



# The World of Children's Books - The Publicity People

Article Author:

[Tony Bradman](#) [1]

[12](#) [2]

Article Category:

The World of Children's Books

Byline:

Continuing our exploration of the Books for Keeps map of the World of Children's Books, we venture into another part of Publishers Island, the Department of Publicity.

Continuing our exploration of the Books for Keeps map of the World of Children's Books, we venture into another part of Publishers Island.

In the Department of Publicity, **Tony Bradman** finds

<!--break-->

## The Publicity People

It's along and arduous journey for a book from Publishers Island to Readerland, and many places and people stand between it and an eventual safe landfall. Publishers can't just stand and wave goodbye to their books after they've launched them, either. They have to try and make all the other parts of the children's book world aware that they're on the way and, more importantly, want to buy them. And that's where the publicity people come in.

Almost all publicity for children's books is done by publishers so, in a sense, the publicity people do the most important job of all. In current marketing jargon, books are an `artificial market'. What this means is that unlike other commodities (food or clothes, for example), people don't *have* to buy books, so unless a publisher constantly works at informing the market - that's you - that his books are available and also that they're desirable, useful, not to be missed, then you're not going to know about them. If you don't know about them you won't buy them, however good they are. As we'll see, other factors play a large part in who buys what, and many people would argue that books *are* as essential as food and clothes. But it's a hard fact of life that our society doesn't see that point.

## Books for whom?

At a rough count there are nearly 12 million children under 14 in this country, and another four and a half million teenagers between the ages of 14 and 19. That's a potential market of 16½ million readers for the products of children's book publishers. The total number of children's books actually sold in a year is probably over 60 million. Nobody really knows how many of those are bought by institutions - schools and libraries - but it's a very high proportion. Of that 60 million in 1980, nearly 19 million were paperbacks. In 1981 that figure fell to under 17 million. That makes not much more than *one* paperback per child under 19.

But, of course, that isn't how it works. Most of those paperbacks are bought for a relatively small group of children who get a lot more than one book a year. They're the lucky ones, with parents and teachers working to provide them with what they need. Think of them as an inner circle, part of a `converted' book world, which has rings spreading out from it formed of kids who get fewer and fewer books. And beyond the last circle there are millions of kids in the uncharted hinterland behind the most accessible shores of Readerland who don't get any books at all.

Nevertheless, as we all believe - and as Michael Turner, Chairman of Associated Book Publishers, wrote in **The Bookseller** about the Barnsley Book Bonanza - there's an 'enormous, latent enthusiasm for books' in the community. The problem is that there are those who know about books, know where to get them, which ones are the right ones for them and how to use them - and there are those who don't. The problem facing anyone who wants to change the situation is how to reach that vast, untapped majority.

In publishing the people at the sharp end of this problem are the marketing and publicity departments. It's their job to make people aware of their product, and also to move vast quantities of books to ensure the survival of their employers. In the chain between author and child they are the second link and the sort of decisions they make - both on what to publicise and on how they do it - have a direct influence on the sorts of books which are available to children.

### **What do they do?**

So what does a marketing and publicity department actually do? It varies from publisher to publisher, but certain broad lines can be drawn. The traditional way of bringing a book to the attention of the public is through paid advertisements, mostly in magazines or newspapers. Also available but more expensive and more rarely used are posters on billboards, and television. Much more important is a free mention on the editorial pages of a publication, something which publicity people work very hard to get. At its most basic this means a review of a new book and costs the publisher only the price of the book itself and postage to a reviewer or a publication. Far more valuable is a feature of any length about the book's content or author. Trying to package a book in such a way that it attracts the eye of a journalist is an essential part of a publicist's job.

Booksellers are absolutely crucial to publishers, as is the whole of the Distributors Group, where you'll find Booksellers Island. There, in the land of the small bookseller, the big bookshop chains and the wholesaler, publisher and consumer meet to exchange money for goods. The whole group therefore plays a huge - and some say disproportionate - part in the work of the publicity people. Booksellers are, for example, supplied with all sorts of 'point-of-sale' material which comes out of publicity departments' budgets - wire racks, shelving, posters, streamers, 'dump-bins', 'headers', and 1001 other goodies designed to make booksellers more interested in selling an individual publisher's products and their shops more enticing to potential customers. Direct contact with those customers is almost invariably limited to the mailing of catalogues, which are also prepared by publicity departments, to schools and libraries. (Booksellers get them too, of course.)

### **Special events**

Last but not least - especially among paperback publishers - there are 'special events', promotions tied to a particular book which it's hoped will gain some more free publicity. These can range from arranging author visits to schools, bookshops or areas when a new book is published - the 'signing tour' - to all sorts of weird and wonderful behaviour. Small publicity people have been known to dress up as large, ungainly creatures and stand around on village greens, organise plate-smashing contests, hand out plastic dog-turds to passers-by in Oxford Street (something Barry Cunningham did to promote Richard Stanley's joke book, **The End**), and generally do things which no one sane would ever contemplate, all to attract as much (free) publicity as possible.

### **Where the money goes**

Arising from all this is the vexed question of how the decision about which books to publicise is made. Many people feel that 'good' books - and that means good in a literary sense - don't get as much money spent on them as quiz books, joke books and books by 'personalities'. It is a fact that at Puffin, for instance, not much money is spent on promoting Rosemary Sutcliff titles, while a lot is spent on a book like **The End**. These sorts of decisions are made early on, sometimes even before a book is accepted. Editorial departments often have a lot to say about which books they'd like to be promoted and how. Many books fit into one 'market' or another, and will 'do best' if promoted to that market. No publisher can afford to spend money on promoting every title to the mass market, so the money is apportioned these days on maximising the profit potential of each title in its respective market. If a Rosemary Sutcliff is likely to sell 5,000

copies and **You Can Do the Cube** over a million, the solution - to a publisher - is obvious. There's no point in spending money trying to create new readers of Rosemary Sutcliff- even if they knew how. Many books inevitably are left to fend for themselves when with a bit of promotion money they might do very well.

One other broad distinction which can be drawn is between hardback and paperback publishers. All this furious activity has to be paid for, and publicity departments are given a 'budget' - that is, they're told how much they can spend on their work. At the top end of the scale, Puffin are reputed to spend well over £ 100,000 a year on marketing and promotion. At the other end, many hardback publishers spend much, much less - an average figure is around £6,000.

It's clear that by far the largest proportion of the money is spent promoting books to the converted and to the trade - schools, libraries and booksellers. A much smaller proportion is spent directly on the consumer.

Hardback houses probably spend a smaller proportion of their budgets on direct promotion to the general public - 'Readerland' than paperbacks. This reflects a very simple difference. Paperbacks is a numbers game, and the numbers have to be big to guarantee survival. Children's paperbacks are a relatively recent phenomenon. Puffin may be 40 years old, but most of the current paperback imprints were founded in the last fifteen years, and it's those years which have seen a veritable boom in children's paperback sales. Paperbacks have always been involved in the move towards the wider, untapped market.

### **Middle-class public**

Hardbacks have traditionally been tied in to an established reading public, a middle-class reading public, which is small yet aware. In addition hardback children's publishers have been reliant for many, many years on what's called the 'institutional market' - that's libraries and schools - and the largest proportion of their promotion budgets obviously goes on promoting to their biggest market.

Schools and libraries also play a big part in some paperback marketing and publicity departments. But the picture has changed recently. The government cuts of the last three years have meant that the institutional market has much less buying power and this has affected many publishers. Schools and libraries just cannot afford to buy as many books as they used to, partly because they've got less money in real terms, and partly because inflation has hit publishers' prices as much as anything else.

The picture for children's publishers as a whole is even more gloomy, however. The ordinary consumer's amount of disposable cash has shrunk too, with depressing results for children which says a lot about our priorities. For while the number of adult paperbacks sold last year showed a slight rise, the number of children's paperbacks showed a huge *fall* - from nearly 19 million to under 17 million.

### **Into the unknown?**

There has therefore been a lot of pressure on children's marketing departments in recent years to do something about the situation. Their response has been to try to get into the vast, uncharted hinterland of Readerland, that vast, untapped reservoir of kids they're not reaching. It's meant a ferment of ideas being thrown up and tried out.

One statistic which publishers use almost as a talisman is that 67 per cent of all children's books are bought by women between the ages of 25 and 45 - the Mum's market, as they say, although it must include a fair number of teachers. (It's another example of how many people stand between the child and the book.) Publishers have watched the institutional market suffer and the 'consumer' market grow, so that's where they're putting their efforts.

'The amount we're spending on direct promotion to mums and dads is definitely rising,' says Barry Cunningham. 'The schools market is static at the moment and the mums and dads market isn't really being exploited at all. So we're spending much more money on getting into that.' Part of this increase is to be found in more of an effort to make inroads into women's magazines, both in terms of paid-for advertising and free feature space. But it's still a drop in the ocean and most of Barry's budget and that of the other publicists still goes on promoting to 'the trade'.

## Keeping the trade happy

Part of the reason for this is that publishers are caught in a cleft stick. They're dependent on their outlets - the booksellers - and they feel they have to keep spending their money on reaching 'the converted'. These are, after all, the people who are known to buy books. It's interesting to note that publishers will admit (behind closed doors) that even much of their so-called 'consumer' advertising - advertising to mums and dads - is aimed indirectly at booksellers.

Most publishers advertisements end up in specialist magazines like **Books for Keeps**, **Books for Your Children** and **Junior Education**, and on or near the regular book pages in the 'heavy' papers like the **Sunday Times**, the **Guardian** or the **Observer**. Part of the reason for this is of course that this is where you'll reach the book-buying public, librarians and teachers - 'the converted'. But publishers also know that these pages are read by wholesalers, buyers for the large chains and booksellers, so even though they're in mass circulation publications these advertisements are still directed at the trade. Publishers often tell booksellers that a particular title will be backed up by 'massive nationwide advertising'. They know that the massive nationwide advertising doesn't necessarily have much effect on the sales of a particular book. But they also know that in the highly competitive world of bookselling, they're showing 'the trade' that they're not just launching a book and forgetting about it - they're trying to help the bookseller sell more copies. They therefore hope that the bookseller will want to take more copies of the book.

## Enter the Ford Cortina Fleet

At this point we're beginning to get into the relationship between publicity people and the sales department, whose Ford Cortina Fleet sets out through the Discount Straits to take the books to Booksellers Island. The marketing and publicity departments come under pressure from sales departments to back up their work. Sales reps want to be able to go into a bookshop and tell a bookseller that a certain title will be 'heavily promoted' - so they put pressure on the marketing department.

That's why most publicity departments spend an enormous amount of time and energy preparing for the sales conferences which every publisher has. Puffin has two a year, huge jamborees where editorial, publicity and sales departments get together, and the onus is on the publicity department to present the new season's books to the 'sales force' and get the reps 'motivated' and interested in the product they're selling so that they will go out and flog it as hard as they can. In the current state of things publishers have to make sure that the books are in the shops - that's the sales force's job - and that the public knows about the books enough to want to buy them - and that's down to the publicity department. Inevitably they have to work together to a large extent.

Increasing awareness of what sells books has had significant effect on what gets published. Exposure on radio, TV or in print for an author or a book is worth its weight in gold, and puts paid advertisements in the shade. In the past this was rare, and publishers tended to publish books and think of publicity angles later. Now under economic pressure from without and pressure for more sales from within, editors are actively seeking authors who come ready-made with a 'high media profile'.

## Personality publishing

In a sense it started in adult publishing and it's spread into children's books. It's why there's a plethora of 'personalities' producing children's books. Would Edna O'Brien's **The Dazzle**, good as it is, have received as much coverage (or sold as many copies?) if it had been written by a complete unknown? The thinking behind it is very simple. Someone who's already on TV or well known in any sphere is guaranteed some sort of coverage somewhere. And coverage equals more sales - not always, but usually.

Puffin and Piccolo have gone into this in a big way in recent years, and it's a case of editors becoming more aware of commercial pressures (as we saw in **Books for Keeps 10**). For a book on magic for kids, Jill Mackay at Piccolo gets Paul Daniels, regularly on television and popular with kids, which gives the marketing and publicity people (as well as the sales reps) something definite to build on. The enormous boom in the pop-up book, runaway successes for joke

books, and the spectre of **Masquerade** which lurks somewhere around any discussion of publicity in children's books, have had their effect.

### **Success breeds excess**

This sort of promotion idea and the success which puts 40 Puffin books in the Top 100 Penguin bestsellers (and makes the overall bestseller for Penguin a children's book two years running) creates its own problems for children's publishers' publicity departments. If Puffin books supplied half of Penguin books' sales for the financial year ending last October, the marketing and editorial departments may well be expected to come up with a similar success rate next year. Of course a large part of this success has to do with 13-year-old Patrick Bossert's **You Can Do the Cube**, a book which had everything going for it from a publicity angle. The idea of a 13-year-old writing a book which solved the problem of the latest fad was ready-made for Fleet Street and television. Sales of over a million reflect the spread of media interest.

### **The Big One**

Television is the big one (see **Books for Keeps 6** on the subject). Most publicists would give their right arms (and any other necessary parts of their anatomies) to get a mention on television. It's obvious why: not even the biggest mass circulation newspaper or magazine can reach the huge numbers of people television does. It goes even deeper than that, though. Newspapers are bought by adults, and although children might read them, they're not the newspaper's prime market. Children's television is, and a mention on **Swap Shop** could reach millions of children at once.

But you need a good angle to get a mention on television, and airtime is restricted, TV tie-ins - that is, serialisations of books - can be a great boost for an author, and producers' offices are awash with books and manuscripts lobbed in by hopeful publishers. The six-part TV serial of Bernard Ashley's **Break in the Sun** directly affected the sales of the book, pushing it into a very quick reprint. Of course you can do it the other way round too, and make a book out of a TV series. It's been happening for years in adult TV and books, but **Grange Hill** has really given it a kick in the pants in children's publishing.

### **Reaching the hinterland**

So that's what they do. But how effective is it? In straight commercial terms, what they're doing must be successful because they are still around. That is, they do sell a lot of books, and (until last year) the number was rising.

Nearly all money spent on publicity for children's books is spent by publishers on their own individual books. It's also spent predominantly on *new* books - what publishers call the *front list* - rather than on books which they have published in the past and which are still available - the *back list*. Is this just a short-term strategy for staying in the same place? What about creating new markets? Many people say - and work very hard at promoting this idea - that the only way to get deep into Readerland in a real way is for more money to be spent on promoting the general awareness of kids' books.

Although much money is spent by publishers on publicity, and much effort goes into it, their effectiveness is very limited. Yes, a lot of books are sold; but there are still millions of kids for whom books mean nothing. Publishers have a vested interest in selling *their* books, and there's still resistance among them to the idea of pulling together and investing in the future by trying to increase the total number of people who are aware of books, by reaching more of the unconverted. In the end the only real way of doing this is to spend money and time on changing the attitudes of people, and making them aware that books are a good thing. All the time that money is being poured into promoting new books, individual titles and so on, the hinterland will remain untouched. As it stands, publicity is increasingly dependent on 'the new'. All this money spent on new books - and high warehousing costs - means 'classics' are allowed to go out of print, and it's increasingly difficult for unknown new authors to get into print.

What publishers do do, however (to a greater or lesser degree) is to support organisations like the School Bookshop Association, the Federation of Children's Book Groups, the Book Marketing Council and the National Book League. They also visit schools, stage exhibitions and seminars, and several produce information in the form of booklists and

reading information for parents and teachers. Maggy Doyle, at Piccolo, for example, stages at least six exhibitions a year in various parts of the country this involves a lot of organisation, getting authors to visit, and a lot of hard work. Many publicists would also argue that any publicity is good publicity in terms of spreading the word.

A lot of work does of course go on outside publishers and much of it is done by amateurs. In fact the last fifteen years - the same period during which the sale of paperback children's books has boomed - have seen a positive ferment of activity at every level, and it's a bit like the traditional chicken and the egg - it's difficult to say what came first. Many of the ideas generated by the `amateurs', parents, teachers and librarians - book bashes and bonanzas, book buses, book fairs, community level promotion of books in all senses and in any way possible, and above all, personal contact and enlightenment - have been picked up by the professionals as good ways of promoting their books. Some publishers have also backed grassroot activities. But all this is only a beginning.

The Book Marketing Council, a section of the Publishers' Association, the trade organisation which promotes publishing, is charged with the general task of promoting the marketing of books. Desmond Clarke, the Council's director, is committed to children's books and in a sense manages the common pot into which most children's publishers - there are over 90 in the country - contribute. Children's Book Week is the flagship of the BMC's work.

`You've got to take the books to the people instead of the other way round,' is what Desmond Clarke says. `In many ways books have a certain similarity to confectionery. You've got to put them in front of people's eyes otherwise they don't buy them. You've also got to make it easy and convenient for them to buy them.' How grateful organisers of school bookshops and FCBG book agencies must feel to hear that what they have been practising for years is at last being preached.

Maggy Doyle of Piccolo stressed the importance of community involvement, of personal contact. `It's only by providing the right book for the child that you'll make that child want to read more. There's a book for every child if it can be found.' That's the problem, and that's where the money arguably needs to be spent. The problem for the publicity people is knowing how to spend it. Because no one really knows, it's risk money. And when your job is to keep sales up so your company survives, the pressure is to play safe, do what's always been done because it seems to work. And it's a hard fact of life in the book world that publicists have to make sows' ears into silk purses, and very often treat silk purses like sows' ears.

Desmond Clarke points to the fact that the music business is actually putting between two and three million pounds into a common fund to promote the idea of records. He says that this is what publishers should be doing. `We've all got to invest in making our total market larger. If publishers could see that that was important, they'd also see that it's the only way to increase their share of the market.'

Anna Locke of Heinemann says 'Publicity in children's books takes so long. Books go out of print faster these days and you spend more time and effort on promoting new books than old ones. But we still depend on word of mouth. In the end it's the children who decide which books sell, and it happens by word of mouth over a long time.'

But before the children can decide they have to be in touch with the book. And whether that happens depends to a large extent on how effective the publicity people are in persuading booksellers to stock it and librarians, teachers, parents and children themselves to be aware of it and want to seek it out.

Which is where we came in. Those who inhabit the Department of Publicity on Publishers Island certainly do play an important part in deciding what children read. Their job involves reaching out to all parts of the world of children's books. How well equipped are they to do that? Children's books publicity is full of very nice people, mostly very nice, well-educated ladies who like books and children and genuinely want to bring them together. Few of them are very highly paid or have the kind of status that encourages them to go out on a limb or take risks. Few of them, if any, have had any specialist training. They learn as they go and because of this tend to hoe a traditional row rather than seek to innovate. Enthusiasm and talent are hampered on the one hand by lack of information (there's almost no market research available yet on books) and money (budgets for publicising children's books are small compared with those for adult

books).

Publicising children's books is an art very much in its infancy. Our exploration reveals a land underdeveloped and under-resourced but rich in potential. The way in which the rest of the children's book world grows and develops depends very much on how that potential is used.

This is a very rough guide as to how publishers might apportion their marketing/promotion budget. It gives an idea of the *range* of activities publicists undertake and the target market sectors they work to. No publisher (with the possible exception of the very largest) sustains all these activities all the time. Some publishers concentrate on specific areas and different emphases exist from publisher to publisher.

Page Number:

4

---

**Source URL (retrieved on Sep '19):** <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/12/childrens-books/articles/the-world-of-childrens-books/the-world-of-childrens-books-the>

**Links:**

[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/tony-bradman>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/12>