PRACTICES

PUBLISHING

TARIQ GODDARD

ADDITIONAL PRAISE FOR *PUBLISHING*

"Tariq Goddard revolutionized philosophy publishing in the Anglophone world, changing many more lives than my own. This brief memoir gives a spicy sample of the personality that made it all possible." —*Graham Harman*, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the Southern California Institute of Architecture

"*Publishing* is really three invaluable books in a sharply tailored trenchcoat: a fascinating memoir that conceals within itself both a handbook for the inner workings of a notoriously occulted industry as well as an emergency survival guide for writers and artists wondering how and why to keep creating from the heart in the age of algorithms and LLMs. I only put it down when I could no longer resist the urge to write." —*Meredith Graves*, artist and writer

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"Too often book publishing is determined by flickering near-term gains, the algorithmic transiency of what's trending, and the unhinged mania for conglomerating. As both author and publisher, Tariq Goddard has shown that this need not be the case, and that the invocation of that strange thing called a book—wily and feral though it may be—can exist as a singular, integrated, creative act." —*Eugene Thacker*, author of *In the Dust of This Planet*

"*Publishing* has a tripartite structure. Ranged around lucid meditations on reading, writing, and wondering—which Tariq Goddard argues as being essential interdependent processes—his book gives us the vicarious thrill of a look behind the scenes into that world in which he was apex and linchpin. As exciting as it sounds, it was evidently in equal measures frustrating, infuriating, and unnerving." —*Matt Ingram, Hollow Earth* blog

"*Publishing* is a tale told with the flair one expects of an accomplished novelist and director of a small independent press, now an increasingly endangered species. It's anything but dry. Tariq Goddard's book is an eloquent and elegant defense of literature and all the arts as expressions of that most beautiful and transcendent of rational impulses, wonder." —*David Bentley Hart*, author of *A Gathering of Leaves: Extravagances and Ephemera*

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Tariq Goddard

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PROLOGUE

Is there anything I can learn for the work I have to do?
—**Henry James**, quoted in Leon Edel, *Henry James*

THE PUBLISHING DIRECTOR waited impatiently for me to stop talking before suggesting, not too gently, that I was pretentious and mad. Her path to her present position, I was to learn, had been a sensible one, whereas my own, I was in the process of realizing, was the opposite of that. Most publishers do not have a "mission statement," and if they do, they can console themselves that it was written long before anyone would expect them to take responsibility for it, far less find themselves reading it aloud in real time before a skeptical audience. The latest incarnation of the Repeater Books publishing credo was raw, having only been drafted and agreed on the day before. As publishers we were a little like a band without any songs that cannot play its instruments yet, convinced that if we pick the right name for the group, everything else will follow. Much of

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our early energy had been taken up with finding the definitive moniker, logo, and manifesto for our new imprint, evidence perhaps of our preference for the aesthetic over the practical and grist for those who would dismiss us as shallow poseurs. While I sensed that the lively rhetoric of our statement might not be to everyone's taste and required toning down before appearing in every book we intended to publish, I had not predicted it would be such a lightning rod for the contrast of styles between our team and the one we were joining. Not that I could have tailored my approach if I had, as through a mixture of naivete, ignorance, and arrogance, my estrangement from received publishing orthodoxy had become a badge of honor, and with vainglorious complacency I assumed it would be respected if not actually celebrated by an audience of peers.

Whoa, mister, I don't know what any of that was, whatever it was, but it is not doing books, it's not publishing, as I understand it or as we do it here, okay?

My early years as an author writing fiction with a major press were not geared toward teaching me about the business end of publishing. A strict division of labor that was intended to serve the interests of both publisher and writer was acknowledged as the tacit norm, and for my first few years as a published novelist I hardly thought about, far less questioned, the sagacity of staying in one's lane. In return for being treated as an artist who was doing something important—and publishers, at least while the going was good, were adept at encouraging their authors to feel this way—it was enough to hand in a novel within the time stipulated by my contract and turn up eighteen months later to promote it, leaving the mysterious stuff that happened before, in between, and after that to the professionals. Any interest

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in the mechanics of the industry would have been profoundly counterintuitive, as most new writers want to write and not be bothered with anything else. (I remember thinking a youngish novelist who said he wanted "power" was unusual; critical acclaim and sales for sure, but power? That was something I did not understand.) Besides, there were plenty of other diversions to distract us from writing: reviews, the next advance, drinking with other writers, and the validation of being included on lists of "who to watch" that were treated with self-referential reverence when not worrying about the unfair attention paid to rivals or whether we would still be read in a hundred years. The baubles and trinkets that came with the life of an aspiring novelist were always as trivial as the writing was meant to be serious, offering a break from the hard creative labor of sitting at one's desk every day, which in a settled period of relative calm in the culture industry felt like it would go on forever.

The transition from this sheltered state of affairs to attempting to set up and become a publisher of Zer0 Books during the financial collapse was severe. The imprint was, to put it generously, a small guerrilla operation, the owner of our parent company an unfortunate combination of old publishing (disdaining authors and the reading of books on principle) and "visionary" futurism, who saw himself ushering in a brave new publishing world—one that would do away with offices, staff, communications, and, if possible, readers themselves. In circumstances that were the very definition of extenuating, Zer0 attracted authors who were as inexperienced as ourselves and readers who would not normally embrace "theory"-heavy tracts, creating a micro-scene that was all our own, a modest miracle that was (partly) rendered possible by the gaps and deficiencies in pub-

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lishing as it then was. Different as my experiences as a novelist and then editor were, neither had exposed me to the everyday rituals of mainstream publishing, fostering at first a somewhat unhealthy dependence on experts, followed by seven years of uncomfortable coexistence with a rule-shredding crank. In light of my history, I was completely unprepared for my first helping of undiluted industry jargon, served up pure and delivered with bored aggression, which my interlocutor correctly thought she could catch me out on. The religious certainty in oneself I carried over from being a writer, emboldened by our achievements at Zer0, meant that I saw nothing hubristic about quoting ourselves, sensing it was prudent to get the most challenging aspects of who we were out of the way lest anyone confuse us for what we were not (which of course would have been impossible). Instead I had blundered into a trap.

I mean, come on, that's all very well, whatever it is, but what about monthly P&Ls, A&Is, MOQs, POD, RPR, advances, annual turnover, agents, run-in times, ebooks, covers meetings? That's the stuff we need to know about. I mean whatever you're on, that's great, but come on, get real, whatever all that babble is, great, but that doesn't help us. The stuff we need to know is publishing stuff; who do I need to be talking to if we want to know that?

I had no answer to that question. We had done without all "the stuff" up to then. The fact that I acknowledged that we had more to learn about publishing was evinced by our being there; I could be gracious about that if it helped us get to the "next level," yet that did not mean I knew the difference between a P&L and an A&I, or either of them from a bad night's sleep. For anyone who had an interest in exposing our imperfections—

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books that were clumsily produced, sometimes hastily edited, and erratically promoted, all on a nonexistent budget—the incriminating evidence was already manifest and embedded in plain sight. Indeed, our quirks were an integral part of our narrative. This was only half the story though; readers had also told me that our books had changed their lives. In my conceit I had assumed my interlocutor would know this.

Perhaps someone in your team could help? Are your guys meant to be doing the same stuff as our guys? I mean, are you all meant to be doing equivalent jobs to our team?

I hesitated before introducing my team to the fray, some of whom had not turned up because they were still recovering from our last publishing experience, still very fresh, and others because they had gotten the date wrong (we had always been pretty flexible about timing). In any case, the three who had made it did not look like they were champing at the bit to join in. Diplomatically, channeling whatever it is that is the opposite of inspiration, I began to explain how the respective roles of the two teams were "not incommensurable" with each other, reaching my absolute nadir when I was asked to explain what incommensurable meant and froze (the parent company would complain about a number of "obscure" terms that appeared in our books, titles, and subtitles, their least favorite being "neoliberalism," although "incommensurable" came a close second).

Whoa, okay. You seem to release a hundred books a month, we're not geared out to work like that. From our point of view, from a strictly publishing point of view, I just don't know how you survived this long. . . . All we know is we have to work with you, and you fell out with your owner. . . . You haven't actually given us anything concrete yet. . . .

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Pride forbade me to give more ground. Any apprehension I may have felt at being dismissed by seasoned professionals as unserious if not entirely unfit for purpose was tempered by the fact that the company we were to join had little more to crow about than us and, despite some eminence in their field, were at that point temporally languishing above a burrito shop on an unlovely road connecting Angel to King's Cross Station. Which made us even in the outcast stakes, I felt. With injured dignity, I mentioned that several of our titles had enjoyed the trifecta of critical acclaim, media coverage, and sales, and if that sounded like boasting, our future collaboration and marriage of styles might yet produce an ideal hybrid that neither of us could achieve alone, and, I added, in the last instance the books themselves were the thing (the first and last time I would say this or hear it said in a publishing context), and ours were great! This made my counterpart laugh, albeit derisively. No, I was told, books were not the thing, certainly not the main one, not in her experience. I was getting everything the wrong way round! Unless you understood the business, it did not matter how good the books were; no one would ever know about them. The fact that we had already succeeded in selling lots of books without understanding her acronyms was left as the ghost in the room, the kind of fluke even the most efficient system might be embarrassed by, but it was in no way an achievement I could brandish. I was left in very little doubt that we would be at best tolerated until we failed. Not everyone on her side of the room shared her opinion though, and in time the publishing director became nearly as supportive as she was then skeptical, without ever losing the bemused incredulity that we existed at all, or that she and I shared anything in common other than our place

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of employment. Perhaps she also understood that passionate enthusiasts are useful if they discover some undiscovered niche, trend, or zeitgeist, and even if we were no more than glorified talent scouts, the new owner of their company was collecting literary kudos, and until he tired of us, we were there whether she liked it or not. My introductory stump speech was an irrelevance that would change nothing, however entertaining or lamentable an impression I had made.[1]

It would not be long before I was conversant in the uses and abuses of most of the acronyms and abbreviations the director had used that day, trying them out for size first tentatively then systematically as a matter of course. I never fully believed in them or their efficacy, and as the years passed, I saw how they suited the structure and seasons of the industry better than they ever did the actual books I brought out or the authors that wrote them, but by then we were clients of the largest publishing house in the world and releasing two titles a month, not ten. This small book will not be about the kind of publishing I heard about that day and later paid lip service to but about what I thought publishing was before I knew better: a creative practice at the service of reading, writing, and wondering, not a process geared toward a financial bottom line. My observations will be of limited help to anyone interested in a programmatic guide as to how to enter the industry, far less succeed in it, or those looking for a step-by-step memoir that adheres to chronology. Publishing is slow and takes a long time, whereas this book is short and can be read quickly, as the first Zer0 titles were written and intended to be. I do not have the space to do justice to a balanced overview of the last eighteen years, and so I have been necessarily partial and partisan on

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which aspects I choose to riff on and on those I pass over without comment or mention. I realize my tone is as unapologetically idealistic as most of our books were, but it is an idealism that has come into full contact with a business reality that was, at best, indifferent to its demands, when not actively opposed to them. Moreover, I choose to write about publishing for essentially the same reason I practiced it, not because I think it is the most important thing a person can do with their life—it is not even close to that—but because it was where I made a contribution I believed to be unique, even if that meant remaining an obscure figure in a small province.

This book is divided into three parts—reading, writing, and wondering—practices that are all as necessary to each other as they are to publishing. By explaining what they mean to me and how all three form a mutually virtuous relationship that is essential to invention and creativity, I hope to share what motivated me to publish and what can happen to publishing when they are lost sight of. There is a game I used to play as a child, daunted by the number of books there were in the world, where if I wanted to magically "read" one without reading it, all I had to do was wink at its cover to assimilate its essence. Leaning into this delusionary fantasy, I quickly worked my way through the libraries and catalogues and became an expert on everything from the Bhagavad Gita to existentialism, kidding myself that I "knew" texts I was utterly ignorant of because I wanted to be taken for the sort of person who had read them. At its laziest I saw something similar in publishing, our titles the currency in a long march of meetings, calls, and shared spreadsheets, with everything a cynic would need to know about the books included in bullet points if they missed the

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presentation. A three-day conference could pass without the content of a single book being mentioned, far less discussed, as there never seemed to be a relevant context where one could be. This was a state of affairs that I never made my peace with. For me publishing is a practice that shares dreams, resembling nothing so much as a loosely organized state of productive awe for those fortunate enough to do it as a living. While the system works as it is supposed to for many writers, my book is for the writers who may never have made it had our imprints not existed. I did not change publishing, it did not change me, though ultimately, the books and those who wrote them really *did* turn out to be the thing. I dedicate this one to the teams I worked with at Zer0 and Repeater, without whom I would never have escaped from the solipsism of a novelist's life, and to all our authors, who already seem to me as brilliant and accomplished as the characters in a novel that happened to be real.

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Introduction
A Note on My Terms

I EMPHASIZE THE VALUE of reading, writing, and wondering in publishing over, for the sake of argument, the role of algorithms and the collation of metadata not out of willful perversity, a desire to set up straw men, or even an old-school romanticism that favors "back to basics" over innovative thinking but because without them I would not have been able to function as a publisher. For publishers themselves, indifference to reading, writing, and wondering may not always be as immediately deleterious to their trade as it would be for their writers, as even the most nominally creative of industries carries a large commercial tail that caters to the needs of those who feel more comfortable managing logistics and stimulating commerce than puzzling over artistic invention. Yet publishers who take this virtuous cycle of intertwined practices for granted—or hope that others care so they do not have to—run considerable risks if their livelihood is predicated on selling books. This is

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not only to do with the importance of understanding authors, who may not always perfectly understand themselves, as it is an appreciation of how these practices provide the business end of the industry with its content and purpose. Publishing is an eighty-billion-dollar worldwide enterprise where the bottom line can be affected by factors as elusive as whether an author can force themselves to write a few words in the morning and then pull themselves together to read them back again after lunch. There is not a flowchart or PowerPoint presentation in corporate publishing that does not owe its existence to the vagaries and caprice of individual talents and the unfathomable source of their gifts, which are so often compartmentalized and sidelined in favor of the known and controllable. This may seem obvious from the outside, but one only has to attend a publishing summit in which neither reading nor writing is mentioned (forget "wondering" for now) over hours spent in seminars dedicated to advertising on Amazon to realize that ignorance of this trinity can degrade and limit a publisher's remit, if not stop the golden goose (good authors and books) from laying eggs altogether.

Does my use of these terms differ at all from what they are taken to mean in their everyday deployment? Reading and writing are self-evidently necessary for a reader to make sense of these words, yet I mean something more by them than a basic competence in literacy. I regard both as transcendent ends in themselves as well as creative activities that work in tandem to keep up an author's morale and mental health. There is not an author I know who does not recognize the crossing of a threshold when what they are reading and writing align in perfect synchronicity, creating an outpouring of ideas and

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connections that emerge out of these activities themselves and seem to then exceed them. For writers both practices are literally integral to their own work, as we must write and then reread what we write, the possibilities inherent in our writing stimulated by the actuality of reading. Each is a transportive practice that, though caused by words, goes far beyond them into a state of heightened awareness of ourselves, others, and life, which I find to be as mystical as it is commonplace. Reading and writing that do not transcend, however modestly, inevitably disappoint if the object is to be creative. I have yet to meet an author who does not mourn the loss of inspiration when all they are left with is marks on a page and letters on a screen, signifying neither the experiences they purport to represent nor the concepts they hope to ignite into life, the writing as worthless as reading it is pointless. This is not to say that only masterpieces have validity, and that reading or writing without transcendence is altogether futile. Ephemeral literature assembled by a team of assistants following the storyboard of a brand name that has forgone the burden of writing their own books can obviously be read for pleasure, just as one can write for a purely practical outcome, listing the side effects of medicines that save millions of lives or writing copy for textbooks that teach children how to count. There is no question that there is a necessary place for all kinds of reading and writing, but my use of the terms has very little relevance in contexts such as these, despite the basic resemblance reading and writing share whether used toward a reductive end or an open one. Part of the object of this book, like those parts of my working life that clicked, is to show why some writers are driven to attempt work of lasting consequence and what publishers who act as

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gatekeepers and midwives of their talent might do to nurture that end, if they care to.

Compared to reading and writing, wondering is even less likely to feature in a discussion on publishing, and my insistence on it may seem more obscure in consequence. I make no claims to conceptual originality in my definition of wondering, and I do not have any counterintuitive meaning in mind, as I intend it in much the same sense as it was evoked by the ancient Greeks and found in the films of Terrence Malick, the poetry of Walt Whitman, the music of the Sugarcubes, or the act of a toddler eyeballing a flower. The mixture of curiosity and amazement that characterizes wondering comes before the practices that embody it and continues after those practices have fulfilled their objectives, the condition, in my view, being a companion to consciousness itself. Publishing for me began with wonder, as has everything else I value in my life, including reading and writing. Together with reading and writing, wondering feeds and sustains a state I need to be in to publish anything worth reading at all. Unlike reading and writing, wondering is an immaterial practice or, as Ludwig Wittgenstein would have it, a "thought in the soul" that both reflects on life's mysteries and serves as our creative point of contact with them. "Thinking" might form an acceptable materialist substitute for anyone put off by metaphysics or "woo," yet it means less than what I want to make of wondering, which I believe affords any activity it infuses with a protection from meaninglessness, careerism, and nihilism.

While all three of these practices are as necessary to creativity as food, sleep, and exercise are to a healthy body, and lapses in any one of them will affect the other two, I realize

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this view cannot apply to everyone, any more than a failure to observe the importance of practicing, listening, and performing if you are a musician would harm you if you were a window cleaner. Every walk of life may well have its equivalent discipline or function that mirrors reading, writing, and wondering, and though I see the benefit they can bequeath anyone irrespective of their profession, I have no intention of trying to shoehorn existence itself into these practices or erecting an all-encompassing theory that applies them or their variants to every vocational calling. While I would double down on wondering being something I would encourage everyone to do, some of my best friends seem to get by very well not having written or read since school, and I do not think anything particularly terrible will happen to anyone content to live in the moment and engage with perishable objects and activities that have no leanings toward immortality and need no elaboration in print. Trillions of existences have passed without encountering the privilege, opportunity, or compulsion to open a book, and one need only compare print sales to those of any other form of entertainment to know this is not likely to change soon, if at all.

Acknowledging the limits of reading, writing, and wondering used to deflate me. I would stand in a half-full tent at a literary festival in a city famous for them, hearing the traffic pass our little enclave without a thought or regard for my book, far less for whatever theme or concept I was expounding, the audience comparable to the attendance of a midweek under-eleven soccer game, and want to yell into the night, "Come in! Come in! This is where it is really happening, you are all missing out!" I envied my copanelists who were able to take what we were doing as seriously as I wanted to, but I could not help but feel

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that however carefully we guarded the bubble we operated in, life outside it regarded us as little more than a special interest group. I realize now that the contentment of my contemporaries was a humbler response to our relative neglect than my megalomaniacal disappointment. Paradoxically, the sparsity of our numbers made life more intense inside our bubble as the battle over the allocation of resources, spaces, and opportunities heated up, squeezing the space where we all had to feed. That was in the days when I still thought that writers, like publishers, were in competition with each other, when our real foes, I was to learn, were the indifference of the public, the fickleness of the bottom line, and the vicissitudes of eternity. Therefore, the greatest test for my terms will be if they touch a nerve with fellow writers for whom validation and publication were so often synonymous and with other publishers, who may look on a writer's involuntary desire to leave a written record of their endeavor that *deserves* to last, however unlikely it is to do so, with the same mixture of sympathy and admiration as I do.

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Happy hour: celebrating with my publicity team, authors, and readers at a book event in 2021. Photo by Eddie Otchere.

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NOTES

Prologue

Epigraph source: Henry James, quoted in Leon Edel, *Henry James*, 5 vols. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1953–72).

1 In fairness to the owner/investor, if this meeting had taken place within any of the big five publishers, our story would have ended there and then, and there would have been no Repeater Books. Perfectly legitimate concerns about our lack of exposure to a larger corporate climate and failure to be clear about how we would integrate with their day-to-day procedures would doubtless be cited, and we would have been erased from the history of publishing altogether, with many of our writers never seeing it into print at all. Being an imprint owned by a single individual did have its disadvantages and contributed to our eventual undoing, but when the going was good, we were left alone and given an autonomy that would be rare if not unthinkable at an established publishing house.

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