



Interview with Edward Nawotka

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KENNEALLY: Whether sold at Fnac or Shakespeare and Company, the bestsellers in France number not only those titles by recognizable global names, but also those penned by Francophone favorites including Jean-Paul Dubois, Karine Tuil, Marc Levy and Guillaume Musso.

Edward Nawotka is Bookselling and International News Editor at *Publishers Weekly*. He joins me now with a look at recently reported sales figures for France from 2016. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Ed.

NAWOTKA: Hi, how are you, Chris?

KENNEALLY: I'm just fine. Good to have you join us today. We're looking at some recently reported numbers that have come out from the French Publishers Association for book sales in France in 2016. What's the view from Paris?

NAWOTKA: Well, French book sales were up a small percentage, about 4.25% overall. This was largely resulting from a change in curriculum in the schools. So really this is school sales that boosted the numbers. Otherwise the trade and retail sales were up just a very small – less than 1% – so generally flat. But the news is relatively positive considering the book business often feels it's beleaguered and under threat from new, emerging forms of digital media, which is becoming increasingly important in France.

KENNEALLY: I think they'll take flat as the new up, as many others do around the world, Ed.

NAWOTKA: Absolutely.

KENNEALLY: Speaking of digital media, what portion of book sales in France are e-books?

NAWOTKA: Right now it's about 5% of the total. It was valued last year at about US \$160 million in sales. It's not significantly growing, but it is up. Europe does lag a



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little bit behind the US or North America in e-book adoption and has, really, since the advent of the format. Numbers are substantially higher in Germany and the UK, up around 10%, sometimes even higher. But France has stuck right around 5%. They have a very strong book-selling network in France, a lot of independent bookstores. Every other street in Paris has one. So there's still the tradition of buying in paper, and that is very much alive and well in Paris, particularly, but also throughout the country.

KENNEALLY: Right, Ed, and listeners should know about a real important factor there, which is a national law mandating fixed prices for books, so that helps those independent bookstores survive. Tell us about that law.

NAWOTKA: The Lang law, it's a very important part of a tenet of French culture. It essentially fixes book prices and it prevents online retailers from discounting more than 5%. If I'm not mistaken there has been some debate about the extent to which the Lang law applies to online retailing, and this been a big factor. We've seen a lot of different manifestations of how online retailers have played with this to try to create market share. Perhaps the biggest player in this market is Amazon. A couple of years ago they actually legislated what was referred to at one point as the anti-Amazon law, which said that booksellers were not allowed to offer, for example, free shipping on books, which is a big tenet in the US, which would make them directly competitive with bookstores. At the time Amazon circumvented this in an interesting way by charging only one euro cent to ship a book, so technically thus not offering free shipping.

But recently this came to the fore, some of the issues with online booksellers with the culture minister finally addressing some of this. She signed a new book price charter just recently with most of the major online booksellers and the French booksellers association. What that is going to do is you also saw an instance where there were a number of online booksellers who were accused of selling new books as used books or second-hand books, thus giving them the ability to set the price and, again, circumvent the Lang law, the fixed book price law. This new book price charter, which was signed, as I said, recently, with most of the major online retailers as well as the culture minister is essentially a memorandum of understanding saying that everybody will play by the rules.

KENNEALLY: Those rules are fascinating to an American audience, I'm sure. It's hard to imagine in our own market, but important, indeed, essential, in the French market. There's a lot more support for cultural goods, as they call them, in France.



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Indeed, according to your report in *PW*, Ed, French culture minister Françoise Nyssen is likely to propose a cultural goods grant for everyone who turns 18 years of age in France. That grant would number up to 500 euros, allowing the individual to purchase these cultural goods, including books. This was something that was launched in Italy last year. Really significant the French government is so active in its support of publishing.

NAWOTKA: Yes, this is just another effort to try to bolster the marketplace. As you know, France has struggled with unemployment issues, particularly among the young and particularly in the cultural industries, it's been a very difficult. If I talk to my colleagues or many of the people I know working in the arts in France, it's been not an easy environment in which to maintain employment. Obviously, the more money you can pour into the economy, at least into the cultural goods sector, the more booksellers, publishers will benefit.

This proposal to offer 18-year-olds, or folks 18 years old a 500 euro stipend, if you will, it did come from Italy. There's a suggestion that they may try it. There's also a lot of debate in Italy whether or not this was a success or not because what they did find is that it was also possible – some of the 18-year-olds were selling these cultural credits, or this stipend, which could only be used, for example, to buy opera tickets or at a bookstore or entrance to an art museum. They were actually selling these online and thus profiting from this rather than actually using it, and that seems fairly widespread. So the question is whether or not it's actually a viable program to implement in the long term.

KENNEALLY: It's interesting because while the government and cultural supporters may wish to see books and reading be strengthened, supported, what's the practice out there? I understand there was a survey in 2016 looking at the usage of various cultural products. Reading stands up pretty well, although it has fallen somewhat from where it was a decade ago.

NAWOTKA: Exactly. It's fallen to about three hours a week, and it's well behind streaming music or videos, both of which are nearly double of that, five to six hours each for those. And the fact that streaming music has become – the way it's described shows you just how digital those formats are. But reading is still very much an important part of French culture. It's as much a part of French cultural identity as it is a pastime.



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Because the language itself was, for such a long time, one of the global languages of record, the government has a very strong position on maintaining the integrity, if you will, of the French language or the usage of French language culturally. You see that in their inclusion of the Francophone literatures from around the world, their continual engagement with Quebec, and the French work that's being produced in Quebec. It's a part of their soft power agenda, which we're seeing, speaking politically, at a time when there's a new prime minister and there's a new culture minister. Soft power is increasingly important culturally, and the French language has been nothing if not a grand weapon to employ in that endeavor for centuries.

KENNEALLY: Well, the French will get to exercise some of that soft power later this year at the Frankfurt book fair in the fall, where France is the guest of honor. What can we expect from that? I guess probably a fairly spectacular display of French culture and French language, and as you say, going beyond France to include those other countries around the world, not only in Europe and North America, but in Africa, as well, that share the French language.

NAWOTKA: What I think you're going to see is exactly that. You're going to see a display of the legacy of French colonial power. But you're also going to see the rebirth and the transformation of that power into a very modern presentation of living French, if you will, because French certainly sounds different in Africa or in Montreal than it does in Paris, let alone in Marseilles or Brittany. So you're going to see a myriad of manifestations of that, and you're also going to see certainly some of the high level intellectual firepower that's going to be on display. The French have no shortage of prize-winning authors and provocateurs, and I'm sure that there's going to be some challenges put forth.

France has, aside from Germany – the European Union, the basis of that organization resides in France and Germany, and here's yet another instance of the two countries collaborating culturally at a time when people have questioned the viability and sustainability of the EU as a whole. I think you're going to see some discussion about what is the role in the changing nature of Europe. France is central to that, certainly, with their having been the site of several terrorist attacks and a lot of questions about the roles of the left and the right in the political identity of France, let alone Europe, itself. I think you're going to see all those things come to the fore as manifested in literature, which traditionally has also been one of their greatest exports, along with wine and cheese.



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KENNEALLY: Ed Nawotka is Bookselling and International News Editor at *Publishers Weekly*. He's joined us on Beyond the Book with news and insights on the French bookselling marketplace. Ed Nawotka, merci beaucoup.

NAWOTKA: Merci. De rien.

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