

## Introduction: Flight Paths

Imagine a paper plane loaded up with paper books and paper publishers. It's flying from Delhi to Frankfurt, or maybe from Tbilisi to Frankfurt, or perhaps from New York to Frankfurt. There are lots of paper planes. Some of them fly fast and far. Some of them get stuck in trees. Some of them converge at midway points, where paper publishers rush between gates to make connections, tapping on paper phones the moment they get Wi-Fi. At the paper airport in Frankfurt, the paper publishers collect their paper baggage and disperse to hotels, perhaps drinking a Negroni in the lobby before converging once again at the Frankfurt Book Fair.

Paper planes are fun to make and to fly. They also prompt reflection on the material activity undergirding a trade that can seem virtual, global and frictionless: the sale of international rights to book-based content. A great deal of physical movement, unequally distributed and routed via the central node of the Frankfurt Book Fair, is necessary to produce the key goods of the publishing industry – successful books.

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This book (itself available as a paper element or as a digital one) is about the Frankfurt Book Fair and its role in the publishing of bestsellers. The Book Fair, or in its native German, Buchmesse, is presided over by the Frankfurter Buchmesse GmbH, a subsidiary of the Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels Beteiligungsgesellschaft mbH (BBG), which was founded by the Börsenverein des deutschen Buchhandels (the German Publishers and Booksellers Association). The Fair is an international forum for the exchange of rights and a showcase for books and publishing. With its origins in the fifteenth century and a renewed role after World War II, the Buchmesse is where the industry gathers en masse once a year, often described as 'the largest of all' trade events in the global publishing industry (Owen 2019). It presents what we term 'megativity', a positive attitude expressed through physical scale and future-oriented behaviours, including the trading of rights. It is where new entrants to the industry go to establish an international presence, the place 'Everyone attends because everyone attends' (Niemeier 2001, 111). In 2019 the Buchmesse hosted 7,450

exhibitors, 302,267 visitors, 4,000 events and 10,000 journalists; while this confirms its size, the Fair is physically smaller than it used to be, occupying two fewer halls in the Messe complex than in 2015 (Frankfurter Buchmesse 2019a; Nawotka 2019a). This retraction notwithstanding, the Buchmesse still presents itself and is thought of as the key annual destination for global book business (or ‘buzzness’, as we have termed it), the most important date on the publishing calendar.

At a symbolic level ‘Frankfurt’ is a byword in the contemporary publishing industry. It is a term around which a host of associations, assumptions and values coalesce. Frankfurt is a semi-mythical placeholder that represents the centre of book publishing, and especially publishing’s most high-profile products: bestsellers. It is also a focal point for much of the publishing industry’s optimism and forward-looking energy, particularly important given, and intriguingly counterposed with, publishing’s long-standing tendency to be powered by existential ‘crisis’ or ‘apocalypse’ (Taylor 1989, 1; Lewis-Kraus 2009) including anxieties about the decline of reading. Publishing is an industry that derives energy from its efforts to document, understand and even influence the sometimes hostile world which surrounds it. In this context bestsellers are proof that books still find readers and they provide the cash influx that supports other books. The Frankfurt Book Fair is an event explicitly oriented around hope: what might sell, where and in what format.

The Buchmesse lasts for only a few days each October, but it is widely discussed in the media in the lead-up to the Fair and for months afterwards as the industry and the public try to grasp the shape of book culture, especially through its key trends. Industry newsletters and websites present insider accounts of the Fair; trade associations feature news about Frankfurt on their websites for the benefit of members.<sup>1</sup> The books sections of newspapers such as *The Guardian* or the *New York Times* often refer to Frankfurt amongst their reviews and articles. News of Frankfurt reaches

<sup>1</sup> Industry newsletters include *The Bookseller* (UK), *Publishers Weekly* (USA), *Books+Publishing* (Australia), *Livres Hebdo* (France) and *Boersenblatt* (Germany). For examples of industry association reports see Australian Publishers Association (2018) and Publishing Scotland (2019).

a broader audience through cultural journalism, such as the long-form articles we discuss in Chapter 3. And a potential bestseller will often be introduced to booksellers with an account of its success at Frankfurt. In these narratives a particular vocabulary is used to write about Frankfurt and future bestsellers. Books are snapped up in bidding wars. Books are sensations. Books are hot property.

There is a gap, though, between how the Fair is reported and how it is experienced. Much more happens at Frankfurt than rights sales of hot books. The layout of the Fair includes thousands of exhibitors from across the world who exhibit on stands grouped by linguistic, cultural and geopolitical affinities. The *Ehregast*, or guest of honour designation, introduced in 1976, showcases the literature and culture of a country (or sometimes region or language group) through a dedicated, decorative pavilion at the Messe and a series of programmes and events. Opening ceremonies and author talks celebrate freedom of speech, even as political unrest sporadically punctures the veneer of liberal discourse. In addition to these political dimensions of the Fair, social dynamics intersect with its economic activity. Exhibitors, visitors and journalists talk and network at meetings, in the halls and at nearby hotels and restaurants. The production of an international bestseller sits on top of layer after layer of Buchmesse activity. How then can researchers best approach this complex, pivotal site of contemporary book culture?

### *Ullapoolism*

This book enacts and develops an Ullapoolist research approach. Ullapoolism is a programme of playful, material, satirical and sociable research producing situated knowledge and creative critique and using arts-informed methods.<sup>2</sup> It is informed by previous models for the study of book culture, including Robert Darnton's communications circuit of the book (1982), Pierre Bourdieu's field of literary production (1993) and Pascale Casanova's *World Republic of Letters* (2004), but breaks with these in order to engage more comprehensively with the oneness of contemporary culture. As outlined in our article 'The Epistemology of Ullapoolism: Making Mischief from within Contemporary Book Culture'

<sup>2</sup> For more information visit <https://ullapoolism.wordpress.com/>.

(Driscoll and Squires 2020b), Ullapoolism is a sensing-thinking-doing epistemology, an interventionist conceptual and activist art practice.

Ullapoolism draws inspiration from the Situationist International's opposition to commodity capitalism and the 'spectacle' which renders people as passive consumers (Debord (1967) 2014). Two of the situationists' key modes are the *détournement*, a parodic rewriting of images and texts, and the *dérive*, a practice of actively drifting through urban environments and responding to the emotions they inspire. Our own *détournements* to date have included card and board games that investigate the dynamics of literary festivals, pyjamas that reflect upon the materiality of reading in a post-digital age and a spot-the-difference quiz that plays on the similar-sounding names of musician and actor Janelle Monáe and author Gerald Murnane; our *dérives* have included the thoughtful drowning of a copy of *Moby Dick* to further our explorations of boats and books (Driscoll and Squires 2018a, 2018b, 2018c).

As explained further in Chapter 2, Ullapoolism also finds inspiration in 'low theory', a term proposed by Stuart Hall and adapted by Jack Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). Low theory is a 'kind of theoretical model that flies under the radar' and 'tries to locate all the in-between spaces' (Halberstam 2011, 16 and 2). It is attuned to 'the small, the inconsequential, the antimonumental, the micro, the irrelevant' and chases 'whims and fantasies' (Halberstam 2011, 21), a mode we adopt in order to advance our cultural analysis and scholarly activism.

Because Ullapoolism is interventionist, researching from within publishing networks is integral to our work. We are not disinterested observers, but active players and sometimes instigators of the situations of contemporary book cultures. In this book we pursue this approach to argue that the Fair is a layered site where the economic activity of any given year occurs in tandem with enduring geopolitical and social inequities, along with political, cultural and environmental challenges. This approach significantly extends earlier scholarship on the Frankfurt Book Fair and on the publishing of bestsellers.

### *Scholarship on the Frankfurt Book Fair*

Previous scholarly approaches to the Frankfurt Book Fair are a relatively select grouping; while writers' festivals have been the subject of considerable

recent scholarship (for example Murray 2012; Driscoll 2014; Sapiro 2016; Weber 2018), there is less research on publishing trade fairs. One line of research is historical: Peter Weidhaas, long-time Fair director, chronicled the Buchmesse (2007, 2009). Stephan Füssel has edited two collections with a predominantly historical focus, including Ulrike Seyer's work on the Buchmesse during the 1960s (Füssel 1999; Altenhein and Füssel 2007; Seyer 2007). Sabine Niemeier's monograph takes an overview of the Fair's history to the (then) present day (2001).

Other research has been more anthropological or sociological in orientation. In this vein is work by Brian Moeran (2010, 2011), including his article 'The Book Fair As Tournament of Values' (2011), which draws on Pierre Bourdieu's model of the literary field and Arjun Appadurai's concept of 'tournaments of value'. Approaches from cultural sociology include Roanna Gonsalves' work, which adapts Bourdieusian thinking to analyse the Frankfurt Book Fair's dynamics, showing how Indian publishers (2015) mobilise friendliness as a strategy.

In publishing studies and book history the Frankfurt Book Fair has been discussed in trade-oriented books such as Lynette Owen's *Selling Rights* (eighth edition, 2019), in Corinna Norrick-Rühl's examination of the Fair in the context of the broader international book market (2019), and in publications by John B. Thompson (2010) and Simone Murray (2012), whose main interest is in the evolving role of the Fair since the 1990s as it widened its focus from books to encompass content and rights. A special issue of *Mémoires du Livres/Studies in Book Culture* includes articles on the Frankfurt Book Fair (Hertwig 2020; Norrick-Rühl 2020). These accounts are especially attuned to the role of the Buchmesse in the commerce of publishing, including its role in the creation of bestsellers.

Each of these accounts is productive and finds a place in the chapters of our book. At the same time these accounts all acknowledge their limitations, particularly in relation to the layered complexity of the Frankfurt Book Fair, limitations that have prompted us towards the creative approach of Ullapoolism outlined in the previous section.

*Bestsellers*

One of the challenges in researching the Frankfurt Book Fair is the high numbers of individuals and organisations that participate. The same problem of proliferation applies to the study of books at Frankfurt. As an element of the ‘bestsellers’ thread in the Cambridge Elements in Publishing and Book Culture series, this book takes a special interest in the interplay between the Buchmesse and bestsellers, and thereby advances existing scholarship on the topic.

One of our key research findings in this book is that the Frankfurt Book Fair is essentially forward-looking, and nowhere is its optimism more manifest than in the Buchmesse’s concentration on the production of future bestsellers. Bestsellers are the high-profile products that drive publishing as an industry and connect it to other media sectors. Bestsellers are also the public face of the industry, the items which, in the words of one individual in the trade, make it “interesting to the outside world; they are barometers of public taste, the harbingers of the new” (Mitchinson, cited in Squires 2007, 106). For John Sutherland, examining the sociology of bestsellers is ‘like running one’s fingers over a topographical map of . . . social history’ (Sutherland 2002, 7).

And yet, despite (or perhaps linked to) the bestseller’s potency in publishing and society more generally, the term ‘bestseller’ has no clear, stable meaning. Industry definitions are highly constructed and contested, with books opportunistically named bestsellers on their covers long before they are published or a single copy sold. Bestseller lists, even in the age of Nielsen BookScan’s rich sales data, are both ‘marketing tool and historical fiction’ (Miller 2000), editorialised, manipulated and missing key sales outlets (such as Amazon) and book types (including from the burgeoning world of self-publishing). The unit of time over which bestsellers are counted – an hour on Amazon, the week in a newspaper, the year in an industry round-up, the decade in a reflective commentary – slips and slides, creating an additional yet imprecise vocabulary of fast, steady and long-sellers (Escarpit 1966; Sutherland 1981).

Previous academic work has traced the historical development of the bestseller, frequently approaching it more as a genre (that is, mass market

genre fiction) than a quantitative descriptor (Mott 1947; Escarpit 1966; Sutherland 1978, 1981; Bloom 2002; Gelder 2004). Over time bestsellers have become more and more important to the industry; as the success of the Harry Potter series highlights, the gulf is increasing between the highest-selling titles and the very long tail (Steiner 2014).

Our Ullapoolist conceptualisation of bestsellers incorporates each of these overlapping, fluid definitions and proposes another approach: the bestseller as situation. Bestsellers, we argue, are actively constructed situations in book culture. They are the products of people, practices, sites, materials and events, and they are the instigators of further activity: buying, reading, imitating, avoiding. Our use of the word ‘situation’ intentionally recalls the Situationist International’s provocative activities, but whereas their situations had an overtly disruptive political purpose, the political impact of bestsellers often seems conservative, reproducing dominant neo-liberal market values. And yet, we suggest, the sheer scale, reach and variety of activity that surrounds bestsellers means they are both generative of and generated by the broader political and economic dimensions of book culture. Bestsellers are situations that both confirm and disrupt patterns of global book commerce and the scholarship that attends to it. Bestsellers are, thus, also the instigating purpose of this study, although – as detailed later – we excavate beneath them over the course of this book.

One aim of this book then is to discern the workings that produce international bestsellers before the fact: the meetings, deals and marketing efforts that take place at the global source. Bestsellers travel globally through rights deals across multiple territories and formats. Bestsellers also depend upon the generation of word-of-mouth marketing, and Frankfurt is where global buzz campaigns begin in earnest. The Fair is the omphalos of international bestsellers, and studying it sheds new light on how these important but often ill-defined products are produced and circulated.

### *Methods: Ullapoolism Goes to the Buchmesse*

The Buchmesse is a compressed, intense layering of social, technological, cultural and commercial transactions, and its scale and organisational

complexity pose a methodological challenge for book culture researchers. It has travelled through centuries and existed in its current orientation through decades, and each year it is remade through the minutiae of daily schedules, half-hourly meetings, minutes of activity, seconds of chance encounters and split-second decisions on which route to take through the Fair. The Fair is multilingual, multicultural and literally multilevel with intersecting experiences across parallel, never quite touching worlds. Activity at the Fair builds cumulatively, palimpsest-like, as the Fair expands and contracts and as old hands and new eyes bring their understandings, experiences, ennui and excitement to the event. What is needed, perhaps, is an excavation of the Frankfurt Book Fair. Beneath the surface of the industry discourse that surrounds Frankfurt is a world to explore.

What methods might researchers use to account for, travel through, situate themselves within and even recreate such a polyvalent entity as the Buchmesse? And in seeking to understand the trajectories bestselling books and their authors, publishers and readers have travelled to their eventual success, how might their stories be told? Our approach builds on the scholarship outlined earlier in this book, but furthers it via Ullapoolism's incorporation of arts-informed thinking and embodied, participatory modes.

We carried out our research for this book over three consecutive years of fieldwork at the Frankfurt Book Fair (2017–19). We conducted fifty-two interviews, walked the Buchmesse and surrounding areas of Frankfurt, sat in on dozens of meetings, and attended multiple parties and events. We also carried out a host of arts-informed research projects: we measured things, handed out fortune-telling mood fish, set up our own publisher stand in a disused area of Hall 6, took on the personae of journalists, and wrote a novella. A complete list of methods (many of which, whether traditional or creative, incorporate aspects of the *dérive* or the *détournement*) is detailed in Table 1. Our argument is that this eclectic suite of methods produces situated knowledge of the Fair and its role in the book industry; playful methods, in particular, follow the epistemology of Ullapoolism in revealing hard-to-access qualitative information about the lived experience, commercial effects and political fault lines of the Buchmesse.



Table 1 Methods used in this book, and the chapter reporting their results

Paper Planes	Introduction
Participant Observation, Including Parties	1, 2, 3
Reading (books, media articles, tweets using the official Frankfurt Book Fair hashtag)	Introduction, 1, 2, 3, Conclusion
Interviews	1, 2, Conclusion
Fortune-Telling Mood Fish	1
Industry Newsletter Collages	1
Penny Power and Polly Pringle, Journalists	1, 3, Conclusion
The Cardboard Buchmesse	2
Laser Measuring	2
The Publisher Stand Reversed	2
<i>The Frankfurt Kabuff</i> , a comic erotic novella by Blaire Squisroll	2, 3
The Sleaze-O-Meter	3
Spotify Playlist	3
Custom Tote Bags	3
Non-actualised Method 1: Stickers	3
Non-actualised Method 2: Burning It Down	3
Guess Who Am I	Conclusion

We also recognise the limitations of our methods. Our participation was both enabled and constrained by our existing networks amongst anglophone publishers (particularly UK and Australian), although the book industry contacts we developed became more geographically and linguistically diverse as our networks expanded. We also recognise that the Buchmesse is not one event but many, and it is impossible to produce a full understanding of it. Without Hermione Granger's Time-Turner (borrowed from *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*), we were physically limited by how much we could observe. The epistemology of Ullapoolism acknowledges these

constraints, but also (as future chapters articulate) actively creates its modes of understanding and interpretation through them.

This short book, then, looks at a big topic – the Frankfurter Buchmesse, the world’s largest publishing industry event – and its role in circulating bestselling books. It explores the transnational flows of information in the publishing industry, the sales of rights that are so essential to bestsellers and the physical pathways that enable them. It analyses the racial and gender politics of the Fair, as well as the political turmoil that occasionally intrudes into cosmopolitan, bookish discourse.

We begin in Chapter 1 by asking, what and where is Book Buzz? We track the physical, digital and print conversations held during and beyond the Fair in order to map a pattern of the buzz production that is essential to the promotion of any bestselling title. We assess the mood of the Fair and talk to book people in their element.<sup>3</sup> Chapter 2 analyses the physical spaces of the Buchmesse which, we show, express power relations within the industry that affect the circulation of books and book people. We examine the stand structures: their size and spaces, their displays and strategic non-displays of power and aggression. We get behind the scenes at the Fair and into ‘Kabuffs’.

Hot on the heels of our entry into the Buchmesse’s cupboards and other spaces, the third element in our narrative is carnivalesque. In Chapter 3 we examine the ways in which the Fair functions outside the everyday operations of the publishing industry, even as it is integral to them. The Fair is carnivalesque and licences a range of convivial, sociable and excessive behaviours. This chapter also considers the public-facing elements of the Fair – including its cosplay areas – its politics of inclusion and exclusion, as well as the unrest that has troubled the Buchmesse.

Our thrilling conclusion begins with a sociologically inflected game that surveys the interactions of different people attending the Fair. It then summarises three key themes that traverse this book: the Frankfurt Book Fair’s prevailing optimism, its neoliberal self-satisfaction and its excesses

<sup>3</sup> Technically paper is not an element, but if it were, we imagine it would be the publisher’s.