

Introduction

D-M Withers and Kate Wallis

The South West of England is emerging as a 'bookish hub' declared a recent article in *The Bookseller* (2022). The opening of Hachette's regional office in Bristol in July 2021 is seen as a key moment in this evolution. For the first time, it brought one of the 'Big Five' 'London publishers' to the South West with the ambition to build stronger links with literary communities and book trade businesses outside the capital. It was a move replicated in other cities across the UK, with Hachette opening offices in Sheffield, Newcastle, Manchester and Edinburgh, with the intention of breaking down barriers and increasing the social diversity of an industry that has remained, until recent interventions, stubbornly white and middle class.

The South West of England has long-established literary networks and publishing industries. Devon alone is home to two literary legends that redefined publishing cultures in the twentieth century. Agatha Christie, born in Ashfield, Torquay in 1890, became the biggest-selling novelist of all time (her business archive, Agatha Christie Ltd, is held in Special Collections at the University of Exeter and offers fascinating insight into how this happened). Penguin Books was famously conceived at Exeter St Davids train station when Bristol-native Allen Lane (who was returning, incidentally, from a meeting with Christie) had the great revelation to publish literary classics for the mass market for the price of a packet of cigarettes. This iconic moment was celebrated in 2023 when a Penguin Books vending machine was installed at the station, an initiative led by Exeter City of Literature, and which you can read more about within this publication (see pp. 25–7).

Publishing and Literary Networks in the South West presents a collection of essays, interviews and reviews that work to collectively celebrate publishing and literary networks in the South West. As the pieces themselves make visible, these stories are inevitably shaped by the region's distinct physical geography. The South West stretches out across Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, Dorset, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire, the largest of the UK's nine regions. Home to the significant urban hubs of Bristol, Plymouth or adjoining Bournemouth and Poole, it also boasts the longest coastline of any UK region, and a large proportion of its population live in smaller rural settlements. Reading this extended regional geography as a collective literary space therefore opens productive connections, but also tensions. A 2023 South West-based literary event that perhaps speaks to some of these connections and tensions was the appearance of Natasha Carthew and Catrina Davis in conversation with Raynor Winn at the Cheltenham Literature Festival. In a discussion entitled 'Rural Idyll: Myth and Reality', staged at one of

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the UK's oldest, largest and most affluent literary festivals, these writers addressed the disjunctions between the beauty of the Cornish landscape as a nurturing space for creativity, and the lived experiences of rural poverty and lack of opportunities for writers located within it. Notably, Carthew, whose memoir *Undercurrent* was shortlisted for the 2023 Nero Book Awards, is a writer invested in strengthening South West-based literary initiatives and networks. In 2021, she published her collection *Born Between Crosses* – interconnected stories that engage with the challenges facing rural working-class women in Cornwall – with Penzance-based Hypatia Trust (interviewed for this publication pp. 94–101). In the same year she launched a new Bristol-based literary festival – The Class Festival – focused on celebrating working-class writing.

As part of a 2023 'South-West Focus' in *The Bookseller*, Caroline Sanderson highlighted the region as one that 'abounds in working authors and illustrators, and brilliant indie publishers'. The pieces gathered here can therefore only ever offer a partial snapshot of the dynamics and breadth of literary networks and publishing initiatives across the South West. What they can do, though, is draw attention to key areas of regional strength. In particular, they highlight the vibrancy of work happening that builds connections between nature and writing, invests in the creativity of young people, and fosters independent bookshops as thriving literary and community hubs.

Davina Quinlivan's evocative essay identifies the legacy of Dorset-based environmental education charity Common Ground, founded in the early 1980s, as a 'living system' connecting and sheltering an expanding network of environmental writers in the South West (and beyond). As Quinlivan highlights, it is particularly apt that Adrian and Gracie Cooper, founders of award-winning Dorset-based independent publisher Little Toller, have now taken the helm of Common Ground. Both organizations have placed a crucial emphasis on the power of writing, art and publishing to enable individuals and communities to connect in creative and transformative ways with their local environments. Oli Kleinschmidt argues here for Little Toller's significance as a small press not only in leading the way in nature writing publishing – a flourishing genre within the industry in recent years – but also in terms of urgent wider questions in relation to publishing and environmental sustainability.

Publishing and Literary Networks in the South West opens with Catie Gilhooly's powerful piece on children's writing and publishing, drawing attention to innovative work in the region that is creating spaces for children and young people's participation and representation in literature. Organizations including Kernow Education Arts Partnership, Paper Nations and, as explored by Jasmine Aldridge (pp. 120–7), Bank of Dreams and Nightmares in Dorset, have all partnered with schools to develop workshop models that push the boundaries of imagination and widen access to creative writing. And yet across the

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pieces shared here we also see spaces for children's creativity and literary expression being prioritized by libraries, bookshops and literary festivals (including Wells Festival of Literature and Africa Writes – Exeter featured on pp. 29-35 and 102-7). Alongside this, South West-based publishers Jessica Kingsley Publishers, Mabecron, Chicken House (interviewed here see pp. 128–135) and Book Island have been working to ensure as many children and young people as possible can see themselves in children's literature and be inspired by the stories they read to make social and environmental change.

One of the biggest boons to the South West's publishing and literary scenes has been the emergence in recent years of a vibrant independent bookshop sector. Independent bookshops have long flourished in the region, but there can be no doubt that smaller, curated, and community-focused bookshops have witnessed a renaissance lately. Independent bookshops feature prominently in the stories we tell about publishing and literary networks in the South West. They are spaces of 'intention' as Charlie Richards, co-owner of Exeter's Bookbag, explains. Such intentions will of course differ according to the motivations of their owners, but all the shops visited in these pages share one thing in common: they are spaces which create community. Whether that be the political reading groups hosted at Bristol's Bookhaus; or the readers who gravitate toward the Persephone Bookshop in Bath, with its feminine, genteel and subtle subversion; or those who simply feel at home in Bookbag, with its careful curation of books by underrepresented authors. The independent bookshop sector is thriving, not only as a space of consumption, but as a vital platform for the activation of local literary cultures.

By creating a publication that celebrates and coheres a narrative around publishing and literary networks in the South West, we want to be part of strengthening the work that is happening in this space. Our intention is to do this by raising the visibility of and generating conversations about the region's publishing ecosystems. We hope that by sharing the series of pieces that make up this publication, connections and interventions can be sparked for readers that contribute to and continue this work. This publication adds to initiatives and conversations started by Literature Works, the Society of Young Publishers South West branch (see pp. 161-9), Exeter City of Literature, The Lit Platform, and Sad Press and Handheld Press's Bath and Bristol Small Publishers' Gathering (2018) that work to promote publishing and literary industries in the South West. In particular, in our interview published here, Anna Cohn Orchard (Director of Exeter City of Literature) emphasizes the importance of 'job creation and talent development'. We hope that in giving shape to the region's publishing and literary space, this publication can play a part in building these opportunities for the future.

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Publishing and Literary Networks in the South West has been forged by the skill, dedication, hard work and talent of students on the University of Exeter's MA Publishing programme. Our 2023–24 cohort have overseen the entire process of creating this publication, from conception to realisation; typesetting the interiors and designing the front cover which features an original illustration by UWE Bristol student Woon Chang. They have conscientiously pitched and written articles, and then collaboratively and carefully edited each other's work. Their contributions report on the vibrant literary events happening across the South West, from Conversations with Baldwin curated by Words of Colour to Bristol's Lyra Poetry Festival and Queer Out Loud in Plymouth. The region's linguistic diversity is celebrated too, through a detailed survey of Cornish-language publishing, past and present. There are articles on the mission-based academic publisher Bristol University Press and queer reprint publisher Lurid Editions. Conversations with library professionals based in Exeter, Bristol and Cornwall speak to libraries not only as the 'beating hearts' of communities, but as spaces of sanctuary, retreat, discovery and entertainment. There are also interviews with South West-based artists and industry figures, such as illustrator Betty Bettesworth and literary agent Suresh Ariaratnam.

When we founded the MA Publishing at the University of Exeter in 2021, one of our goals was to create a supportive, research-based space that could form part of making meaningful change within the publishing industry in relation to issues of access, representation, global power structures, social and environmental justice. We also wanted to connect our teaching and research to the vibrant literary networks and publishing industries present in the South West. Our work in these areas is ongoing, and we hope with this publication and its subsequent iterations, in dialogue with work with our students and South West-based industry partners, we can make space for continuing these conversations.

Works Cited

Agatha Christie Business Papers, 1938-1976. University of Exeter, EUL MS 99.

Caroline Carpenter, 'Momentum builds in the south-west as Bristol and Bath emerge as bookish hubs.' *The Bookseller*, 28 Oct 2022. <https://www.thebookseller.com/features/momentum-builds-in-the-south-west-as-bristol-and-bath-emerge-as-bookish-hubs>. Last accessed 28 Nov 2023.

Hachette UK. 'Hachette to open new national offices from July.' <https://www.hachette.co.uk/hachette-news/2021/07/26/hachette-uk-to-open-new-national-offices-from-july/>. Last accessed 28 November 2023.

Caroline Sanderson, 'Category Spotlight: South-West Focus.' *The Bookseller*, 27 Oct 2023, pp. 16-20.

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