



Questions for: David Roche

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The chair of the London Book Fair advisory board and BookBrunch, industry consultant, and founder of Grey Area Coaching contributes to our Q&A series



Describe your current job

For Grey Area Coaching, I am steadily trying to build a new business which helps clients to attain their goals and where my workload can be scaled up and down according to the time available.

What was your first job in the book industry?

Product director at Waterstones. I had done the grunt work as a production planner, stock controller and merchandiser in fashion retail before working my way through operations and project management to end up as product director at HMV. When I had to interview 12" singles dance buyers I knew it was time to make the move over to books, and a much more welcoming and, frankly, less sexist industry. Once inside, publishing is a seductive business, and rather like Hotel California.

Who has been the most influential person in your career?

My wife. I am very self-motivated, but she knows when I am cruising, she knows when I'm a flake, she knows when I've been bad and good - and when I need the gift of a boot up the backside.

How has the industry changed since your first job?

The balance of power between publisher and retailer has changed, and between physical and online retailers too. The only chain bookstores left are Waterstones and Blackwell's, with supermarkets (pre-Covid 19) and WH Smith seemingly faltering in their drive to make big book sales. There are some wonderful and innovative independent bookstores such as Mr B's, but one online store with infinite range just keeps getting bigger.

What's the biggest challenge in your job?

Getting the balance of coaching and mentoring right. Coaching is excellent for constructing innovative plans to achieve specific goals and exploring the reasons that may be holding someone back. For other issues that require resolution, or relationships that need to be developed, mentoring can provide powerful support. Grey Area Coaching balances the most effective combination of both coaching and mentoring. Good skills for a Chair and NED, by the way, and we can all benefit from learning to listen better.

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

If you're not enjoying a book, dump it. The most valuable, and necessary, top tip of them all. You may miss a



few late-developer gems but you will salvage months, literally, maybe even years, of your life.

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

The efforts of the book industry to embrace inclusivity in a way that genuinely makes a difference, that sticks and takes us to a permanent and business-as-usual, authentic representation of our population. There are so many great initiatives and start-ups but still so far to go. I am delighted to chair New Writing North, who are a real force for good. To do my own small bit, I have been giving free coaching for the last couple of years to a few fab people from under-represented groups towards the beginning of their publishing careers. It is so important that we attract and welcome a true cross-section of society to work in the industry and fling the gates wide open.

What do you think might be the next big thing?

The increasing imprimatur around self-publishing is something that interests me. How authors who have genuine, proven marketing and brand skills in other areas can create the awareness and publicity that generates non-traditional demand. Amazon is nonpareil when it comes to fulfilling items that people know they want to order before they log on, and authors are the only ones on the case 365 days a year to create that awareness. Publishers will have to continue to up their game, and that's no bad thing.

How are you coping with working from home?

London Book Fair's cancellation and not being able to travel to Newcastle to see New Writing North have been major unwanted disruptions, but in my everyday life I have had to adjust less than most. My roles are generally contributing from a distance, but I do think the creativity generated by face-to-face interaction has taken a dip. I was determined to come out of lockdown better qualified than when it started and completed my 15-month coaching qualification during 2020.

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

I think OK. Publishing seems to be fairly resilient and survives the difficult times even if it doesn't scale enormous heights at others. The business of storytelling is timeless and global, and we still have a lot further to go to take our rightful place at the head of the creative arts table. I do some lecturing at the National Film and Television School, and their MA students see the book as the cheapest trial format for the production of a story.

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

This year: cooking, reading, walking, pottering in general, and surprisingly (to me) running, swimming and exercising far more than normal. I look forward to travelling again, and I would love to scuba dive somewhere beautiful more than anything.

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

For contemporary fiction, *Weather* by Jenny Offill, which just surprised me on page one and had me spellbound in admiration on every subsequent page. For non-fiction, Craig Brown's *One, Two, Three, Four*, which was just fun all the way. And in the classics catch-up that I try and do every summer, *Middlemarch* by George Eliot lived up to its omnipresent appearance on every best-ever list.

What are you reading now?

This year's Booker Prize winner *Shuggie Bain* (Picador) by Douglas Stuart is totally engrossing. It's set in Glasgow, where alcoholic mother Agnes is losing her children one by one. Her resilience, poise and relentless attempts to rise are matched only by her ability to plunge deeper to new lows. Her youngest son Shuggie has to look after Ma from the age of seven and suffer being mercilessly bullied by neighbours as well as fellow schoolkids for being "different". It sounds depressing and bleak, but that's not the emotion it gives you at all. It really is an amazing achievement, and a stunning debut.

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



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Definitely on paper for literary fiction and non-fiction that I really want to read, Kindle for commercial fiction, non-fiction I must read and articles, and, once in a blue moon, audiobooks for non-fiction when it really matters. I am loving *A Promised Land* read by Barack Obama, who is even better than the voice in my head.

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