Interview with Richard Charkin, founder, Mensch Publishing

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KENNEALLY: As an entrepreneur in publishing, Richard Charkin had checked none of the usual boxes when he began his new venture – no business plan, no strategy, no list of authors and book titles committed to the venture. What Charkin had going for him, nevertheless, is a record of success in the book business over nearly half a century.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book. Richard Charkin has since boasted that his new company, Mensch Publishing, is a house with no mission statement and no stated editorial strategy. What matters, he asserted, is that the imprint only live up to its name – to do business with honor and integrity. The former executive director of Bloomsbury Publishing and past president of the International Publishers Association, Richard Charkin joins me on the line from his office in London. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Richard.

CHARKIN: Well, hello, Chris. Good to speak with you.

KENNEALLY: We're looking forward to chatting with you. As we referenced in the opening statement there, you have been a publisher for 46 years, but you've been working for other people throughout all of that time – some very distinguished houses, of course – but it seemed like the right time to start one of your own companies. Tell us what you were thinking when you decided to do that.

CHARKIN: I was probably thinking mad thoughts.

KENNEALLY: (laughter) That would have to be for anyone about to start a publishing venture these days.

CHARKIN: (laughter) That may be true. As I approach 70 and look back on an unbelievably enjoyable, rewarding, challenging, stimulating, fun career, I realized that the one thing I hadn't done was to spend my own money and do things the way I really wanted to do them on behalf of authors and readers. So this was an opportunity. If it were to go wrong, it wouldn't land me in jail, I hope, and it wouldn't bankrupt me. If it went well, I wouldn't become a billionaire or even a

millionaire or even a thousandaire, but I would be in the black. So I thought I'd give it a try.

KENNEALLY: How much does it change things, Richard, that you're now spending your own money, rather than someone else's money?

CHARKIN: It changes everything. I've started delivering proofs by hand in order to save the postage. Not sure many major publishers do that. I keep an eye on absolutely everything. I'm discovering things that I never, never knew about how the nuts and bolts of the business work. In fact, one of, I believe, my duties is to let my previous and current employer, Bloomsbury, know where they might be able to save money if they behaved like an independent spending your own money. It makes all the difference in the world.

KENNEALLY: When we hear about you spending your own money, you are doing that entirely by yourself. That's what's so different about starting a publishing house in 2019 than it might have been even 20 years ago. You can do practically everything just in your own office. I've seen a picture. You're by yourself. It must be a nice, pleasant break to get out and mail those proofs.

CHARKIN: (laughter) It's good for my walking regime, anyway. Yeah, that's absolutely right. Of course, I do spend time in other people's offices – with agents, authors, etc. So I'm not entirely on my own. And I've got a dedicated team of professional freelancers. That's the big difference. I could get the website designed and made. I could get the editing done. The selling is being done brilliantly by Bloomsbury, the distribution by Macmillan. All that is doable without having an overhead. In fact, I call it – as I work from home and I don't pay myself, I call it an underhead rather than an overhead. It seems to work.

KENNEALLY: Your approach to publishing is to focus on the concerns of authors, you said, as well as their readers. Tell us about the ways you're thinking of remaking, reconceiving of that relationship that authors and publishers have. You have published already one book just out this month, Guy Kennaway's *Time to Go*. You can tell us about the book. But tell us about how you found Guy and the arrangement that you made with him. It is different, I understand, than you might have done at Bloomsbury.

CHARKIN: Yeah, sure. Well, not entirely different, but I think different in nature – put it that way. I knew Guy. He's a personal friend. I knew his mom, who'd asked him to help her die. So it was natural when this book came up – and I know what a good writer he is – that they would talk to me and I would talk to them. The deal

was really between the author and me. There was a literary agent who was terrific, but really was more a conduit than a negotiator.

Mensch Publishing is new. We cannot afford to pay advances. What we can do is to pay good royalties, which we do, to the author and pay them quickly. And we always will take world rights. I'm afraid I don't go along with splitting rights. I think it reduces a publisher's responsibilities if they don't control rights everywhere. So for instance, in English, we will sell in the US, in the UK, in Australia, in India, etc. We will be responsible for the audiobook and the e-book. We're responsible for selling serial rights, for foreign language rights. It's a whole package – which frequently, of course, literary agents prefer to split rights, which is fine. But that's not the way I can see doing it.

Also, I think I can care about the book more, in a way. For instance, I had to learn how to register for CCC, for the Copyright Licensing Agency, for Copyright Australia and make sure that the book was registered, would pick up whatever income came through that route. It's all those details that get lost in the structures, I think, of bigger publishers.

Incidentally, they do certain things really well. Their sales teams, their distribution teams, their IT systems, personnel – all that sort of thing I have no quarrel with at all. I think what I'm trying to do is to get the best of both worlds out of using their facilities where appropriate and focusing deep attention on the author. I think if you were to interview Guy – he's been published by several other very, very distinguished publishers – I think he would give you a story of how much interaction he and I have had. Not me trying to edit his book in any way, but me trying to ensure that he reaches his readers as effectively as possible.

KENNEALLY: And these days, Richard, one of the ways that authors reach readers isn't in print, but by the audio version of the book. What was it like to manage that project?

CHARKIN: It was amazing. Now, we're having a chat over an audio system with a digital studio, which is impressive. I've never sat in on a recording of an audiobook before. It was eye-opening. The main reader, the actor, had worked for three days. He'd spent a whole day reading the book and getting the hang of the characters and then two full days – and it's not a very long book. It's 200 pages. It took two whole days of recording to get it right. And in the end, we've got something that is as good as a book, and for many, many people, I have to say it might be better than a book. It's the same, but it's a different work of art. I think it really is an incredible new direction for publishing.

KENNEALLY: Richard, you should tell the listeners a little bit more about the book. You mentioned something very intriguing, but a little worrisome. You said that Guy Kennaway's mother asked him for help to end her life. Tell us more.

CHARKIN: Yeah, she was at the time, I think, 88. She's now 89. Her husband was early 90s. They were both perfectly healthy, living in a lovely house in France. But they knew, as many old people do, that at some point or other they were going to become infirm, either mentally or physically. And they frankly didn't want to go through the agony of it all. However, the law says that you may, if you're terminally ill, go to various places and effectively commit suicide, but you may not ask someone to help you do it, or they're liable to be accused of murder, I suppose. They were worried that they'd be too infirm to get to Switzerland or wherever it is that they would have their final dose. So they asked their son to help.

He didn't. He conversed with them, discussed with them, and wrote it down. It just so happens he's one of the funniest writers in the English language. His previous books, if you check them out, are really, really funny. So he's turned what is in some ways a horrific subject into something that's readable, entertaining, engaging, but never loses sight of the central theme, which is that old people have rights, and one of those rights is to determine the time of their departure.

KENNEALLY: Now, that first book is out from Mensch Publishing. Do you have any others planned at the moment? I'm sure your announcement about opening a publishing house meant a lot of offers to publish someone's book.

CHARKIN: Yeah, sure. I'll give you a couple of clues. One is I bought 100 ISBNs from Nielsen, not 10. So I can publish quite a few books before I need to pay any more money to Nielsen. Secondly, I do have other books, but I'm afraid until I've got them under my belt, I'm not going to start showing off about them. I think the areas are likely to be nonfiction. It's very, very hard to see how a small publisher can add real value to particularly literary fiction, which is so much geared by relationships with the big retailers and indeed with the reviewers of literary fiction, etc. So I think I'll probably be focusing on nonfiction. I wish I could tell you. I've got some exciting books, and I wish I could tell you. But until I've signed the contract, I better not. It would be un-mensch-like, I think.

KENNEALLY: Right. Well, we are speaking today, Richard Charkin, in the lead-up to Brexit, the exit for the UK from the EU that will happen, if all goes according to – if not plan, at least according to legislation – this coming March 29. But you were part of a group of representatives from publishing expressing concern about

publishing in the UK post-Brexit. Can you tell us briefly about your position on that, what your hopes are for publishing in the UK after Brexit?

CHARKIN: Firstly, I should say that I think Brexit is misconceived and is being mishandled. And to be perfectly honest, I'm ashamed of our performance as a country or as a government in handling this. So my prejudices are out there. I would rather remain within Europe, and I would rather be a citizen of the world as well as a citizen of Europe. I'm a second-generation immigrant, and I feel that some of the Brexit vote was about anti-immigration, and I really can't hold with it. So that's where I stand.

In terms of publishing, there are some technical issues about split rights, European rights, which will be potentially affected by Brexit. They're very technical and very dangerous, but I can't go into them now. Not that it's a secret, but it's just hard. But I think British publishing is in good health and will remain in good health in spite of Brexit, because we've always been global. We've always had to punch above our weight. The UK market is a relatively small market in terms of comparisons with the US or China or even Germany, for that matter. So I think we'll adapt. It's a very adaptable industry. But I do think it's going to – how could I say – reinforce my argument that we should always go for world rights in all the books we publish so that we can serve our authors around the world irrespective of the diversion of Brexit.

KENNEALLY: Well, Richard Charkin, the former executive director of Bloomsbury Publishing and now the founder of Mensch Publishing, we have enjoyed speaking with you today for Beyond the Book.

CHARKIN: It's a pleasure, Chris. Thanks very much.

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