

Buy and Sell Foreign Rights

Alec Gilmore, author of Agenda for Development: The Future of Third World Christian Publishing, argues for greater collaboration and exchange of rights among Christian publishers.

Every October, publishers, large and small, from all over the world, come to the Frankfurt Book Fair to do business. What they are selling is not books, but rights. Mostly they divide their time between talking to potential purchasers, who stop by their stands to see what they are offering, and browsing to see what they can buy.

Foreign rights sales spread the gospel, benefit authors and create profit.

Deals are done, joint editions are planned, packages are bought and sold. Why?

Foreign rights in the secular market

Secular publishers are in business to make money, and selling foreign rights is one way to earn profits. For a publisher who has a best-seller, foreign rights can be a real income generator. Not all books have best-seller potential: some books may be specialist works, with small editions or high distribution costs. But even

without best-sellers, sums received from foreign rights can in time provide a steady source of income which every publisher and author appreciates.

But it is not only money. Many secular publishers are motivated more by building a successful list and propagating certain principles, ideas or areas of knowledge than by profit. They like to see their products published in other countries and in other languages, because this increases the circulation of the ideas and work they are promoting. The sale of foreign rights increases circulation because a local publisher is likely to know his or her market better, and to have better promotion and distribution outlets, than a foreigner could establish in that country.

Foreign rights are particularly important where there is a link between the subject matter and the country of origin. Dictionaries are a good example—English from England, Russian from Russia, and so on. Books on tropical medicine carry more weight if they originate in the tropics rather than in Europe. Books on Shakespeare have

an edge if they originate in Britain, books on Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams in America, etc. The books are not necessarily better because of their origin, but if they come from where “the experts” are, they have greater sales potential.

Authors like foreign rights sales. Ben Okri, the Nigerian poet and novelist whose book, *The Famished Road*, won Britain’s top literary prize in 1991, might never have achieved his international reputation if he had been published only in Nigeria.

Foreign rights for Christian publishers

Money, mission and benefits for authors are important considerations for secular publishers, and no less so for Christian publishers. There is no need to apologize for the profit motive. Survival depends on marketing success. Some say it is different for Christian publishers because their commitment is to strengthen their business for the proclamation of the gospel. But money is still necessary. The rules of the game are the same for Christian publishers as for secular ones.

There are, however, additional reasons why Christian publishers might look more closely at foreign rights. The gospel, which is central

to the mission statements of Christian publishers, is universal, and Christians have a particular interest in crossing both national and denominational boundaries, breaking down barriers and increasing the sense of family and unity among believers.

Working with a non-denominational or ecumenical publisher in another country can help widen one's impact. Though a company may be unable to go beyond its traditional market in its country of origin, it may be able to reach other markets overseas. Many publishing houses have a particular denominational affiliation, whereas most Christians, at least in their reading, regularly cross frontiers and need to be encouraged to continue doing so. There is a great market there.

Christian publishers cannot say that local audiences would not greatly benefit from the experiences and perspectives of their brothers and sisters around the world. Approximately 200 years ago, the Religious Tract Society in London (subsequently, Lutterworth Press) established a global reputation by choosing topics of general interest, encouraging Christians to write about them, and then spreading the material worldwide, originally as exports but more recently through foreign rights sales.

Consider another example. *The Student's Bible Atlas*, the World Christian book series, the books by Ingrid and Walter Trobisch, and many titles published as a result of the overseas activities of Angus Hudson, would never have had a global impact if Angus Hudson had not sold the foreign rights.

Or, imagine how different the Western impression of liberation theology might have been if a few South American publishers had succeeded in selling foreign rights for their works in Britain and North America, and if publishers in Asia and Africa had done the same.

Christian publishers also feel some responsibility to their peers in other countries. Some publishers like to use their foreign rights programs to help publishers abroad

to be more successful. Whether this means offering rights to a Christian publisher at a lower rate than to a secular one is a matter of management choice. It depends on how generous the company can afford to be. For most Christian publishers it means greater sharing of information and the offer of a helping hand.

Selling rights

Publishers can develop their lists with one eye on the foreign rights market. The home market is their primary concern, but local and international markets need not be mutually exclusive. Publishers can see what authors, knowledge, resources, contacts, and opportunities are available to them that are not available to foreign publishers, yet whose potential for sales may be considerable.

A publisher may discover lay Christians with a flair for writing novels, plays, poetry or children's stories. Some may be highly regarded specialists on ecology, perhaps, or local wildlife, local medicine or principles of simple, sustainable living, proven methods of education without recourse to western models, archaeology, hobbies, or arts and crafts.

Much of what they produce may or may not have relevance outside the immediate locality. A publisher may spot a writer's potential and plan one or two books with both home and overseas markets in

mind. Thanks to the internet, people all over the world who are interested in these issues can now purchase these books. Who better than a local publisher to find, produce, and then make them known?

In selling foreign rights, it is easy to feel one's company has nothing to lose and everything to gain. Often that is true. Only one publisher shows interest and one thinks anything is better than nothing. However, for special titles it is best to choose the purchaser carefully. Ideally, the purchaser will be reliable, with a good reputation for selling, who has other similar titles already and therefore knows the market. Do not sell a prize children's author to a publisher who has never published a children's book before. Other interested publishers may demonstrate the same enthusiasm, but what matters is the best outlet for one's product and author's reputation.

Buying rights

There are many advantages in purchasing rights to titles developed by publishers abroad, or else secular publishers would not be involved. One advantage is one can see the finished product and avoid the uncertainty that accompanies too many commissioned works. Another is, it broadens one's list and gives it an international feel. The presence of a well-known author, or an already established specialist, may enhance both the

CAN'T VISIT FRANKFURT?

Conduct business on the web. With worldwide internet access, it is no longer necessary to postpone rights inquiries until the Frankfurt Book Fair, the Christian Booksellers Association convention, Book Expo America or other events.

The Evangelical Christian Publishers Association (www.ecpa.org) has added a searchable database to allow Christian publishers to search books by language, author, title, publisher, and category. Site users can request rights for books meeting their criteria.

Visit Christian publishers' sites. The Cook Communications Ministries International site (www.ccmi.org), includes a section on Non-English rights.

Visit secular on-line rights markets such as rightsworld.com, rightscenter.com, subrights.com, or www.new-books-in-german.com.

list of titles and the reputation of the publishing house.

Sometimes, foreign rights negotiations enable publishers to secure an established title which clearly has a place in their market. If one is not able to produce a book of similar standing in one's firm, because the subject is too specialized or the market too small, foreign rights may be a way to overcome these obstacles.

Always view a book's "success" in another country with a wary eye. On a recent visit to the Frankfurt Book Fair, I observed two highly successful Christian authors giving an English publisher a very rough ride because he held the UK rights and stoutly refused to release them. He failed to match the sales achieved in almost every other country which had bought them. Why he refused to surrender them was never clear, but there was no doubt he had tried hard and failed.

These authors' books may have sold everywhere in the world but they just didn't "go" in Britain!

Off to Frankfurt

The Frankfurt Book Fair is the world market for foreign rights in books of all shapes, sizes, subjects and descriptions. To be effective, it is necessary to have a small stand or at least a corner of somebody else's stand. Wandering footloose can be a soul-destroying business. The book fair is crowded with visitors from all over the world, including lots of small publishers struggling to survive. One is certainly not alone.

If time and money are available, the fair is worth a visit. The foreign rights are what matter, not the book fair. There is no need to go to Frankfurt to get on with the business of negotiating book contracts with publishers in other countries. However, at Frankfurt, publishers

have opportunities to exchange titles and information. In some cases, a publisher spots an overseas market for a title, knows that his or her firm cannot handle that market effectively, and so seeks a deal with a local publisher to their mutual satisfaction. Or, conversely, the publisher spots an author (or a book) in somebody's list overseas which might do well in the local market. Foreign rights then become something to buy.

Bear in mind that it is important to preserve a balance between buying and selling foreign rights. Do not rush when it comes to negotiations. Weigh the advantages and disadvantages—and proceed wisely to Frankfurt. ♦

THE UNITED STATES IS NOT THE CENTER OF THE WORLD

Very little of what is published in the "Two-Thirds World" ever reaches U.S. readers. This is a tragedy. Americans need to understand that the United States is not the center of the world. Not all truth originates here. Most Americans are not world-literate. Our isolation limits our ideas and even our Christian growth. I wish I could have taken American Christians with me on a visit to South Africa. I would have liked them to sit with me and listen to the prayers of Christians from across the African continent. They would have heard those people's insights into who God is and what he is doing in the world. And, they would have been taught by what they heard. How I wish they could have been with me in a small prayer group with three black South Africans and have heard their prayers on reconciliation and forgiveness, and on what it means to be a brother or sister with another believer regardless of race. Cook Communications may have much expertise to give "Two-Thirds World" Christians, but we and other U.S. Christians need to realize how much worldwide believers have to teach us about obeying Christ and living out his teachings. It will be a great day when we all become teachable.

—Bruce Adair, Senior VP of Operations,
Cook Communications Ministries