

## HOW TO MAKE THE EUROPEAN BOOKSELLING INDUSTRY MORE SUCCESSFUL AND COMPETITIVE?

### 1. **BY PROMOTING READING AT A EUROPEAN LEVEL**

Books are central to the acquisition of literacy, education and knowledge of all kinds: specialist and general, informal and formal, whether for adults or children. Books provide the basis of reading skills, inquiry, comprehension and individual enterprise. Books build and transmit the culture, science and history of Europe, and the European identity lives through the written word.

If the ambitious objectives set by the European Council of Lisbon are to be reached, literacy is undoubtedly the first step in the improvement of learning skills: how can Europeans think of being competitive without improving their literacy skills? Reading skills are a prerequisite to work and social insertion.

How can the bookselling industry think of being competitive outside of Europe, and be the ambassador of our fantastic talents and linguistic diversity when too many Europeans still have very poor reading skills?

Indeed, four recent surveys are extremely worrying: a Eurobarometer survey into reading; an International Adult Literacy Survey, Literacy in the Information Age; an OECD PISA international study, comparing the performance of school children; a survey from the UK's Department for Education and Skills.

#### ***Eurobarometer survey***

In April 2002, the European Opinion Research Group carried out a Eurobarometer survey at the request of the European Commission, Eurostat, in which over Europe as a whole, 42.1% on average indicated that they had not read a book in the last 12 months. In Portugal, Belgium, Greece and Spain, the figures were 67.3%, 58.3%, 54.3% and 52.7% respectively.

#### ***International Adult Literacy Survey***

In its report, *Literacy in the Information Age*, which compared literacy skills in 20 countries (including Belgium (Flanders), the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom), the Canadian based International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) commented: "*Improving the literacy skills of the population remains a large challenge for policy-makers. In all of the countries surveyed, including Canada, there exists a significant number of adults with low literacy skills. It is important to address this issue, as such skills are needed to sustain widespread participation in economic, social, cultural and political life. This is especially so given the emergence of the knowledge economy and the increasing demand for skills this has brought about*".

### **OECD PISA study**

The OECD PISA study provides international comparative data on the performance of school children. OECD's conclusions are similar to that of IALS. It is disturbing to note that there are six EU countries (Spain, Italy, Germany, Greece, Portugal and Luxemburg) that are statistically below the OECD average (and significantly so) in terms of reading proficiency.

### **UK's Department for Education and Skills study**

In research very recently carried out by the Department for Education and Skills in the United Kingdom, 10% of adults in England were unable to understand correctly the instructions on a packet of seeds for the garden.

## **PROMOTING READING THROUGH AN EXISTING PLATFORM**

### **Using the World Book Day**

The World Book Day tradition began in Catalonia, Spain, in 1926, where people celebrate St George's Day by giving a book and a rose to loved ones (St. George is also the patron saint of Catalonia). UNESCO has since designated April the 23<sup>rd</sup> - the day on which both William Shakespeare and Miguel de Cervantes died - as World Book Day. The World Book Day was celebrated in over 30 countries around the globe last year.

- In Austria, there were more than a hundred readings and book related events in bookstores, libraries, schools and other places; these did not only focus on 23<sup>rd</sup> April but continued until the end of May. The 2002 anthology, entitled "Kleine Fibel des Alltags", edited by the Hauptverband and compiled by the publishers Jochen Jung, was given free to the customers of 400 bookshops participating in the World Book Day. Jochen Jung had invited 62 Austrian writers to contribute to this book. This project resulted in a very fine and humorous reflection of contemporary Austrian literature and for this reason it is still a book in great demand, even though 45,000 copies have already been purchased.
- In Antwerp (Flanders, Belgium), a Book Ball was organised in the Museum of Fine Arts on the 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2002. More than 800 people were present. The Book Ball concluded Flanders' "Spring of Literature" project.
- In Denmark, a book first published in 1998 when Astrid Lindgren was celebrating her 90<sup>th</sup> Birthday "Samuel fra Sevedstorp og Hanna i Hult" (Danish) "Samuel från Sevedstorp och Hanna i Hult" (Swedish title), was given to customers in the bookshops as a gift on the World Book Day. There were three main happenings around the World Book Day in 2002 in Denmark. A reading was arranged in Copenhagen, a discussion on present literature problems was organised by the Cultural Committee of the Parliament, together with representatives

from the Book trade. The day ended up with a meeting to discuss Copyright.

- In Finland, the goal of the World Book Day was to draw attention to books and literature around the nation. Various organizations had arranged numerous happenings around the city. Booksellers, publishers, schools, kindergartens, libraries, cultural centres and florists took part in the event. Market stalls in the park were filled with books and roses. Authors appeared on stage next to the statue of J.L. Runeberg, Finland's national poet. In 2002, the theme of the Book and Rose Day was "*Time for Books*"!
- In France, for the third year running, booksellers organised a party on the 27<sup>th</sup> April 2002, in the framework of the initiative "Un livre, une rose" (*A Book, a Rose*). 250 booksellers had registered, and bookshops organized various events and celebrations around 'the book'. In Libourne, for example, Madison Nuggets held a St Emilion wine-tasting session and had invited along the translator of Stephen King's books, who lives in the surroundings. In Lille, 9 booksellers from the association "Booksellers in Lille" organized various events in the framework of the launch of "Passions d'Avril", an annual festival running from the 25<sup>th</sup> to the 28th April. In Paris, 10 booksellers and critics presented their favourite book in a collection called "Au-delà de cette limite votre livre peut encore être lu". The day ended up with a big party bringing together writers, booksellers and critics in Paris. This year, a short text by Stendhal has been chosen: "Les brigands en Italie" (*Bandits in Italy*).
- In Germany, for instance, teachers' packs are distributed to schools and nearly 1,000,000 copies of a special book are produced which consumers can buy for 0,50 Euro. Anthologies, quizzes and competitions are organised, special WBD bookmarks are produced, and a number of the events are promoted on television.
- In Hungary, 2001 was the Hungarian *Year of Reading* campaign, a cross-border event with the power to mobilise people. It has elevated the importance of reading, the significance of written culture and the rediscovery of the joy of reading. This campaign was particularly successful and the results exceeded those reported by the international book world during the last five years.
- In the United Kingdom, 59,000 Information Packs are sent annually to schools and public libraries by the organizers of World Book Day. These Packs outline the plans for the forthcoming promotion and suggest ideas as to how the event might best be celebrated. Furthermore, the well-known charity, Book Aid International (which sends books donated free in the UK to the disadvantaged overseas), promotes its fundraising activities in the WBD Packs.
- Fifteen Million special World Book Day Book Tokens are produced and given to virtually every school child in the United Kingdom and Ireland, so that they can go into bookshops and exchange the Book Token for specially produced books, or for price reductions of other books. Bookshops and libraries organize events in support of WBD. Linked to

the WBD promotion is a *Get Caught Reading* campaign – a reading awareness campaign involving celebrities, who give their endorsement and time for free. Many institutions have used this material, including schools, bookshops, local authorities and prison libraries.

But these countries realise that far more could be done if more resources were available.

The European Booksellers Federation (EBF) would like to urge the Parliament to envisage ways of including the promotion of reading among the political priorities of the Parliament and the Commission, using the promotion of World Book Day as the platform to encourage greater literacy.

The European Booksellers Federation would very much welcome the opportunity to discuss possibilities further with the Culture Committee of the European Parliament and, if deemed to be appropriate, to obtain the support and the involvement of other major figures of the book industry, such as the Federation of European Publishers, the International Federation of Library Associations, the European Writers' Congress, the EUROREAD platform, Teachers Associations and other experts combating illiteracy.

The European Booksellers Federation has considered the possibility of developing a stand-alone initiative to this end, but believes that far more could be achieved if a new initiative to promote books and to combat illiteracy was put onto the back of an existing infrastructure.

We believe that a suitable platform already exists – that of World Book Day - which is already supported to various degrees by virtually every single Member State.

## **2. BY AVOIDING THE TAXATION OF READING**

The Value Added Tax (VAT) rate applied to printed books by Member States throughout the European Union currently varies from 0% to 25%. “The book trade in Europe”, a table providing VAT rates in all Member States and candidate countries, attached to this document, illustrates the great diversity of situations in Europe.

It has to be pointed out that 3 candidate countries (Cyprus, Lithuania and Poland) presently benefit from a 0% VAT rate. Any change of the situation (revision of the Annex H of the VAT Directive 77/388 in 2003) would be highly damageable for the book sector industry of the incoming countries.

The reduction of VAT on books has an immediate effect on book sales, and therefore on reading: a reduction of VAT on books from 25% to 6% was effective in Sweden on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 2002 and the Swedish Government appointed a Commission for the Book Price for three years. The task of this Commission is to follow the change of book prices and its effect on reading after lowering the VAT from 25% to 6%. The Commission has already reported that book prices have gone down and sales of books have increased in 2002. The same happened in Finland when VAT went down in 1994.

The European Booksellers Federation strongly believes that printed books should not be taxed at all throughout the EU in the future, and that under the harmonisation arrangements, any Member State that wishes to allocate a 0% VAT rate for printed books should be allowed to do so.

### **3. BY ORGANISING APPROPRIATE STATISTICS AT THE EUROPEAN LEVEL**

In late 2002, EBF learned that a revision of the Eurostat classifications is being undertaken for implementation in 2007, and contacted the appropriate service in the European Commission (Eurostat) to draw its attention to the fact that this might be a good opportunity to provide books with a more appropriate classification than the one currently in existence. At present, books are classified as follows in Eurostat retail statistics: "Cpa 952471 Retail trade services of books, newspapers and stationery".

The European Booksellers Federation formally asked Eurostat if books might be classified separately under "Retail trade services of books".

Because of the huge importance of books as social and cultural assets, EBF argued that it is of paramount importance to be able to produce credible statistics, that can provide both the decision makers within the European institutions and Member States, and also those within the book trade, with an accurate picture of how books are faring and where efforts might best be placed to better promote books and reading.

### **CONCLUSION**

The European Booksellers Federation is of the opinion that the bookselling industry has valid reasons to be proud of the important social and cultural value of the products it promotes and sells; booksellers are aware of their responsibility in the promotion of European literature within Europe but also worldwide.

Nevertheless, no doubt the industry, like many other cultural industries in Europe, has to face difficulties and to meet the challenges of a fast-evolving environment. The European Booksellers Federation would very much welcome the opportunity to discuss the issue further with the Culture Committee of the European Parliament.

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