

The Author

Journal of The Society of Authors

THE £500,000 NOVEL

We sell our work for what we can get for it, and there's nothing wrong with that. Or is there?

An American agent has sold Martin Amis' new novel *The Information* and a collection of short stories to HarperCollins for something approaching £500,000. Mr Amis cannot be described as a best-selling author, and everyone but his new publishers assumes that only about half of the 'advance' is likely to be recovered through sales (though it is said that the new book is 'his funniest, most overtly commercial to date', to quote his sometime British agent, Pat Kavanagh).

The mechanics of the deal are interesting. It seems that Ms Kavanagh held an auction for the novel in December, at which four publishers put in bids. HarperCollins is said to have bid £350,000 for the novel together with an additional £110,000 for a collection of short stories. Mr Amis decided not to accept the offer.

Enter, now, Andrew Wylie, Amis' American agent. Though the American rights of the book have already been sold, Mr. Wylie persuades Amis that he can secure half a million or thereabouts from Cape, Amis' previous publisher, of which £150,000 would be for the backlist (at present with Penguin). Cape declines Mr Wylie's offer on the grounds that 'As a matter of principle we would not pay £350,000 for a novel which would have an unearned advance of £100,000.' HarperCollins, not sharing that view, sign a deal worth somewhere between £460,000 and £500,000.

Stuart Profit of HarperCollins has said that 'This is a book worth making a fuss about. It is not a deal

worth making a fuss about.' Well, up to a point, Lord Copper. Certainly, any author who criticises the deal is likely to be accused of sour grapes. But one is perhaps justified in wondering whether the extraction from a publisher of a sum unlikely to be recovered unless the novel in question is very different from the author's previous books is an act which is in general good for authors. HarperCollins have been quoted as saying that they enter no deal which they do not think profitable to them.

It is not necessarily true that because an advance is unearned, publishers will lose money. Such are the economies of scale with large print-runs that part of an advance can be written off and the venture still be hugely profitable. Putting it another way, royalty rates should be much higher as sales increase. But there remains the question whether less well-known authors on HarperCollins' list will not have to pay for this offer in enforcedly smaller advances. Money lost is not invariably recouped by reducing the salaries of publishing executives. But there is an argument that the large conglomerates can afford to spend money at this rate without having to recover it from anyone in particular: it simply comes out of the general slush fund.

So should we (Mr. Amis aside) be celebrating or mourning? Dan Franklin of Cape commented that one reason for turning down the book was that if he paid the price asked, at least seven other authors on his list would expect a similar sum. I doubt if the fact that he didn't actually hand over the money will protect him - or any other publishing house - from that eventuality.

D.P

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will now be published by Little, Brown in January 1996.

Meanwhile, I detected an astonishing lack of interest in the future marketing plans of *The Kirkland Acres*. I had lined up a reader offer with *BBC Gardeners' World Magazine*, an organ to which I contribute every month, where I have quite a following, and which has a circulation of 360,000 copies monthly. It seemed to me a good springboard for the novel, especially as it's a countryside story, but the marketing department at Orion chose not to follow this up. Then, when publication day arrived, nothing. Not a review, not a copy to be seen anywhere, not a sausage! It was perplexing that after so large an advance, and so warm a honeymoon period, the publisher seemed almost to want to un-publish. Then, after months of non-communication, Orion have just announced that they are to produce *The Kirkland Acres* in paperback. I'm delighted, of course, and

will work extra hard to help market the thing, but whence this latest caprice?

The moral? Try to find out, at the outset, whether you are likely to gain full, unequivocal support from everyone in the publishing firm, whether the marketing department is up to scratch and whether they have faith in you.

It would be quite wrong to allow this piece to be nothing more than a series of moans. Almost as much of the fault with the preceding anecdotes lies with me, the writer, as with the publisher. I should have been more diligent. If publishers would take authors more deeply into their confidence, and if we were prepared to learn more about the publishing business, I've no doubt that much of the frustration, on both sides, could be removed and that sales could improve. That, surely, has to be the supreme objective for both publisher and writer. □

WRITER REMEMBERED: HENRY REED

L. W. BAILEY

In the autumn of 1943 I was discharged from a military hospital and transferred to the Intelligence Corps Depot, from which I was posted to the Code and Cypher Station at Bletchley, and placed in a civilian billet at New Bradwell (both places are now buried in Milton Keynes).

The main building at Bletchley Park, a country house now under threat of demolition, contained the canteen, at that time shared by military and civilian personnel, where I was surprised to see Henry Reed. We had known each other in Birmingham at the University and afterwards, among a group engaged in producing the annual Carnival Revue and various cultural activities. I think we were pleased to meet in these circumstances, each finding in the other a connection with pre-war life. I had last seen him on a train from Birmingham to London, the first stage (for him) of a runaway journey to Italy with a male friend against his parents' wishes, a subject of scandal amongst mutual acquaintances. This seems to contradict Jon Stallworthy's statement, in his introduction to *Collected Poems*, that Henry's father had subsidised his trip to Italy; but perhaps it was a different trip.

Over the next two years we met regularly and spent evenings in conversation at his lodgings (I had by then been moved to a military camp specially constructed to prevent army personnel getting too many civilian comforts). Henry, however, was a civilian ('on loan' from the army) having originally been recruited to Bletchley because of his intimate knowledge of the Italian language; but when Italy was knocked out of the war he was set to learn Japanese, a task which he endured with more fortitude than enthusiasm. He told me that when he first arrived at his lodgings, his landlady (or 'billetrix' in the civil service jargon employed there) watched him unpack the large number of books he had managed to bring with him, and then solemnly pronounced 'Books are a thing I never read'. Later I gathered that this story became part of Henry's regular post-war repertoire.

Earlier in the war I had met a mutual acquaintance who had told me that in the army Henry had been appointed a drill instructor, a piece of information that was met with incredulous mirth by other mutual friends to whom I

retailed it. However he now informed me that it was perfectly true; he had at one time trained as a ballet dancer which gave him a precise control of physical movement. The drilling experience may have been the first inspiration for *Naming of Parts*.

The work done at Bletchley has in recent years been made so well-known by many books on the subject and one play, that I do not need to refer to it, and so can avoid the danger of being sent to the Tower or elsewhere for breaking the solemn oath which I and others were made to swear on leaving, never to reveal it to others. Of course the individual work was mostly very boring unless one was high enough up to have an overall picture; but like Orwell's first world war narrator in *Coming Up For Air* we were very comfortable compared with those enduring hardship and danger elsewhere. This did not inhibit the traditional service habit of perpetual grousing.

The reviewer in *The London Review of Books of Collected Poems by Henry Reed*, published in 1991, described Henry accurately as a 'funny but sad man'. It was the funny (meaning light-hearted and witty) side that was uppermost in the Bletchley years. He had a spontaneous gift for verbal wit and the facility for inventing outrageous puns which often accompanies it. I mentioned once that penicillin (recently discovered) was being used in the treatment of syphilis; he responded immediately with an advertising slogan: 'Use penicillin for penis healin'. At a party he was cornered by an intense ATS lady who was saying 'I think a woman should be placed on a pedestal, looked up to, worshipped' (people still talked like that at that time) at which Henry murmured 'Embalmed, I would say'. At the same party somebody quoted the saying about the Lord Privy Seal being neither a lord, nor a privy nor a seal, on which Henry commented that he was sure the speaker combined the best features of all three.

Henry wrote a little poem about himself, citing poets like Keats and Shelley who had died before reaching his age (30) ending 'You may think my development's tardy, But at least I am younger than Hardy'. At the time Hardy was much on his mind as he had written a thesis on the writer a few years before, and was contemplating the biography over which he agonised for so long before abandoning the project. He once quoted Hardy as writing somewhere that 'the tragedy of the heart is always the same tragedy', meaning that we always make the same mistakes with different love objects. Once we were discussing Somerset Maugham's *Cakes And Ale* and the general belief that the character of Edward Driffield was based on Thomas

Hardy, both having had early marriages of which the details were unknown to the public. Henry (who admired the book and referred to it in his pamphlet on *The Novel*) remarked that he knew the facts about Hardy which were totally different from those of Maugham's character, and would reveal them in his biography. Eventually, of course, many years later, he was beaten to the post by Robert Gittings, with whom, according to the *Times* obituary of Gittings, he had an acrimonious correspondence. I suppose that as he spent several weeks over revising a single line in a poem, the time spent on revising a book would stretch into infinity; which in a way it did.

He told me on one occasion that he had been invited by a leading weekly paper to be its dramatic critic, but had turned the offer down. Surprised, I asked him why; he said that he had friends in the acting profession and could not bear the thought of having to write unfavourably about their performances when he thought that was deserved. I suspect that another aspect was that continually attending theatrical performances, most of which would have bored him, was too dreary a prospect.

He did, however, review novels for a time, sometimes with considerable acidity, as in the following remembered passage (of a forgotten work): 'The characters in this story appear to spend most of their time copulating, excreting and urinating. This presumably gives satisfaction to those unable to achieve these objects in real life.' (This could apply to much contemporary work.)

The three months between the ending of the two wars was an odd period, in which people felt optimistic about the future; this feeling was enhanced by the Labour victory in July, which seemed to be welcomed by everybody one knew. The feeling of optimism was shattered soon afterwards with the news of the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Henry was greatly upset by this, as indeed were many who later became hardened to Cold War confrontation. I recall entering the mess for breakfast on the morning that the news broke and feeling a dull silence instead of the usual cheerful chatter. The sort of celebrations that had greeted VE day seemed inappropriate, and the Japanese war ended with a bang and a whimper.

After VJ day Henry disappeared and was duly demobilised (having only been on loan from the army). One condition of his wartime civilian status had been service in the Home Guard, and he had been presented with a certificate stating that he had been willing to defend his country by force of arms and with his life if need be. This he gave to a mutual friend, having crossed out the words 'if need be' and substituted 'if absolutely necessary'.

Under the gradual demobilisation plan I eventually returned to Birmingham where Henry had been broadcasting weekly on the Midland Region about the films shown in local cinemas, which he did with his own special combination of wit and eccentricity. Reviewing a film about a 'wonder dog' of the kind popular at the time, he devoted the whole script to speculating why they never made similar films about cats (he was a great cat lover). Another time, reviewing a musical, he quoted a song of which the entire lyric consisted of the word 'Guadalajara' repeated four times. Henry concluded: 'If you want to know the name of this song, it's "Guadalajara".'

I only saw Henry occasionally in later years, to my regret, but we followed different paths. Once he came to supper with my wife and me and spent the evening nursing the cat. Later, I read that he was to give a talk on P.G. Wodehouse

on radio in connection with the latter's eightieth (or was it ninetieth?) birthday. Surprised, I asked him about this and was told 'He and Stendhal are the only novelists I read', adding that he would have to write the script as he had been paid for it. Apparently he never did and the BBC repeated an earlier talk by Evelyn Waugh – a pity; Henry Reed would have been, I am sure, more interesting and less conventionally eulogistic. I don't know whether he repaid the fee. □

WHEN IS A PRIZE NOT A PRIZE?

Steve MAY

The taxation of literary awards seems to puzzle not only authors but also the Inland Revenue. One writer remembers arguing his case before the General Commissioners.

A couple of years ago I won a prize for a novel. I didn't declare the sum on my tax return, but mentioned it in a covering letter. In this case my inspector wanted to tax the sum, because I entered my own book for the prize, 'thereby soliciting financial reward... in much the same way that you would solicit a receipt by sending [it] to a publisher.' I disagreed. One year, much correspondence, two meetings and three inspectors later, my latest inspector (Mrs A, a self-confident young woman, newly qualified, who saw in my case a chance to show her stuff) told me that I hadn't got a leg to stand on, so, unless I backed down, it would be necessary to have the case brought before the General Commissioners.

The General Commissioners are lay persons, of the same type and standing as magistrates, and a hearing before them costs nothing beyond your own time and expenses. Their decision on matters of fact is binding, but on matters of law is open to appeal. Mrs A confided that if by some miracle I did happen to win, then the Revenue would probably appeal, and after the Commissioners the next stop would be the High Court, then the Court of Appeal, and finally the House of Lords, which could prove pretty expensive. She kindly offered me one last chance to pull out. I declined, and my preparation for the hearing began in earnest.

Anyone who tells you that the law relating to taxation of literary prizes is simple is a liar. There are a dozen relevant cases, but not one of them has a thing to do with literature. The nearest thing to a literary precedent is the Andrew Boyle Whitbread Prize hearing before the IR Special Commissioners in 1979. Boyle won, but because the IR did not appeal, the details by which the Commissioners came to their decision cannot be known, and anyway, cases before the Commissioners do not serve as legal precedents.

Instead we must turn to a motley assortment of cases involving 'voluntary payments' to cricketers, jockeys, footballers, huntsmen, property dealers and insurance agents. In the Irish case of *Wing v O'Connell* a delighted owner sent £400 to the jockey who rode one of his horses to victory in the Irish Derby. The Irish Supreme Court found the sum taxable, but Judge Fitzgibbon made the point that:

'I do not decide that every reward given to a jockey, even though his being a jockey affords him an opportunity of