

Questions for: Alex Hippisley-Cox

News - Interviews Wednesday, 14th July 2021

Founder of the eponymous PR agency on authors, colleagues and how and why the industry is changing, from diversity to BookTok



Describe your current job

I have my own company, Alex Hippisley-Cox PR Ltd, and I handle the PR, Marketing and Communications for a number of book industry clients including Frankfurter Buchmesse (for the UK), the Chalke Valley History Festival, Bitter Lemon Press and the LoveReading LitFest.

What was your first job in the book industry?

I started off as a Publicity Assistant at Hodder & Stoughton, which was still independent then and based in Bedford Square in London. My first boss was the amazing Carole Welch, now Publishing Director at Sceptre, who took me under her wing and basically rewrote my press releases until I learnt how to stand on my own feet. I still have close friends from that first job.

Who has been the most influential person in your career?

That's a really difficult one to answer. Early on, it was the Head of PR Liz Sich at Random House who taught me all the basic skills of dealing with the press, and showed me that as a woman it really was possible to have children and maintain a career. More recently, I'd say Thomas Minkus - who until recently was VP English Language Markets at Frankfurter Buchmesse - who introduced me to people in the industry I'd never normally meet and who, as a friend, gave me the confidence to reinvent myself at a time when I was at a bit of a crossroads.

How has the industry changed since your first job?

The industry has changed in many, many ways since I joined the Hodder publicity team. I can't believe that at that time authors were actually asked if they wanted to promote their books, and a lot said they'd prefer a nice lunch to mark publication rather than doing interviews! It's insane to think of that nowadays. When I first started out there was no internet, no Amazon, no smart phones. Each national newspaper had acres of space devoted to book reviews and the VIP authors would go on proper tours around the country, staying away for weeks at a time. Those tours must have cost a fortune. And the launches!! They were legendary and I was like a rabbit in headlights gazing at all the famous names who attended, never dreaming for a minute



that one day I might actually work on some of their campaigns. Those were the days...

What's the biggest challenge in your job?

Probably the biggest challenge working in PR for the book industry is that the rules keep changing. And every journalist seems to like dealing with publicists in a different way. Some never reply to emails, some only reply to emails. Some only work part time, others only work from home. Some like to chat, others make it clear that you have to be short and snappy. Some likes PDFs emailed to them, others will only read from a finished copy. And they move around THE WHOLE TIME! It's hard to keep up... But I have learned, as a freelancer especially, that it's fine to ask others for help. So, if someone asks if you can spare 5/10 minutes to give them a steer with a difficult campaign, then you shouldn't hesitate. Sooner or later you'll need their help in return.

What's the best piece of book-related advice you've ever been given?

Never fall-out big time with anyone in publishing. The chances are they'll be your boss at some time in the future.

What are the most interesting things you're seeing at the moment in the industry?

I'm really excited to see the industry becoming less London-centric. Some of the big publishing houses are beginning to set up offices in other parts of the UK in order to find different voices and bring some diversity to their lists. I think this is an important and huge step forward. Nothing ever happens quickly in book publishing but I do sense a change right now.

What do you think might be the next big thing?

Currently BookTok seems to be taking off massively, with teen influencers having an impact on books racing up the bestseller lists. Their posts can attract millions of views and some are even encouraging some young readers to pick up books for the first time. This is exactly what books and publishing needs right now, and could be the way through to a whole audience. Watch this space!

How are you coping with working from a home environment?

I've worked at home since I turned freelance in 1999, so it makes no difference to me at all. But I do miss regular meetings in Central London with my publishing friends and I'm looking forward to changing that very soon.

How do you think the industry will come out of this current Covid-19 crisis?

I think the industry has shown over the past 18 months that, at its core, it's full of incredibly hard-working, creative people who can rise to a challenge in the hardest of circumstances. Lockdown was tough, but books have won through and it has taught us all that we need to keep upskilling as an industry in order keep up with others in the creative sector. We will come out of it stronger and in a far better position to embrace change in the future.

What do you most like doing when you're not working?

We moved house out of London two years ago and I'm now rather obsessed with getting my daily exercise walking in the beautiful Surrey Hills. We are so lucky to have such scenery right on our doorstep and we've discovered some pretty good pubs and cafes along the way too.

What is the best book you've read in the last year?

I absolutely loved *Fleishman Is in Trouble* by Taffy Brodesser-Akner - a really smart, funny novel. I'd highly recommend it.

What are you reading now?

I'm just starting *Hamnet* by Maggie O'Farrell. I'm rather late to the party on this one but a bookseller at Waterstones in Ringwood was raving about it, so I thought I'd give it a try.



How do you like to read: on screen, on paper, or do you listen to audio books?

I read print books and on my iPad, sometimes on my phone if I'm really gripped and I'm travelling. If the story is good enough, I don't mind how I read.

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