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Textual Chemistry

MY JOURNEY FROM SCIENCE TO PUBLISHING

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It is now clear to me that my starting point could never have been anything but what it is; I was born to a nurse and a biochemist — delivered into the lap of science, so to speak. So, even if I hadn't fallen in love with science myself and

become a food technologist, the tagline of my life would always have begun 'from science . . .': my first kiddie sound bite was that the take-off angle of a Concorde was up to twenty degrees; I was asking for carbohydrates instead of simply asking for snacks at the age of six; and my first tongue twister was 'cybernetic serendipity' — my father's phrase to describe how he had come up with a centrifugal filtration system. But 'cybernetic serendipity' was also, perhaps, the clue to my eventual destination. A five-year-old with no concept of slow speech, I could barely pronounce it. Nevertheless I loved the sound of it; I wandered round our yard in Accra mumbling something that sounded like *tibernekick-senpipity*, an interpretation that evolved for years as I became more articulate, until I finally got it. I got it because, once I figured out that it was actually two words instead of one, I went and sought the words in a dictionary. The dictionary sat, stiff, at the left edge of the second shelf of my parents' bookcase. I pulled it down, sat on the floor and flicked the pages until I got to the C section; it took me four hours before I found both words. In that time I had taken a piece of paper, folded it (twice) into a simple eight-page booklet by cutting the top of the first fold with a ruler, written down several words that began with C and S that I had not known, and bound the pages by tearing sections of the spine of the booklet and folding them in alternate directions. I did not think so then, but that was the first book I created.

After my first extended trip to the bookcase, I was a regular visitor but, although I loved literature, I always saw reading and writing as a hobby. In secondary school I continued to read and I developed a sideline in writing love letters for tongue-tied boys. I also got involved with the annual public

reading competition, the drama club and, later, the school magazine — *The Achimotan*.

The Achimotan, which I worked on from 1988 to 1989, was a very important seed for my career in writing and publishing. It was the first time I worked in a team towards a significant goal, the first time I worked with someone I really disliked (I came to respect him because of his knowledge of literature, but I continued to dislike him) and the first time I was able to have discussions about literature with people outside my family. But its importance is mainly due to the fact that, after all the time we spent on it — the editing, the layout, the design, the missed lunches — it was never released. **We failed and I hate failing. I think that, if we had managed to launch the issue of *The Achimotan* that I worked on, it is possible I would never have gone back to publishing.** The failure was not really anything to do with the editorial team; we had done the work, whilst the school had failed to raise the money to print the magazine, but I hated the feeling of helplessness, the emasculation, the idea of having laboured for nothing. And I was not the only team member who felt that way.

Three years later, a core of *The Achimotan* editorial team, working with friends we had recruited from other secondary schools, founded a new **magazine called *filla!* — Ghana's first student-run national magazine.** This time we raised the money ourselves; we visited banks, manufacturing operations and retail businesses to request sponsorship, we sold some advertising space and we squeezed our parents for small contributions. We left nothing to chance. The result was a magazine which was launched by Ghana's Minister for Education, covered in the national press, sold impressive numbers and is still remembered as a cultural landmark by a generation of Ghanaian students. I learned a couple of things from that experience: if you want something published right, do it yourself unless you can not afford to; and always work with a team that is as passionate as you are.

The *filla!* magazine experience was supposed to be my final flirtation with publishing. I went off to study food technology, excelled at it and got a management job with

a major multinational. The trajectory of my life, it seemed, was set. But there had been deviations, some kind of unyielding attraction always dragged me close to words; while in France on an Erasmus exchange programme, I became involved in drama again and contributed to the school magazine. Back at university in England, I started to attend and occasionally lead a poetry workshop at Manchester's Commonword organisation and, on my return to Ghana, I set up a publishing company with friends, with the aim of starting another magazine project on the side and, perhaps, publishing the odd special edition book. Still, I was surprised by my own sudden conviction that what I needed to do was to drop everything else and try my hand at writing — properly. It was that decision that led, indirectly, to my current career as a publisher.

flipped eye publishing grew out of, to borrow the word from my late father, serendipity. Having moved to London in a quest to launch my writing career, I became a regular attendee at poetry readings and often found that poets whose work I had enjoyed hearing were not published (the ones I had not enjoyed so much were often trying to sell me books, ironically). So, in 2001, I decided to start a magazine, which, in homage to my science roots, I called *x*, to represent the undefined. I asked poets I met at readings to submit work to me and began to release *x* quarterly from early in 2002. By the time the end of 2002 rolled around I had approached several poets about the possibility of publishing full collections of their work. Depressingly, very few of them felt that they had enough work to start to assemble a collection, but three poets — Charlotte Ansell, James Byrne and Agnes Meadows — responded positively and would become flipped eye publishing's first poets. Of course, publishing costs money, and I had almost no savings at that point, but I had recently learned how to build websites, so I went looking for clients and built five websites that funded the first year of flipped eye publishing. Actually, when we first registered the company in 2001, HSBC would only open an account for us if we could show that we had something as part of our portfolio that would make money, so we registered as a publishing and website design company and in the first three years we did quite a bit of web design.

Looking back, if I had to change anything, I would probably have tried to find someone who knew more about publishing in the UK to partner with, because my inexperience cost us a lot of money. I think we spent more on our first five books than we spent on the next fifteen books and, if I had that money again with the experience I have now, I would be able to do incredible things. Nevertheless, the pain of discovering how much money we wasted has been pivotal in driving innovation in the way flipped eye works. We have ended up with a model that means that we have perhaps the lowest cost to market in the industry, and I am also incredibly proud of the fact that we ran the company for five years before we reached that inevitable landmark for poetry publishers in the UK — a meeting with the Arts Council.

In 2006, it became clear that some of the ideas I had for developing writers would never come to fruition without some kind of injection of cash into the business, so I went to the Arts Council in London to meet a Literature Officer called Sarah Sanders. One of my main ideas was a result of my early discovery that so few poets felt they had enough work to assemble a collection. It occurred to me that, if there were some kind of development series where poets could have the little work they already had discussed over a considerable period of time edited and put together in a pamphlet, it could be a stepping stone towards a full collection. I knew many publishers had pamphlet imprints, but none of them — to my knowledge — had an imprint that was specifically a development imprint, with particular focus on the editorial process as a development element — exploring voice and style and encouraging growth and experimentation. I called it the mouthmark series because I also planned to focus on poets who largely performed their work, so the direction of the editorial sessions would be about how to translate the rhythms and emotions of the live readings into a concise urgency on the page.

After a first publication under the series (Nick Makoha's *The Lost Collection of an Invisible Man*) and a couple of subsequent meetings with the Arts Council, we applied for £4,800 to develop the mouthmark series and to release our first fiction title after the purchase of a fiction imprint, Lubin & Kleyner, in 2004. After the funding was approved, we released Inua Ellams's *Thirteen Fairy Negro Tales* and Jacob Sam-La Rose's *Communion* as well as the fiction anthology *x-24: unclassified*, edited by the Malaysian writer, Tash Aw, and me. The results of that injection have been incredible: *The Lost Collection of an Invisible Man* was selected for the British Council's enCompassCulture.com site, which recommends books representing the most vibrant new work in the UK for its international sites and for casual browsers interested in British writing; *Communion* won the Poetry Book Society Pamphlet Choice for Summer 2006; two contributors to *x-24: unclassified* — Niki Aguirre and Sefi Atta — have since published highly acclaimed full-length books with us, with Sefi winning the Noma Award in 2009; and Inua Ellams has since published the text from his Edinburgh Fringe First-winning play (National Theatre, February 2010), *The 14th Tale* with us. The mouthmark series was also responsible for flipped eye publishing being shortlisted for the Independent Publishers Guild's Diversity Award in 2007 and I was awarded Ghana's National ACRAG (Art Critics and Reviewers Association of Ghana) award for poetry and literary advocacy in 2007 — an award of which I am particularly proud.

But I think the impact of our work goes far beyond the mouthmark series and the successful careers of the writers who first appeared in our publications; it has triggered change in the publishing industry as a whole. For instance, my experience in publishing was very helpful for the work I did alongside writer and literary advocate, Courttia Newland, in launching Tell Tales, a short story initiative that has seen many imitators since its launch in 2003. And, in 2009, Faber

launched a new poets initiative that in its elaboration – ‘The Faber New Poets programme aims to create a culture of support for pre-first collection writers’ – sounds very much like mouthmark, except that it is three years later and has extra money for mentors. These changes, imitations or not, are brilliant signs for emerging writers and are, ultimately, very good for publishing.

So, with flipped eye publishing’s tenth anniversary approaching, I think I am entitled to feel some small sense of accomplishment. The company I founded in 2001 has published forty titles, over 150 writers and trained two editors — Niall O’Sullivan and Jacob Sam-La Rose, who became flipped eye’s poetry editors in 2009. But I feel that my work will be incomplete until I have transferred my experience to Ghana and helped to revamp a publishing industry which has been in decline as a producer of literary work since the overthrow of Kwame Nkrumah in 1966. In my development as a publishing professional, I have learned almost everything by doing, but I have been guided by experiences from my childhood in Ghana.

flipped eye publishing operates on a not-for-profit model because I remember what it was like not being able to afford to buy books whenever I wanted them, and I wanted to build a company that put effort into pricing books as low as possible so that a greater percentage of disposable income brackets could access them. Not surprisingly, I am a great admirer of Allen Lane, the originator of the Penguin paperbacks initiative in the 1930s, who believed that there was a ‘vast reading public for intelligent books at a low price’ and priced the books the same as a pack of cigarettes. Using that price benchmark, it is easy to see why so many publishers have been struggling to sell books in recent years. A pack of twenty cigarettes costs £5.85; the average paperback costs £7.99 to £8.99.

We have a passion for writer development because I come from a family of teachers – my grandmother and aunt both founded educational establishments in Ghana – and I was raised to appreciate the value of guidance and mentorship.

Our focus on writers who are comfortable with a live audience is related to my admiration for great storytellers in my youth, my intermittent involvement with drama, my formative years in a culture that values conversation highly.

Our low-stock, low-margins approach derives from my experiences on *The Achimotan* and the early days of flipped eye publishing, a commitment to not tying up capital that could be used to develop new ideas.

All these elements are distilled into flipped eye publishing’s mission:

We are dedicated to producing consistently high quality fiction, non-fiction and related products, with a focus on poetry and authors who are comfortable with a live audience. This means that, while we seek to publish high quality literature, our authors are signed, not only based on how well they write, but also how well they communicate with an audience.

This is because we consider conversation to be the oldest and most enduring form of literary creation. [...]

Editorially, we are guided by five aspirations:

1. to publish intellectually profound work that is lucid through a focus on clarity as opposed to exhibitionism;
2. to raise the profile of performance and oral literature as legitimate and viable forms of artistic interpretation and learning;
3. to publish literature that is affordable and accessible to less privileged audiences;
4. to unearth talent from non-mainstream sources and underrepresented groups;
5. and to constantly leverage technology to facilitate the spread of literature. (flipped eye website)

But, although flipped eye publishing forms a huge part of my relationship with literature and literacy, my interest in publishing goes beyond the act of publishing. I have always been very concerned that the gatekeepers and tastemakers (including editors) in English-language publishing have largely come from a mono-cultural pool. By mono-cultural pool, I am not referring to ethnic origin, but rather to cultural formation — what one consumes in the course of one’s development that aligns one’s worldview. While mono-cultural bias in editorial roles does not translate into bad quality literature, I believe it impoverishes us intellectually and culturally — it limits our view of the world and leads to the dismissal of literature from cultures other than the dominant as substandard, without sincere consideration. It is a trend that results in the promotion of inaccurate anthropological clichés over lived experience, leaving the truths of human existence in the slush piles of short-sighted editors. The response to this over the last thirty years, it seems to me, has been to set up imprints or publishing companies solely for the project of publishing minority voices. I do not believe that to be the answer; what needs to happen is that persons from other cultures need to become gatekeepers for both the dominant and the marginal cultures. Otherwise, the world’s literature will become a confusing place for readers, with one thing appearing as unmitigated truth in one quarter and another thing altogether in another. The world will lose the sense of nuance, the concept of shades and, with those losses – essentially – we will lose the beauty of literature. One of my projects, therefore, is to encourage more talented people from the fringes of the dominant culture to get into editorial roles. This was one of the triggers for my request for Niall O’Sullivan and Jacob Sam-La Rose to join our editorial team at flipped eye publishing, but I am also keen to work with interns as and when convenient, to help create a flow of interesting new gatekeepers with an engagement with a world that does not fit into boxes.

Another area of interest is technology trends and how to use them to get closer to the reader, as well as to help reduce the cost of literature for consumers. I find that, in these areas, I often struggle between my personal opinion

and what is fair for the writers I work with. For example, I have waited to see how the debate on **e-books** will evolve and I am happy to see that there is now more sensible discussion on the eventual pricing of this potentially revolutionary format. My own position is, the cheaper the better, but at flipped eye publishing, I have recommended that we allow the industry debates to settle before we convert so that our authors do not think we are trying to manipulate them. However, we have embraced **video** and are constantly working to get new content out for our readers — whether it is from readings, interviews or made-for-internet snippets. We also have a **translation wiki** (developed after discussion with our writers) to encourage the sharing of the work we publish in other languages. While the initiative is in its infancy, it was one of the projects that led to my selection as a finalist for the **UK Young Publishing Entrepreneur Award in 2009**.

I have other obsessions and ideas – to do with design, paper, retail outlets, festival programming and reviewing – that I am sure will continue to develop and evolve as I continue my love affair with publishing but, for now, it is enough for me that I do not regret relinquishing my safe pay packet for the excitement of writing, editing and publishing. And, as long as every new book I work on continues to fill me with breathless excitement, I will be there in the midnight hour, my editing eye cutting through inky black.

Work Cited

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