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Chapter 09 - Publishers and Authors in the Nineteenth Century: Changing Roles

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Publishers and Authors in the Nineteenth Century: Changing Roles

-Reina Morgan-

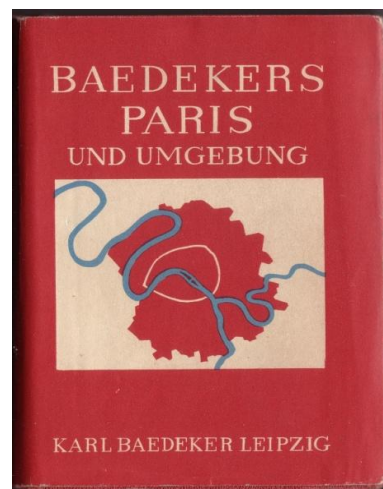
Technical innovations like the cylinder press, stereotyping, electrotyping, and the production of paper in wooden pulp rolls made the reproduction of books less expensive than ever before¹. With cheaper books came the production of more books, which in turn led to a need for regulation. During the nineteenth century, publishers started to become more specialized and authors started to get decent wages for their work.

The Changing Role of the Publisher

Historically, there was no clear distinction between the printer, publisher, and bookseller. In the nineteenth century, this changed as publishing roles started to become more specialized. Around the mid 1820's, booksellers started to create their own associations separate from the printer's guilds. The publisher was no longer just a position that was passed down the family tree; it was now open to outsiders as well since the guilds were no longer in control.

Publishers no longer needed a background in printing. Instead they needed to be creative, independent, and adventurous entrepreneurs. They now had to be knowledgeable about the market in order to make decisions that fit the demand. Their role was to make decisions about price, paper quality, format, advertising, and distribution. It was also at this time that

A guild is an organized group of people who have joined together because they share the same job or interest².



Karl Baedeker's Guidebook on Paris¹

publishers started to develop their own niches. Karl Baedeker, for instance published guidebooks³. This more specialized way of publishing replaced what came before it and is similar to what we still see today. By disrupting the publishing industry we now have publishers who are experts in their areas.

Royalties in the Twenty-First Century

A royalty is the percentage of book sales that is paid to an author. Today this is how authors make their money. The rate of royalties are set and paid by the publisher and is usually between 1-10% of the cover price for paperback books and 10-15% for hardcover books. It is a very rare case when an author is in a position to demand a higher royalty.

Some publishers will pay a straight flat fee instead of a percentage of the book's profits.

Authors receive part of the royalty in a lump sum in advance. Authors can expect to receive an advance of \$1,000-\$10,000 when signing their first contract, though well-established authors can expect larger advances. For example, an author might have a royalty rate of 10% and be given \$3,000 up front. Since \$3,000 is 10% of \$30,000, once the sales of their book reaches \$30,000 they would start receiving more royalties routinely as sales continue⁴. Most publishers issue royalty statements every six months (once the advance has been earned and they are owed royalties).

The author will likely not know how much money they can expect to get during each pay period because they usually don't know how many of their books have sold. Publishers will also hold some of the author's royalties for a reserve against returns. This is in case a bookstore is not selling very many copies of the book, and they return a significant amount to the publisher. For this reason, publishers will withhold a percentage of royalties against returns to avoid overpaying the author. Some publishers will demand the return of any portion of the advance that goes unearned⁵!

An author can license their book for foreign markets, magazines, movies, etc. in order to try to increase their income. This is known as a sub-right.

Royalties in the Nineteenth Century

In the early nineteenth century, instead of distributing royalties like they do nowadays, publishers would pay an author a lump sum for a manuscript and the author would not make any additional money from sales of the book. This meant that the amount the author made had nothing to do with how many copies of the book sold. So if the book was very popular and sold many copies, it was only the publisher who would benefit from it because the author would make the same amount regardless of whether or not the book sold well.

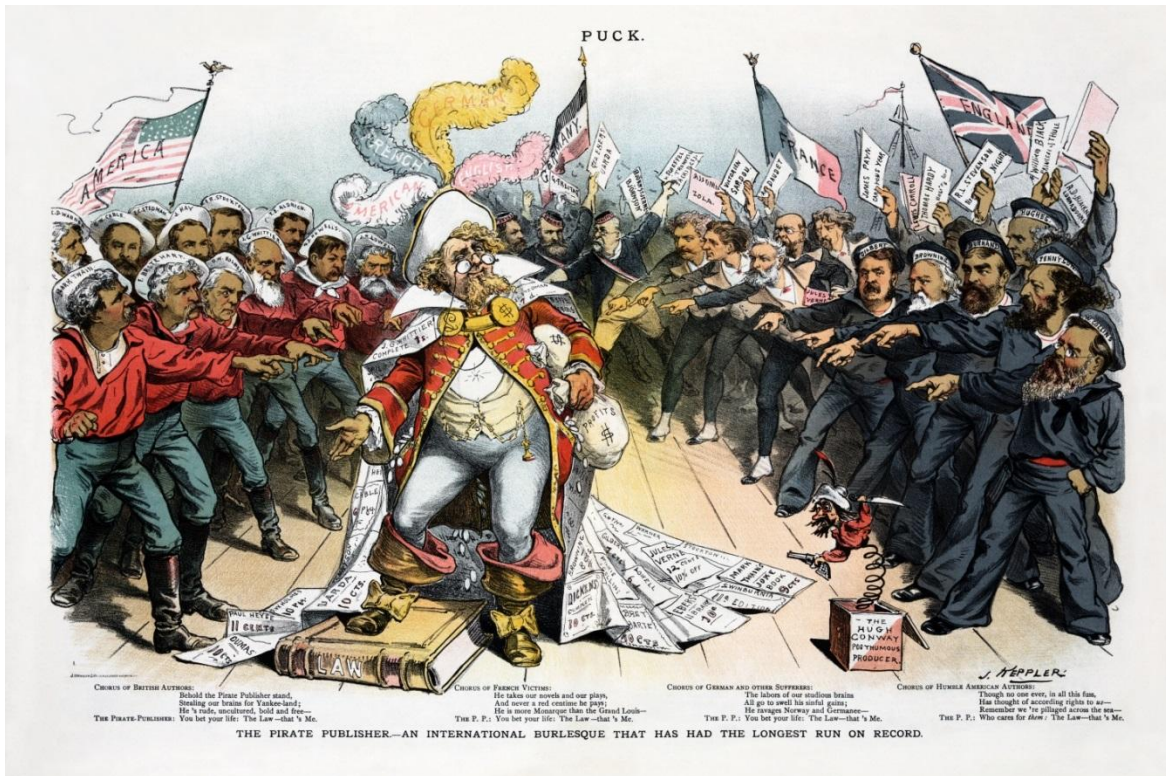
Later, it became customary to pay authors based on how many copies of their book were printed. This number was often very different from the number of books that actually sold. This was good for the author because they were paid for every book, but bad for the publisher if not very many copies sold. It wasn't until the late nineteenth century that a true royalty system like we have today was developed³.

Some authors chose to self-publish in the 19th century even though legal and technological hurdles made it difficult.

International Copyright

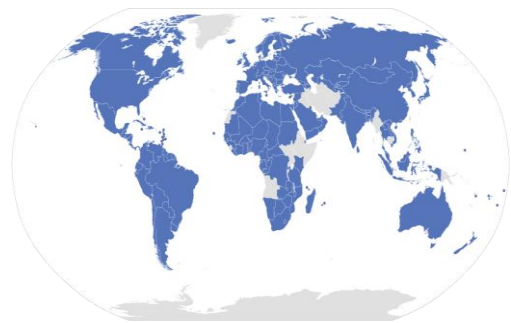
Now that authors were able to make a reasonable amount of money based on the number of copies their book sold, there was just one problem; they still didn't earn anything on global sales. This is because there wasn't an international copyright agreement in place. But this too was starting to change. In the 1850's some individual countries signed a series of bilateral treaties that made pirating books illegal; however it wasn't until 1886 at the Bern Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works that the first international copyright agreement was signed³.

The Bern Convention made it so that the author must give permission in order for someone to translate, make adaptations and arrangements of the work; recite literary works in public; communicate to the public the performance of such works; perform dramatic, dramatic-musical, and musical works in public; broadcast; make reproductions; and use the work as a basis for an audiovisual work⁵.



A famous cartoon about the lack of protection for foreign authors²

It wasn't until 1988 that the United States agreed to the treaty, which allowed them to have greater protection for proprietors, new copyright relationships with twenty-four countries, and eliminated the requirement of copyright notice for copyright protection⁷.



Signatories of the Bern Convention³

By the end of the nineteenth century authors could finally make a substantial amount of money off of their works because international copyright laws were in place. In fact, some authors of the period such as Pierre Loti, a French novelist, received royalties between 17-21%! This is a considerably higher rate than what many authors are paid today³.

The Chace Act (1891)

British authors had difficulty getting American copyright protection in the nineteenth century so they had to get a little creative. They discovered that if they could get an American to act as a collaborator on their book, then they would be able to get their book registered in Washington, D.C., under their collaborator's name. These authors would frequently have the American write something like a short preface and that was enough for them to be a part of the book, thus making it eligible to be registered in the United States. Now that's sneaky!

Then, in 1891 the Chace Act was passed, which allowed copyright protection in the United States for citizens of other countries. This helped American authors too! Other countries were more inclined to grant authors from the U.S. international copyright protection because they were being given protection. Before the Chace Act, American works were unprotected abroad⁸.

Easier Access to Books

Books came a long way in the nineteenth century, from the publishing industry being opened up to outsiders, to authors getting paid royalties, to the development of an international copyright agreement. With authors finally making money from their books, both domestically and internationally, there was more motivation than ever before to write books. This resulted in greater accessibility.

While books were getting cheaper and cheaper as a result of new technology, there were still many people who were unable to afford them. Even if people could afford a few cheap books, this only allowed them to read certain books that were within their price range. Then they would only have those same few books to read and who wants to read the same books over and over again?

Unless maybe it is a really good one, of course! This led to the creation of the institutions we are so familiar with today: libraries.

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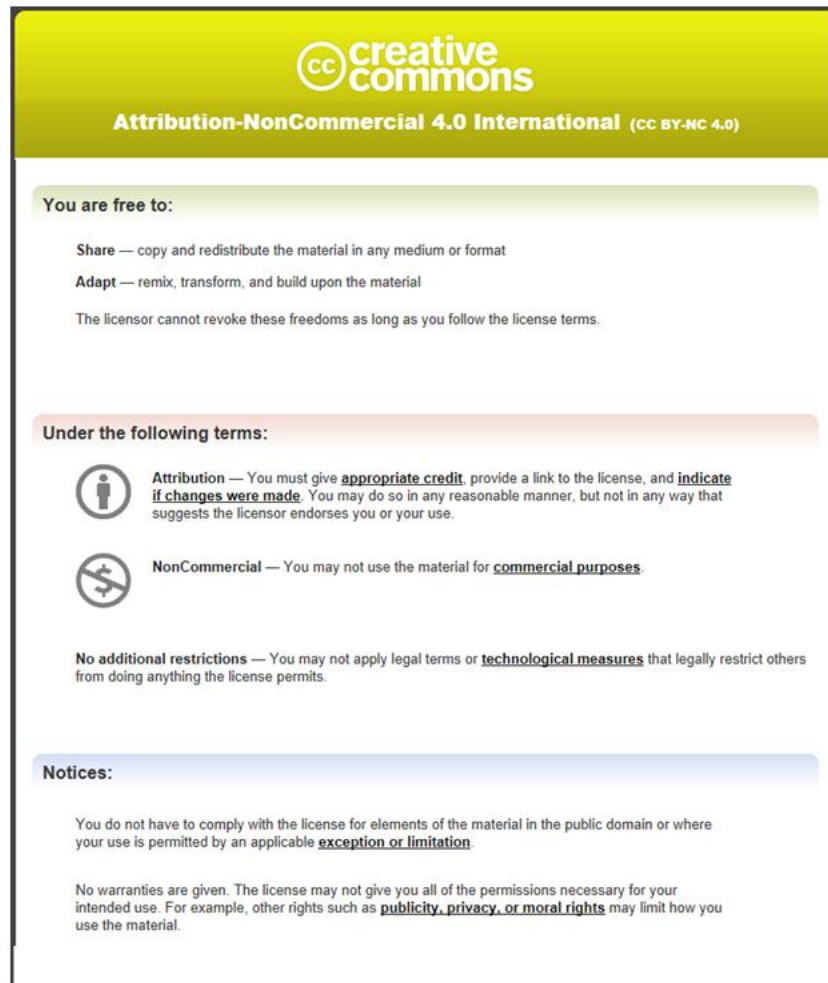
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