



**Interview with Fabrice Piault, Livres Hebdo**

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KENNEALLY: A new president, a political system unrecognizable from only a year ago, a country looking to expand its influence on the world stage and to assert itself once again as an economic and cultural superpower. From Paris, the summer of 2017 looks much the same as it does from Washington.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book.

The election in June of Emmanuel Macron made clear that France has entered a new political period, with traditional parties in decline, new forces on the rise on the right and left, and a sense that the old ways may no longer be relevant. Are the same revolutionary forces at work in publishing and the book business here, too?

Fabrice Piault became editor-in-chief of *Livres Hebdo* in 2015. He joined the Paris-based publication, which reports on the French publishing industry as well as booksellers, in 1987 as a reporter. He is also president of ACBD, the association of critics and journalists covering graphic novels and comic books in France. Piault is a keen observer not only of *le monde littéraire français* but also of the world publishing scene. He joins me now in his office off Boulevard Saint-Germain in the Latin Quarter of Paris. Welcome, Fabrice. *Bonjour*.

PIAULT: *Bonjour*.

KENNEALLY: It's wonderful to have a chance to speak with you, because these are interesting times in the United States and in France, as well. I think that listeners would appreciate a kind of contrast between the American marketplace and the French marketplace. I spoke about a month ago with a colleague at *Publishers Weekly*, Ed Nawotka, who told us about some of the recent sales numbers for the book business in France. It was up overall by about 4%, but that in the trade and retail sales, it was really less than 1%, extracting some special sales in the school sector. The news, even though it is relatively flat, was considered positive. Is that how you would see things right now as far as the sales for books in this country?



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PIAULT: Last year was positive. I think Ed is right. There has been an increase of the sales, but this mainly comes from education books. The reason is effectively that there has been some changes in the programs – some huge changes for all levels. So it has really brought a dynamic in the book market, but specifically for education books. As a whole, the market is flat. It's not an increase, period. It's generally flat.

From the beginning of this year, the sales are down. The first and the second quarters have been quite – well, have been a little down, and I think it's related to the election, actually. People have spent a lot of time watching TV and reading newspapers or on the internet. It's an election which has really mobilized all people. There has been so many surprises during the campaign. I don't know if you had the information in America, but the favored candidates have lost early and so on, and there had been many changes. Macron's victory was not expected, actually, at the beginning. So many changes, and it was good for the press, good for the media, not so good for books.

KENNEALLY: We saw very much the same phenomenon in the United States during the election in 2016. Book sales dropped, and book publishers and booksellers were all hoping for the election to be over. They couldn't wait for it to be over so the distraction would go away. Unfortunately, the distraction continues, and the distraction isn't only in the White House, but it is from other media, as well. Books today compete with other media in a way that they never really did before. Is that true in France?

PIAULT: Maybe it's more than it used to be, but I think the political elections have never been a good thing for books, actually. Last year, political books have really succeeded much more than during previous elections, but it was not enough to compensate the lack of sales of other types of books.

KENNEALLY: One of the things one notices wandering through Paris, which is always a lovely experience, particularly here in this quarter, is the number of bookstores that continue to exist and hopefully to thrive. Some of that is a result of the fixed price law, the so-called Lang Law, that doesn't allow for discounting and kind of holds off the threat of Amazon. But also, I imagine, it's to do with the culture of reading. Would you say the culture of reading continues to be strong here?

PIAULT: I think the culture of reading remains strong, but we see – on a long term, we see a decrease of the number of really big readers – readers who read more than 20 books a year. This number is going down. But at the same time, there is an



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increase of the number of people reading one or two books a year. So it has some consequences on some type of books. That means it's a bit more difficult now for high-quality literature, but at the same time, it opens new windows, new possibilities, new opportunities for popular literature or the type of how-to-do books and so on.

KENNEALLY: Are people reading those books in print, in digital, or a mixture of both?

PIAULT: Digital is not so strong in France, actually. It has never been so important. It's not like in the United States or in UK. For literature, about maybe 4% or 5% of books are read digitally, but in some categories, it can be much more. For romance, for example, it's much more. For fantasy also, it's 10%, 15%, or even 20%. It can be much more for these categories.

KENNEALLY: I see. Of course, it is summertime, which is a season for the beach and for books at the beach. Any titles doing particularly well for summer reading here in France?

PIAULT: Yes. Actually, if you look at the bestseller list, the book which is in first position is a book from Raphaëlle Giordano called *Your Second Life Starts When You Understand That You Have Only One*. This book has been on the bestseller list for, I think, something like one year and a half, and it's really a huge success. I think it's very symbolic of a new type of literature – feel-good books, some sort of feel-good books and popular literature.

France is well known for its quality literature – high-quality literature. Usually in France, the bestsellers of popular literature was coming from the United States, and it's still the case. But I think there is an emerging of a French popular literature which started maybe about two years ago or something. We always had a few writers doing this type of literature, like Marc Levy or Guillaume Musso, or a little more recently, Katherine Pancol or Anna Gavalda. But now we have dozens, actually. And if you look at the bestseller list this summer, most of the 20 bestsellers are coming from this type of books – popular literature.

KENNEALLY: France will be celebrated at the Frankfurt Book Fair coming in October. It's the guest of honor this year – the first time since 1989 – so I'm sure many of those authors of those popular novels will be joining the festivities. I spoke with Juergen Boos, who is the CEO of the Frankfurt Book Fair, and he told me the program is going to be about much more than just books and authors. In fact, he sees it as an opportunity to try to do many things – to express Franco-German



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solidarity, support for the European project. What are your own expectations for the Frankfurt Book Fair and France as guest of honor, and what do you hear about the expectations among publishers?

PIAULT: First, there is a political context. That's why Juergen Boos speaks about this. There is a political context related to the election of Macron, as Macron is maybe the first important political person and president who really defends Europe and he's in favor of Europe. Usually in many European countries, politicians try always to say Europe is responsible for every bad thing in the countries. This time, we have a president who wants to build something in Europe. So it's an opportunity to strengthen the links between Germany – there is a sort of Franco-German axis which is a little center of Europe, especially now as the UK is going out with the Brexit. That's the context.

If you look at the publishing side, there are very ancient and important links between German and French publishing industry. First, we share the same idea of how you can sell books. We both have fixed price. We both trust in the importance of booksellers and independent booksellers. So the two countries have important links, and they often fight together on many dossiers in the European Union. That's an important part of the debate, I think. During the Frankfurt Book Fair, there will probably be some discussions about the fixed price and about copyrights, author rights, etc. So that's important. Especially in the digital world, the problem publishers face with Google, with Amazon, and so on – there is strong cooperation between the two countries.

And there are also a lot of exchanges of rights. French publishers translate – German is the third language more translated in France after English and Japanese because of mangas, mainly. So it's very important. Also, German is among the fifth countries buying more rights from France. So there are really strong relations, and I think French publishers now want to develop their sales this year. I think they will do. Many authors are already going to Germany. There are many meetings organized everywhere in Germany. That will probably help to develop French literature in Germany.

Besides, I think French publishers expect to be under the lights for the whole world publishing industry. I think it's an opportunity for France to show that its publishing industry has changed, actually. I talked about this development of French popular literature, but there is also a renewal of the human sciences. Children's publishing is very, very dynamic, and it's well known for its innovation ability. There is also what we call *bandes desineés*, sort of comics industry, which



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is one of the three most important in the world beside the American one and the Japanese one. So I think France has a lot to show, and French publishers expect to show what they are doing now and what they have changed in the past years.

KENNEALLY: It sounds like the dynamism and the even revolutionary tendencies of the last election are reflected in part in the publishing business. Would you think that we're going to see many more changes in the coming years in the same way that we've seen such changes on the political scene?

PIAULT: You mean in the publishing industry? Well, difficult to say. I think there are many changes coming, with more young publishers – there are new publishing houses – and we see, yeah, a lot of dynamism with new trends. But as everywhere in the world, the book industry is not expanding a lot. It's a mature industry. So we can't expect a revolution. You talk about revolutionary. I don't think there will be a revolution. But a renewal, certainly.

KENNEALLY: Fabrice Piauxt, editor-in-chief of *Livres Hebdo*, thank you so much for joining us today here in Paris on Beyond the Book. *Merci beaucoup*.

PIAULT: You're welcome. Thank you.

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