

Questions for: Oliver Gadsby

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The director and founder of Rowman & Littlefield International contributes to our Q&A series

Describe your current job

I'm running a major co-publishing venture for Rowman & Littlefield (details to be announced shortly...), and contributing to the work of several boards with a focus on academic, professional and B2B publishing.

What was your first job in the book industry?

I was a desk editor (Redakteur) with Klett Verlag, the schoolbook publishers, in Stuttgart, Germany, for three years in the 1980s. I had taught English in Casablanca for a year beforehand, and this was a nice chance to apply that small piece of classroom experience in a publishing setting. I worked on English and French books for German school pupils. When I returned to work in the UK, as a commissioning editor with Hodder, I had to learn the technical terms of publishing in English, having only encountered them in German.

Who has been the most influential person in your career?

David Smith, who was my boss at Wolters Kluwer, was someone who really encouraged me to move up and helped me broaden my experience. As MD of Stanley Thornes, he was very clear about our goals and direction, and really good at getting the most out of each member of his management team. He was then the person who asked me, to my surprise, whether I would consider moving to Sweden, to another WK company. My wife and I, and three small boys, headed off to Stockholm for three very enjoyable years. By the time I returned, Dave was in a position to appoint me as MD of what became Nelson Thornes. **"The creative conversation between author and commissioning editor is still what makes the whole process tick"** *How has the industry changed since your first job?*

Well, computers have happened! When I started, design departments were filled with the aroma of Spraymount, with real cutting and pasting underway, and proofs were handled strictly on paper. When we did sound recordings, we would edit out coughs and splutters from the reel-to-reel tape with a scalpel, before sticking the new ends

back together. But there are many constants in all of that time, and I think that the creative conversation between author and commissioning editor is still what makes the whole process tick: shaping thoughts into a publishable form, and finding ways of bringing a company's resources to bear on the whole creative and sales process.

What's the biggest challenge in your job?

Keeping up with the way students learn, and what materials they need, has been a continual challenge. For over 20 years, I've been involved in finding the mix of print and digital resources which pupils, students and teachers actually want to use. There have been many false starts, but it feels as though in the US in particular there's a substantial shift underway, and the use of textbooks is dropping. Those Open Educational Resources (OER) which have been developed over recent years are perhaps now being widely used. And then there's Open Access in monographs, where I fear that the UK is going out on a rather particular limb, which may not be comfortable for those in the arts and humanities...

What's the best piece of book-related advice you've ever been given?

To get real feedback ahead of major investments through neutral market research (not run by the author, or even the editor). I've done many pilots and focus groups, but they work best when they are run by professional market researchers.

What are the most interesting things you're seeing at the moment in the industry?

I think the resilience of trade publishing, and in particular children's publishing, is a really encouraging sign. Readers have navigated into and often through digital, but the space for well published, beautifully printed books is still substantial. They're so important in the lives of young children.

What do you most like doing when you're not working?

I love cycling, whether on my Brompton through the streets of London, or on wilder terrain in the Cotswolds and Wales. There's some tennis, a bit of skiing, and of course reading.

What is the best book you've read in the last year?

An American Marriage, by Tayari Jones, is a powerful account of a marriage strained by injustice and imprisonment. Great moments of drama and revelation, as well as tender insights into what makes relationships tick, and sometimes break.

What are you reading now?

Between East and West, by Anne Applebaum. She is a scholar who carries her research lightly and can tell a powerful story - in this case, about Eastern Europe after the fall of Communism. I loved her *Red Famine*, too, with its gripping account of the terrible wrongs inflicted on Ukraine by Stalin.

How do you like to read: on screen, on paper, or do you listen to audiobooks?

Almost always on paper. I had an early Kindle, but found myself losing the thread, particularly in a long novel. And I can't sit still for long enough for audiobooks!

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