

Symposium: Publishing, Literature, and Responsibility

(University of Münster, September 26-27, 2024)

Considering the relationship between art, the artist, and society, Margaret Atwood stated in the early 2000s: “Let us suppose that the words the writer writes do not exist in some walled garden called ‘literature’, but actually get out there into the world, and have effects and consequences. Don’t we then have to begin talking ethics and responsibilities[...].?” (2015, 87). Atwood’s questions take on a new significance at this point in the 21st century. Notions of literature and responsibility have become especially prominent due to social contexts such as the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements, a rising awareness of climate crisis, and the lack of inclusivity in both the publishing industry and the literature it produces.

‘Responsibility’ can manifest in literature and the publishing industry in a multitude of ways. For instance, Phillips argues that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a way for book publishers to distinguish themselves in an era of “open content and self-publishing,” noting: “a credible publisher assumes responsibility for, and believes in, its content and stands by its authors; this sets it apart from those who wish to be simply intermediaries in the distribution of content” (2019, 160). Author Lauren James specifies forms of editorial responsibility, contending that “publishers have a responsibility to their authors to make sure that books are edited to a professional standard.” As she stresses, today, this is “no longer just about legibility and plot structures,” but about representation and respect: “These days, having accurate and respectful diversity is a core and essential part of a novel” (James 2019). This shifting responsibility has already impacted the publishing process of various works. For instance, children’s publisher Puffin, justifying their decision to rework Roald Dahl titles in 2023, argued: “Children as young as five or six read Roald Dahl books and, often, they are the first stories they will read independently [...] With that comes a significant responsibility as it might be the first time they are navigating written content without a parent, teacher or carer” (Bayley 2023).

Notions of responsibility are of course not limited to the content of cultural outputs. In the UK publishing industry, the Book & Publishing Industry EDI Forum released an industry statement regarding professional behaviour and values in the publishing workplace “particularly around online behaviour and mental health [...] post BLM and #MeToo” (Wood 2023), and publishers such as Penguin Random House, Hachette and HarperCollins have launched diversity initiatives in recent years in an attempt to reach underrepresented authors

and publishing staff (Carpenter 2018). The industry has also demonstrated creative responses to the climate crisis, such as Faber's open call for works that "envisage a positive, sustainable new future for the planet at a time of extraordinary global change" for their Imagined Futures competition (Comerford 2021), while logistical approaches to lessen the industry's environmental impact have accelerated in order to meet proposed net-zero targets in the near future (Bayley 2022).

This symposium, hosted in-person within the Book Studies department at the University of Münster, will explore the notion of 'responsibility' in literature and publishing however this may be interpreted. Participants may wish to consider the ways in which responsibility manifests in publishing and literature, and how these notions affect the role and perceptions of the book in the 21st-century.

Other potential themes for consideration include (but are not limited to):

- Reader Responsibility
- Publishing and CSR
- Literature and the Environment
- Author Care
- Responsibility in the Workplace
- Responsibility and Literary Movements
- Responsibility and Activism in Literature
- Literature and Responsibility Prior to the 21st Century
- Responsibility and Bookselling
- Responsibility and Children's Literature/Publishing

Submissions

Please send a 250-word abstract for 20-minute papers and a 100-word bio to bullen@uni-muenster.de by April 2, 2024. Speakers will be informed of their participation in mid-April.

Costs and Logistics

We anticipate that the timeframe will be from around noon on September 26 and to the early afternoon on September 27.

We are currently exploring funding options. At this point, we anticipate that there will be a conference fee of 25 € to defray catering and other on-site costs.

Münster is easily reachable by train and the campus is downtown. The conference will take place in the English Department (Johannisstraße 12-20, 48143 Münster). Please note as you plan ahead that Münster tends to fill up quickly – it is popular with tourists. If you are looking for low-cost accommodation, we can recommend the Deutsche Jugendherberge (<https://www.jugendherberge.de/jugendherbergen/muenster/>) and Sleep Station Münster (<https://www.sleep-station.de/>). Both are walkable from the conference venue.

Contact/conference organizer

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