



I have just found two online publications that recommend books that I think I might like. This feels like a breakthrough.

One is a blog. The other calls itself a magazine. They are both based in the UK. Both do weekly posts.

I am not too sure what the difference is between a blog and an online magazine is. In practice the online magazines tend to have better layout, clearer navigation and more disciplined publication schedules. Even the best of the blogs can have a more chaotic feel, which can be quite appealing.

The blog I have found is called *Bookmunch*. The magazine is *Shiny New Books*. In both cases the work they have decided to do is recommending books. *Bookmunch* does occasional articles. No self-publicising, and no tips on creative writing. That to me is already

a relief. *Bookmunch* feels quite funky. *Shiny New Books* is respectable. Nobody on either publication gets paid. *Shiny New Books* say emphatically they don't review self-published books. *Bookmunch* don't say anything in particular.

The books I have found include *War and Turpentine*, by Stefan Hertmans, *American War*, by Omar el-Akkad, *Swallowing Mercury* by Wioletta Greg, and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* by Jesmyn Ward. I have put them all on Amazon lists.

Except for *Sing, Unburied, Sing* they are all translated. Ward is an American writer. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* was the winner of last year's National Book Award. As such it may well have had exposure in the mainstream media in this country. I hadn't heard of it. *American War* had turned up in my recommendations on Amazon, presumably because I have browsed dystopian fiction. I hadn't heard of any of the others. All of them have something to do with trauma, which is an interest of mine.

I don't like contemporary English fiction. I don't think it's very good. This selection tends to confirm my view. I am not very impressed by contemporary European or American fiction, either. It's striking that when I find European and American novels I want to read, I find them on publications that are outside the mainstream.

It is fairly easy to find stuff that was written in the second half of the twentieth century. I am a huge fan of Naguib Mahfouz, and a fan of Lao She and Ma Jian. Notice that this is all translated. It is hard to find good contemporary stuff.

One reason it is hard to find good contemporary fiction is that regular publishing, in this country and probably the United States, isn't working very well. I don't think they are capable of finding and publishing genuinely original work. The other reason it is hard is the sheer volume of self-publishing. Most blogs won't touch self-published fiction. The ones that will review self-published either deal exclusively with genre or charge a fee for reviews. No-

one is sifting the bulk that is out there.

I am convinced that if anyone is writing good stuff in this country now - and that's if, and only if - it is either being self-published, or not published at all. I can't find it. And as a writer - a writer who is quite confident he is writing good stuff - I can't find readers.

Until I found *Bookmunch* and *Shiny New Books* I was convinced there were a lot of book blogs out there. There are. Most of them are vulgar. They do genre. They are decorated with pictures of flowers and sunsets. Some are pretentious. They are literary and intellectual. Many are not being updated any more. In some cases this is because the owners have gone on to social media. Blogs aren't fashionable any more. They leave a forwarding address, and mumble about the archive. In other cases the owners have just disappeared. It was obviously too much work.

There are probably 200,000 books being published in the UK by regular publishers every year. Not all of them are novels. Many are. There are probably a couple of hundred thousand self-published books.

I have found two publications to help me sift through them. I don't know how long their owners will be able to keep up the unpaid work. I don't know where I will go when they close.

What I really need is to find other writers who are doing similar stuff and have similar values. I need to feel I am not alone. With the help of *Bookmunch* and *Shiny New Books* I may be able to find regularly-published writers I feel an affinity with. That will be something.

I don't know how I'm going to find the self-published writers I like. And I don't know how I will find readers.

I have sent *Bookmunch* a copy of *The City that Walked Away*. I don't know what they will do.

I have emailed *Shiny New Books*. I have suggested they need a procedure for making exceptions.

I don't expect a reply.

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