereby gain a real return on our investment of time. And still sell books.

As for the original cause of my thoughts on this subject, you will recall that it wasn't a question of money. What I sought was a pass to see whichever literary events at the festival interested me. I learn a lot from meeting my colleagues, discussing ideas, and seeing them perform. Many non-writers enjoy feeling part of a literary milieu too. The whole interaction of writers attending other writers' events strikes me as something literary festivals ought to encourage: it creates a dialogue across the literary world. That literary festivals do not wish, or cannot facilitate, such a participatory dialogue, and prefer the model of writers speaking for forty minutes, answering questions for twenty minutes, signing a few books and then heading off back to London (or wherever), makes me certain that the future of these literary festivals is wedded to that of the book as a physical entity. There seems to be no stopping the demise of the latter. Literary festival directors who don't pay authors and who don't wish to be part of a wider social dialogue are, I suspect, unwittingly embracing the same fate.

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