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The Brains Behind A Brand: An Interview with Gareth Howard and Hayley Radford of Authoright


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It’s an auspicious day when I wander down Clink Wharf past ‘the most notorious medieval prison,’ down a tiny lane, towards an unassuming little door replete with bells. Markers tagging the path to a mini start-up Mecca; ‘Cute Little Apps’ Studios, One, Two and Three, and then up four flights of stairs, there I am standing before a Charlie and the Chocolate Factory door, tiny on one side, white walls, dark ebony desks, elegant designer lighting on the other... These are the **Authoright** offices, where writers' dreams are whipped to a frothy Fudge-mallow delight. Co-founders Gareth Howard and Hayley Radford, stirring up a very particular alchemy; marrying the professionalism of the traditional publishing model with the autonomy of high end self publishing, with all kinds of added extras.

It’s a seriously topical business, what with the shenanigans involving Amazon, Hachette's war with the retailer in the US, cue petitions from authors, all endemic of an industry rippling with seismic shifts, what with the surge in self publishing, the boom in debut novels and the well established struggle of the authors to get seen, get published and make money. Never has it been more difficult to get your foot in the door. So what can Authoright do to ease the plight? A lot as it turns out. Advisers on hand, free of charge, publishing services – pick and choose any or all (editing, cover design, marketing, social media campaigns, even the delightful new trend of author trailers and interviews to whip the potential audience into a frenzy). And that’s the niche quite frankly, take a look at the covers, the campaigns, the sum of their parts, it’s nothing if not a classy gig, Radford (a former journalist) and Howard (a former lawyer) battling the outdated modus operandi with their turbo charged light sabres. ‘Whilst there are all these technological changes,’ Howard says, ‘it’s interesting that the author is always sort of left out. I had a meeting the other day with a big agent and I said that I felt authors had become more powerful and they said they felt they had lost power. I said that’s really interesting, my kind of authors have gained power.’



Radford chimes in: ‘There’s a lot of mysticism about publishing... The individual, who is the creative talent and force behind the book, you would think they would be the centre stage throughout the whole process and yet both agents and publishers deem the author to merely contribute to the literary role. They don’t feel it’s their strength or desire to play an active role. Authors historically were accepting of the relationship because there weren’t any alternatives. When supermarkets started selling books in the early 90s, publishers saw that you couldn’t sell literary fiction in Asda, as customers there wanted easy to digest material, so it changed the way in which publishers commissioned. Self publishing came about because authors saw reducing opportunity for themselves. **Suddenly for the first time in publishing history people have choice**, so invariably people are increasingly inclined to go for the new model where they have a greater level of control. The scary thing about self publishing; you get to make all the decisions. The buck stops with you, you need to be smart in understanding where your strengths lie. I think what surprised us generally is how, across the board in publishing authors don’t have anyone to talk to, current information to devour online. Is it right to have some of your rights taken away by a publisher? Do you want to sell rights in different countries? Should you pay a company a vast sum just to go on a book tour? Authors are consumers now, and we need to support them in making the best choice. It doesn’t mean they have to abandon traditional publishing, it doesn’t mean they need to spend a fortune self publishing either.’

Client care is at the heart of the Authoright ethos: ‘We wanted to have things like best practice,’ Howard says. ‘The irony is when you were at law school it was instilled in you from day one; how you look after your clients, how you talk about your fees and update them.’ Howard himself has first hand experience of self publishing his own book after attempting a traditional deal. ‘There was no updating, emails would go unanswered for months at a time, things weren’t explained to me. They [agents] probably need a professional body, qualification, training contracts – what training have they had? They don’t necessarily have any.’

Howard and Radford are all about pushing the author to question 'absolutely everything. ‘What have you been offered? Does that make sense to you? A lot of authors have been tricked into partnership publishing, a lot of authors feel they have a traditional publishing deal when they are essentially 100% self publishing, but it’s dressed up to look like a traditional deal; the author is asked to send £8000, they find they are locked into a contract and can’t go away and self publish themselves.’



The pair was introduced by a mutual friend, because she thought ‘we were equally irritating’ Radford laughs. They are confident, driven, authoritative, outspoken on the failings of an industry which badly needs to innovate. Why does it take a year for a traditional publisher to bring out a book for example? ‘There’s a medium between the two,’ Howard says, that’s where Authoright step in, speeding things up but not throwing things out before they’re cooked, so to speak; a meticulous eye on detail with the end goal definitively in sight.

But now back to the beast that is Amazon, just this week a new round of controversy kicked off when AS Byatt added her thoughts to the debate on the world’s largest retailer and their relationship with authors; ‘As a writer I wouldn’t be where I am without them,’ she said. However she also continued with, ‘I do think there’s been a terrible dumbing down owing to self published books... I was speaking to a Norwegian bookseller: she said we look at the self published book and those who end up publishing them and it fills a

space that used to be filled by the ‘real’ book. Something’s going on.’ On the latter part of the argument Radford is certainly not in agreement. ‘Self publishing encourages freedom in publishing, there is the good and the bad readily available. But to imply that traditional publishers are somehow still the sole bastions of quality is hard to take seriously when they have such a penchant for commissioning serial titles from the cast of TOWIE. There have been plenty of moments in our literary history where writers we now celebrate were considered to be too populist at the time. I don’t think AS Byatt’s comments reflect the complex reality of the industry today, especially not from the authors’ perspective, but it does represent an author who has had a very privileged, but arguably rather narrow experience of that industry.’ So there you have it.

‘Without Amazon, self publishing would not be where it is,’ Radford continues. ‘Authors would not be able to retail directly to their consumers. The reality is that we are now having conversations with Amazon that should be applied to publishing generally. Do I think it’s fair that a publisher takes 70-80% of an author’s earnings? No I don’t. How about publishers think more creatively, offering, say 50% for a first time author? Ultimately this is like venture capital, publishers might make the deals more varied. Amazon are being scapegoated simply because they are the biggest fish in the pond, we should be looking less at them and more generally at how publishers and authors are remunerated. A lot of authors ask ‘Why am I only paid once every six months?’ So it's important that we explain about authorised and unauthorised sales and that it takes time for disparate earnings to come in, but equally we should be seeing if we can deliver better ways of paying authors.’

‘Creative freedom is also really important,’ Radford and Howard agree. 'It’s that level playing field, you can almost dictate it’s changing. Some people don’t like that; you’ve got to look at customer service, something that’s been forgotten about, that’s what Amazon does really well in this industry,’ Radford says. ‘It’s also a free market, I find it peculiar when we start to have arguments that border on communist, you have to expect that business corporations and individuals can do what they want.’

Most of all the awareness of the business side of the industry is what I find most refreshing about Authoright, lighting the way through the mysticism, a hazy fog that would seriously benefit from a ‘Things People Don’t Tell You About Publishing’ How To. ‘In a normal business situation,’ Howard says, ‘you’ve gone out and done your research, checked out the competition. You should be able to talk openly. Most people don’t want to look greedy, they can’t quite bring themselves to say ‘I am great’ - self consciousness is a real shame.’ That’s where Authoright turns the tables; authors having paid for a service, for want of a better phrase ‘man up.’ ‘When an author comes to us and says, ‘Right here is £500’ - we will have shouty author on the phone if things aren’t done properly,’ Howard laughs. And that's the USP, because aside from superior customer service, and the aforementioned attention to detail, that’s what Authoright does, puts the novel squarely back in the hands of the person who created it.

Alice Kahrmann, 2014

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