



## Models of support for literary fiction

### Introduction

It is impossible to overstate the significance of literature to this country. England's international reputation is entwined with its literary output: from Chaucer, Donne and Shakespeare through Austen, Eliot and the Brontes all the way up to present-day authors such as Hilary Mantel and Zadie Smith, the richness and brilliance of our literary tradition is unparalleled. But over the course of the last decade, there has been a sense, gradually building to a conviction, that fiction - especially the less commercial, more experimental type of fiction that is commonly labelled 'literary' - currently finds itself within an especially challenging environment.

While it is important to acknowledge that there has never been a point when authors, agents, publishers and, indeed, readers, haven't feared for the future of literary fiction, the volume and consistency of the concerns expressed by the sector over recent years – particularly when taken in the context of the seismic changes experienced by the industry (the death of the Net Book Agreement; the birth of the internet; the rise of online bookselling; the proliferation of competing media) – appear to support the view that something singular is occurring. As a result, Arts Council England, in its role as the national development agency for arts, museums and libraries, decided that further research into the health of the sector was called for. The aims were, firstly, to test the assumptions emanating from the sector around literary fiction's decline and, depending on the findings, to identify what actions the Arts Council and others might take to halt it.

To that end, the Arts Council commissioned digital publisher Canelo to undertake an extensive piece of research into every aspect of literary fiction's wellbeing and sustainability, in order to set an independent benchmark for the sector, and to inform our own investment, development and advocacy work going forward. The report was researched and written during 2016 and 2017, and is published today as **Literature in the 21st Century: Understanding Models of Support for Literary Fiction**. Broadly, its findings support the anecdotal evidence. While individual bright spots and success stories certainly exist, the general trend for literary fiction is a negative one. (The report's authors note, incidentally, that while there is no categorical definition of 'literary fiction', there is a functional consensus

across the sector which allows for a practical interrogation of its position.) Sales, prices and advances are all down, meaning that the ability of authors to make a living through their writing has been substantially eroded. Perhaps as a result, diversity (in the form of the representation of BAME, working-class and non-metropolitan writers and publishers), long-recognised as an area of concern within the industry, is, if anything, declining. Support for ‘midlist’ authors is diminishing, as publishers are forced to tighten their belts, and there is a widespread sense that mainstream publishers, conscious of their bottom lines, are choosing to take fewer risks when it comes to the less commercial end of the spectrum. The advent of digital technology, meanwhile, has proven a double-edged sword: creating opportunities (new platforms; new publishing models; new mediums and methods of storytelling; new outlets for writers) on the one hand, while contributing to the challenges facing literary fiction (Amazon’s erosion of book prices and real-world shops; the competition for attention created by streaming services and handheld devices) on the other. Although there have been tentative signs of recovery – strong print sales in the week leading up to Christmas 2016, for example, and Waterstones’ recent return to profit – the structural issues remain unchanged.

For Arts Council England, investment in literature constitutes a small but highly significant portion of its total spending. Over the current funding period (2015-2018), the Arts Council expects to spend approximately £46m on literature, in the form of grants for the arts, strategic funds and the organisations it funds through the National Portfolio, from a total budget of over £1.3bn. Our aim is to support and sustain every aspect of the literary ecology in this country, and our support for the sector is wide-ranging, both in terms of size and scope: covering everything from ‘time-to-write’ grants of a few thousand pounds all the way up to an annual award of £5.4m given to BookTrust for its universal and targeted bookgifting programmes. Between these two poles, we also invest in a national network of writer development agencies, a range of publishers (with a particular focus on poetry presses), literary festivals, story centres, spoken-word groups, manuscript assessment services and reading charities, with a focus across the board on promoting diversity within the artform.

Historically, there has been an assumption that literary fiction fell within the sphere of commercial publishing, and therefore required little in the way of direct intervention from the Arts Council. Given the evidence in the report, however, as well as our own internal intelligence and the input of a group of industry experts who offered advice on the report’s content and recommendations, the Arts Council will test and develop the following proposals with a view to strengthening the literary fiction sector in England during the 2018-22 investment period.

## **1: Support for individual authors**

The Canelo report's findings around the position of authors writing in England today – particularly in the field of literary fiction – are unequivocal. Where in 2005 40% of authors survived solely from the earnings they made through their writing, just eight years later, in 2013, only 11.6% were able to do the same; these days, median earnings of professional writers (those who spend more than 50% of their working week writing) fall well below the minimum wage. The impact of this situation on the range of people who can afford to write – and thus the diversity of stories that are being told – is profound. Further, it is important to recognise the potential impact on the broader creative industries of the absence of a strong, diverse talent pool of writers. There is a growing recognition beyond the publishing sector of the value of writers as content creators: in film, TV, gaming, immersive media, and so on. If our creative industries are to continue to thrive, we need to ensure that we are able to identify and develop the authors of the future, many of whom will emerge out of the field of literary fiction.

Currently, authors can and do apply for funding via our Grants for the Arts programme, which typically provides project grants of up to £15,000. However, the number of applications received from authors is relatively low compared with those from artists working in other artforms, and the success rate is not high; the requirement to demonstrate public engagement has proven difficult for some writers to negotiate,

The Arts Council will therefore take the following actions to improve the way it supports individual authors:-

- a) As part of the work on developing the new Grants for Arts & Culture programme which will come into operation from 1 April 2018, we will take into account the high potential impact of the 'time to write' grants that are distributed via the programme, and ensure that they remain an aspect of the fund going forward. We will also work to promote internal awareness of their significance to decision-making panels.
- b) Alongside the new Grants for Arts & Culture programme, the Arts Council is currently examining the possibility of a new funding programme aimed at supporting individuals to develop their creative practice without the requirement to describe the public outcomes of their work. Such a fund would be of particular value to authors, for whom the difficulties of demonstrating public engagement in advance of the publication of a work are evident; we will ensure that this new programme is designed in a way that it is hospitable to authors of literary fiction.

## **2: Development of diversity across the sector**

The report shows that diversity within publishing – a long-term, widely-acknowledged issue for the industry, both in terms of staffing and artistic output – has failed to improve over recent years and in some areas appears to be worsening. In the case of authors, this is likely to be related in part to the issues around income mentioned above: writers from low income backgrounds (many of whom are disabled and/or BAME) are less likely to embark on a career in writing than their better-off peers as they are less able to take financial risks. This comes in addition to problems that are already recognised: those people from BAME or working class backgrounds who do attempt to gain entry to the publishing industry, either as writers or editors, publicists etc, are less likely to be successful. Given literature’s position as a cultural gateway – the first artform to which most of us are exposed, and the one to which all of us, no matter where we live, have access – the long-term implications, both social and artistic, of this state of affairs are significant.

The Arts Council will therefore take the following actions to improve the way it supports and develops diversity across the sector:-

- a) In allocating the additional £38m pa funding for the National Portfolio for 2018-22, we have prioritised investment in diverse-led and –focused organisations, especially outside London<sup>1</sup>.
- b) Over the next funding round, will focus our work with funded organisations on ensuring that individuals from areas of low engagement, BAME backgrounds or economically deprived backgrounds, and those with disabilities, are made aware of the opportunities for personal support from ACE.
- c) In designing strategic funds for the 2018-22, we are taking into account the need to develop and support diversity across the literature sector.

## **3: Support for independent publishers**

Currently, the Arts Council focuses its support for publishers on poetry, short story and translated fiction presses; that is, those elements of the market with recognised artistic value that lack commercial viability. While this remains a crucial element of our investment, the Canelo report highlights the recent proliferation of bold and innovative small fiction presses, and makes the case for Arts Council England increasing its support for them, in order to

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of diverse-led and/or focused literature organisations to which Arts Council England has made new funding offers or offered higher levels of funding in the 2018-2022 National Portfolio include Bradford Literature Festival, Grimm & Co, Spread the Word, New Writing South and Discover Children’s Story Centre

strengthen the health and diversity of the UK's publishing sector. Where corporate publishers are less able to take risks on new authors, or support midlist authors over the course of their careers, a number of independent publishers have stepped up, acting in many cases as talent development agencies for authors at the more literary and experimental end of the scale. They are now a critical part of the UK's literary infrastructure; all the more so because they tend to be based outside of London and therefore provide a conduit for local, traditionally under-represented voices. However, market conditions are such that their financial positions tend to be extremely precarious.

The Arts Council will therefore take the following actions to support independent publishers:-

- a) We will seek to broaden and strengthen our support for independent publishers over the 2018-22 investment round, especially using our Grants for the Arts & Culture and strategic funds programmes<sup>2</sup>.
- b) In the wake of the successful extension of creative industry tax reliefs to include theatre, orchestras and exhibitions Arts Council England will open discussions with Government about the introduction of a tax relief for small publishers.

#### **4: Support for individuals and organisations to seize opportunities presented by new technologies**

When discussing digital disruption in the context of literature it is, perhaps, natural to focus first on the negatives: on the impact Amazon has had on earnings for authors and small publishers through its discounting policy; on the way in which social media, gaming, Netflix and smartphones all now clamour for our attention, collectively encroaching on the time we have to spend with a book. However, it is important to recognise that while these changes present the sector with challenges, they also bring with them a raft of opportunities. Digital publishing is a new and growing field in which low overheads allow for nimbleness and creativity; online publishers such as Unbound, which uses a crowdfunding model to fund its books, have achieved significant successes over the last year (in particular *The Good Immigrant*,). Book bloggers have stepped into the spaces created by newspapers cutting their books coverage, and websites such as Lounge Books, have drawn on the work they do to connect books with readers. The burgeoning creative media industry which has arisen from

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<sup>2</sup> Our offer of additional funding to Comma Press from 2018-2022 in support of the recently convened [Northern Fiction Alliance](#) publishing collective is intended to underpin this support

the digital revolution, meanwhile, requires the input of writers, and presents them with a range of new platforms.

The Arts Council will therefore take the following actions to grow our support for digital opportunities:-

- a) Our new Grants for Arts & Culture programme will be open to and supportive of applications from writers and publishers focusing on new types of creative media practice.
- b) Our 2018 strategic funds, currently in development, will seek to support literature organisations in the development of new methods of delivery and business models that take advantage of digital technologies.

## **5: Reader development**

While the Canelo report focused on writers rather than readers, our own intelligence and our consultation with the industry highlighted the importance of considering readerships when producing literature. The necessity for audience development is well-understood in other artforms, but in literature is often overlooked, or conflated with the more technical question of literacy. A challenge for literature in the long term is the rise of alternative forms of entertainment, particularly for children – games and social media, specifically, are competing for space with books. At the same time, the recent publication of [several significant studies](#) considering the impact of literature – and specifically literary fiction – on mental health and [our ability to empathise](#) emphasise the importance of reading literary fiction.

The Arts Council will therefore take the following actions to further our work around reader development:-

- a) As well as renewing our funding offers to The Reading Agency and BookTrust, the Arts Council has offered National Portfolio funding for the 2018-22 investment period to The Reader, a Liverpool-based organisation that promotes reader development through an innovative shared-reading model. We will undertake further work with all of these organisations over the 2018-22 period to consider how we can provide better support for reader development
- b) Libraries play a critical role in this area and, through its role as the national development agency for libraries, Arts Council England will continue to support the library network in its reader development activities. Offers of National Portfolio funding have been made to six library trusts around the country for the

2018-22 period, and the Society of Chief Librarians will be funded as a Sector Support Organisation.

- c) As with fiction publishers, the Arts Council has had little engagement with independent bookshops to date. While we have been comfortable supporting bookshops as part of a wider range of activities in, for instance, galleries, theatres, cinemas or arts centres, we have tended to treat standalone bookshops as purely commercial entities. However, it is clear that many of these bookshops are not simply commercial businesses. They function as curators, reviewers and event spaces, and play a key role in communities' cultural lives, particularly in smaller towns and rural areas, developing an appetite for reading. We also know that many are under significant threat. The Arts Council will therefore undertake further advocacy work with local and national government to support independent bookshops and maintain their important development and support role for readers and communities.

These proposals are not exhaustive, nor are they set in stone; over the forthcoming investment period, we will test the impact of our interventions and revise them accordingly, as well as leaving ourselves space to respond to the market as it continues to evolve. Furthermore, the challenges facing the literary fiction sector are of a scale, and the required responses of a scope, that the Arts Council cannot meet them singlehandedly; partnership working, both with our funded organisations, with the commercial sector, and with prospective partners such as the Booksellers' Association, with whom we hope to establish a relationship, will be critical to success. However, we believe that, in focusing on the areas we have identified, Arts Council England is well-placed to strengthen its support for literary fiction and help to create the conditions in which it can continue to thrive.