



# Ready to pounce

Large publishing houses are keeping tabs on self-published authors and smaller imprints, eager to snap up successful books. **Nicholas Clee** charts the rise of titles sourced from outside the mainstream

What do the bestsellers *Watership Down* by Richard Adams, *The Hunt for Red October* by Tom Clancy, *Shadowmancer* by G P Taylor, *The Road to Nab End* by William Woodruff, *A Year in the Merde* by Stephen Clarke and *Our Kid* by Billy Hopkins have in common? Before becoming hits with mainstream houses, they all came from small or unconventional publishers. As the example of *Watership Down*—first published by Rex Collings in 1972 before being taken on by Penguin—shows, this is not a new phenomenon; but it is one that may become more frequent.

Tom Clancy announced his arrival as the king of the techno-thrillers through the Naval Institute Press. G P Taylor, a Yorkshire vicar, famously self-published his children's fantasy before enjoying bestsellerdom with Faber. William Woodruff's memoir came from literary travel imprint Eland before Little, Brown

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*Justin Hutchinson, small publisher co-ordinator, Waterstone's*

discovered it. Stephen Clarke touted his book round the streets of Paris, found an agent, and won a deal with Transworld. Billy Hopkins self-published *Our Kid* after numerous rejections; he is now with Headline.

Several recent or imminent books have followed the same route (see box, *right*). Jack Sheffield self-published a memoir called *Teacher, Teacher!* in 2004. With encouragement from Waterstone's, he approached an agent, Philip Patterson at Marjacq. Patterson got such an enthusiastic response from publishers that he held an auction, and struck a multi-book deal with Transworld. *Teacher, Teacher!* comes from Corgi in May.

Imran Ahmad created his own BookSurge imprint to bring out *Unimagined*, a memoir about growing up Muslim in Britain. It, too, was a hit with Waterstone's, where the then buying manager, Scott Pack,

described it as "witty and incredibly relevant". Like Sheffield, Ahmad went on to find an agent; in his case, Charlie Viney of Mulcahy & Viney. A deal with Aurum followed.

Iqbal Ahmed's books *Sorrows of the Moon* and *Empires of the Mind* also portray a Britain under-represented in mainstream culture: that of immigrant workers. While doing shifts as a hotel concierge, he published the books under the Coldstream Publications imprint, and won enthusiastic support from the London Review Bookshop, among others. Going on to find representation from Patrick Walsh at Conville & Walsh, he signed a deal with Constable.

An author may start with a small house for a variety of reasons, most of them connected to trends that have been on the increase in recent years. One, the subject of much commentary, is the bias towards conservatism in the commissioning process.



Mainstream publishers lean towards the kinds of books that already seem to work in the market; to the kinds of books that Richard and Judy promote; to the kinds of books that the bookselling chains promote. One cannot blame them: the market is tough and unforgiving. Unless a general book has the potential to be marketed, it is not worth taking on.

The second trend is that the larger publishers no longer look at unsolicited material. Authors have to find agents—and some agents do not look at unsolicited material either. Those that do have to be mindful of what they can sell. Billy Hopkins sent out his manuscript at a time when it appeared that his subject—a poor northern childhood—was unfashionable. One agent wrote: “There’s no demand for stories about nostalgia, northern slums, and ‘trouble in’t mill’ stuff.”

After numerous rejections, Hopkins writes on his website, he published the book himself, advertising it in magazines including the *Oldie* and *Practical Gardening*. Someone recommended the memoir to the Blake Friedmann agency, where Isabel Dixon took him on; she sold *Our Kid* to Headline. As Headline was to discover, northern slums held appeal for a readership that publishers had been neglecting.

**Trend setters**

Sometimes a subject may seem unfashionable; sometimes it may be too fashionable. Raymond Khouri wrote a screenplay called *The Last Templar*, a thriller about the bloodline of Jesus, before *The Da Vinci Code* came out. By the time he had produced a novelised version, the mass market publishers had already taken on their “Da Vinci clones”.

So his agent, Eugenie Furniss at William Morris, sold *The Last Templar* to a small house called Ziji, which co-published with Duckworth and sold tens of thousands of copies. Rights went to publishers in 28 overseas territories. Orion bought the mass market rights.

Authors who become associated with a publishing trend and fail to publish for a while, or who write a different kind of book, may also struggle. Deborah Lawrenson wrote several frothy romances for Reed (later absorbed into Random House) in the 1990s. There was a gap, and then she wrote a novel called *The Art of Falling*, set in Italy in the present and during the Second World War. She published it herself under the Stamp imprint, sold it energetically, and then, with the help of Stephanie Cabot at the David Gernert agency, got a deal with Arrow. Her next

novel, *Songs of Blue and Gold*, will come from Arrow in 2008.

A third trend, and one that may seem to be partly in conflict with the first one, is that booksellers are on the lookout for promising books from unusual sources. Sometimes publishers will not take on books because they do not think that the bookselling chains will promote them; and sometimes the booksellers sell books that the large publishers will not take on.

Scott Pack, now with The Friday Project, mentioned an example of the latter phenomenon on his blog recently. The book is called *The Key to Chintak*, by John Howard. After receiving numerous rejection letters, Howard indulged in an experiment: he typed up the contents of his washing machine manual, entitled the manuscript *The Silver Drum*, and sent it off. The rejection letters he got this time used exactly the same wording as had appeared in the first batch. At this point he decided to give up the conventional approach, and published *The Key to Chintak* himself.

The novel got into Waterstone’s top 10, and in the second quarter of 2006 was the second bestselling children’s title from a small publisher. But still no mainstream publisher would take it on. A few looked at it, but decided that it needed “too much work”. Pack blogged: “I’d sign it myself, but the author is selling more than enough on his own and pocketing a higher royalty per copy than any publisher could offer him.”

Justin Hutchinson is the small publisher co-ordinator for Waterstone’s. “A well-stocked, interesting bookstore needs to have more than just bestsellers from the big publishing houses,” he says.



Above: three left-field hits

Some authors and small publishers may ask in response to that fine sentiment how they, lacking clout, can approach the giant bookselling chain. Hutchinson says that booksellers in the branches have the discretion to stock small publishers’ titles; if an account needs to be set up, Hutchinson gets involved. “This takes about half my time—every day I am talking to new publishers and self-publishers.” Another aspect of his role is to give advice to small publishers—sometimes making them aware of “harsh realities”. “We want to take books we believe will work well in our stores, and if there are reasons why they won’t work, then I have to be honest with the supplier.”

Among Waterstone’s successes at the moment is W M W Fowler’s *Countryman’s Cooking* (Excellent Press), which has had substantial feature coverage in the *Times* and *Daily Telegraph*. Waterstone’s has placed the book in about half its stores, and has sold nearly 1,000 copies since Christmas.

Hutchinson has high hopes for another food title, Ian Walker’s *Thirty Miles: A Local Journey in Food* (Matador), which is on trial in selected stores. Walker, a chef, writes about sourcing fine ingredients in an apparently unpromising area of north Wales. Hutchinson says of Walker’s book: “It is the sort of book you can imagine being picked up by a bigger publisher if it does well in our trial.”

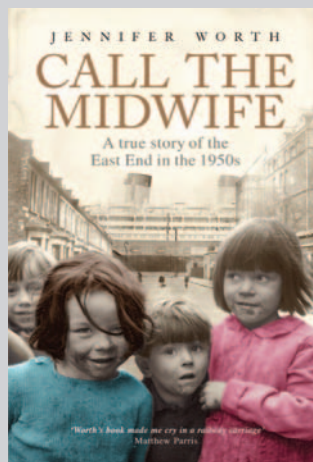
That, of course, is the dream of many authors, and it is still a comparatively rare event. But, at a time when finding new talent is an ever tougher challenge, small publishers and enterprising booksellers are offering some highly valuable market research.

**THE BIRTH OF CALL THE MIDWIFE**

Jennifer Worth, a retired ward sister and midwife, is the author of a memoir called *Call the Midwife*, about working in the East End in the 1950s. After an agent had tried unsuccessfully to sell it for her, she approached specialist house Merton Books, which in 1997 had brought out her *Eczema and Food Allergy: The Hidden Cause—My Story*. Merton published *Call the Midwife* in 2002, and a second memoir, *Shadows of the Workhouse*, in 2005.

A copy of *Shadows of the Workhouse* arrived in the hands of Matthew Parris, who wrote about it in the *Spectator*. “Worth’s book made me cry in a railway carriage yesterday,” he reported. That tribute impressed Eugenie Furniss, an agent at William Morris. She sought out a copy. “I took it home, having no idea what to expect. One of the stories didn’t just leave me moist-eyed: it reduced me to gut-wrenching sobs.”

Furniss knew that publishers would be more receptive to Worth’s writing than they had been a few years earlier. “It has strong shades of the misery market, but is also a



very good social history.” She sent it out; eight publishers expressed interest. “It had the best response of any book I submitted last year.”

Kirsty Dunseath at Weidenfeld had lunched with Furniss, and had heard about the book. When Dunseath read the submission, she decided that she wanted to act pre-emptively. “Eugenie said that she was going to auction the book. She was planning a day when interested publishers would visit the William Morris office, meeting Jennifer at half-hour intervals. Jennifer is a very fit 70-year-old; but that seemed an exhausting prospect. I said that I’d like to pre-empt.”

Dunseath sent an offer, with enthusiastic paragraphs from her colleagues in sales and publicity. Furniss came back and asked for a raise; Dunseath obliged, and they had a deal, for both volumes.

Weidenfeld’s edition of *Call the Midwife* will appear in June 2007, with *Shadows of the Workhouse* following in 2008.