

# PUBLISHING NOW

With new digital-first divisions launching and many publishers only releasing ebooks initially, Kathleen Whyman asks why this format is so popular

Connecting readers with stories, fast' is the aim of Orion's new digital-first commercial fiction imprint, Dash, which launched this autumn led by commissioning editor Victoria Oundjian. Meanwhile, back in July, HarperCollins combined its HarperImpulse, Killer Reads and Avon digital-first divisions to form One More Chapter. Run by editorial director Charlotte Ledger, the digital-first division wants to 'close the gap between author, publisher and reader; reacting speedily to reading trends and publishing the best in commercial fiction.'

## Fast fiction

There are so many elements involved in print publishing that the actual writing is almost the quickest part of the process.

Hannah Smith, editorial director at digital-first imprint Head of Zeus (Aria), says: 'We can publish quickly, without detriment to the quality of the novel, which means there isn't a long waiting time before seeing your book out in the world. With print it could take more than a year.'

Speed is a positive in more ways than one, as Abigail Fenton, head of HQ Digital explains. She says: 'What I love about



Abigail Fenton

digital-first publishing is how agile it is. Because we can publish incredibly fast, we can make changes easily and react to the market and to readers. You can update ebooks quickly if you need to change a jacket or add an extract of the author's next book.'

Jenny Geras, publisher at digital publishing company Bookouture, agrees. 'If an ebook isn't selling, we can make immediate changes – to its cover, its blurb, its title. We do this regularly and it often has a significant impact. This is much harder to do in traditional publishing once a print book is on the shelves of a bookshop.'

'Another pro is the ease of updating files,' adds Amy Durant, editorial director at Sapere Books, which publishes digital and print-on-demand books. 'If a print run goes out with an error, you can only update by printing a second edition. If an ebook goes out with an error, or you want to add something post-publication – links to an author's other books for example – you can correct the file, re-upload it and the updated version will be available within a couple of days.'

## Shelf space

To get a traditional print book in front of readers, it first has to be sold to retailers. And with so many books being released each month, there isn't anywhere near enough shelf space to accommodate them.

'Retail space is getting more and more squeezed, so it's increasingly difficult to get books into stores, particularly supermarkets,' says Durant. 'Digital lets us publish directly to readers.'

Geras agrees. 'Traditional publishers are very limited in terms of what they can publish because they have "gatekeepers" – the retailers, whose space is hugely limited. At Bookouture we can publish 10 psychological thrillers in one month and make them all bestsellers. A traditional publisher wouldn't be able to get all 10 thrillers into the supermarkets.'

'We can also publish to more niche genres. And, most significantly of all, we



Jenny Geras

can sell all of our books globally.'

Smith confirms that international sales are another USP for ebooks.

'You reach a global audience quickly without waiting for rights deals to go through or export editions to be created,' she says. 'We can also reach readerships that we never thought we could, from those who prefer to read digitally or onscreen to people who struggle to read small fonts.'

## Financial benefits

Ebooks have financial benefits for readers, authors and publishers alike. For readers, they're more affordable than print books. For publishers, ebooks are cost-effective because there aren't any print costs, a benefit they can pass on to their authors.

'Digital-first publishers usually offer a much more generous royalty rate than traditional publishers,' says Durant. 'You don't need to stock ebooks, pay for printing or worry about returns.'

'At HQ Digital we don't pay advances, but we do pay high digital royalties,' says Fenton.

'Bookouture has a high royalty rate,' says Geras. 'Some authors care a lot about seeing their books in bricks-and-mortar retailers. Other authors care more about getting the maximum number of readers reading their work, which our model helps with because we tend to price more competitively and therefore to sell a higher volume.'

'At Head of Zeus (Aria) you earn royalties monthly from the time you're published, as you don't have to wait for an advance to be paid off,' says Smith.

Speed of publishing and high royalties? That certainly answers my question as to why ebooks are so popular!