

MIRA DROUMIEVA INTERVIEW

Welcome back to Brian Pickings. This time around we're going to hop all the way across the globe to Bulgaria, where we'll sit down to talk with Mira Droumeva, a foreign rights agent who deals with a good many authors you probably have heard of (and read). It's her job to find these authors publishers across and around the Balkans, which she's been doing rather successfully for almost two decades now.

First of all, foreign agents are a little different than US agents in that they deal with not just multiple publishers but also multiple countries. What countries do you deal with for your clients?

Actually, not all foreign agents deal with multiple territories, but we in particular work in quite a few. We are based in Sofia, Bulgaria and we started out by selling Bulgarian language rights. But subsequently we expanded our territory and now we represent many of our clients for neighboring Serbia, Macedonia and Romania as well as Montenegro, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Quite the list. As we already mentioned, being a foreign agent can be a bit different than one in the US. To help those reading this interview fully understand what is involved, might you be so kind as to perhaps walk us through a typical day?

I can't say that we have any days that I can label as typical. A foreign agent, much like a primary agent, actually has a lot of administration to deal with. So the more typical part of our job has to do with issuing of contracts, chasing for payments or royalty reports, and sending this information on to the primary agents. But it's the variety of titles we get for review from our clients in the US and UK that make our days anything but typical. Every book is a universe onto its own! Some days it seems that it's one great book after the other and its then that the admin work takes a back seat to reviewing and discussing the books among us in the agency, and then pitching the books to publishers. These are the days that we live for!

It sounds like you really enjoy being an agent. Was that something you always wanted to do?

I started out by helping my mother who ran the agency (and still does). I started as a part time helper to earn some cash over one summer some 18 years ago... But I fell in love with the job and while it was not something I'd ever dreamt about doing, it turned out to be something I can't imagine not doing.

That's great to see something you can share as a family. Do you have plans to eventually take over the company when and if your mother retires?

My mom has been and still is the best teacher I've had and I will be honored to continue her work.

Since most of your clients tend to be publishers, how do you go about deciding who to take on as a client?

I'd say that half our clients are publishers and half agencies. And in both cases the decision to take them on is the same – potential. When approached by a new client, we always ask for the catalogue for review and if we feel the greater number of books have potential for our markets, we take them on. When we used to have fewer clients, we took on more in the hope that a potential book will come in eventually. Now we have reached our limit and we really can't take on any new clients, unless we see a real potential in the books they handle.

We are always honest with what we can do for a client. I've always felt that there is no point in having a representative in a market, no matter how small or peripheral that market might be, if you are not being told the whole truth – pleasant or unpleasant.

So what types of genres tend to be a big sellers in the countries you work in?

Our markets are quite different in what works well. Bulgaria is much more commercially oriented and thrillers and commercial women's fiction tend to work the best. Serbia and Romania are more literary and we sell mostly up-market fiction there.

What genre doesn't tend to do well right now in the countries you deal with?

I can't say that there is a genre that completely does not work. Small as our markets are, they are varied and they have a little of everything. But there are some genres that our agency does not sell much of - we don't sell many science books, for example, or business books. My view is that for such non-fiction titles, readership is not big and with modern technologies many people will read these in the original English language. We do not sell much classic crime or memoirs either. But we are just one of the agencies operating on the markets and there are local authors as well, so we can't really claim to be completely objective.

So if someone wanted to take things into their own hands and enter into the world of foreign rights, what should he or she be aware of?

A foreign agent is in a special place between the primary copyright holder and the local publishers. So they have to know both sides of the business well and be understanding to both sides. Ultimately, we are looking out for the best interests of the author, but we do this within the reality of the various markets. So the most important thing is to know the markets from the inside out and know the people you are working with on both sides.

Again, most people reading this have no clue how foreign deals are conducted. Do you mind walking us through how a deal is done and what might often be the result for US authors in terms of sales, advances, and such?

A foreign deal is not much different from a deal an agent concludes with a US publisher. So the principle is the same. We try to keep the publishers as informed as possible. If we get a book which we feel is just right for one publisher, we will contact them, pitch the book and wait to hear back from them. Depending on the book, there are cases where we have auctions, though perhaps not as many as there are in the US and Western Europe. But if a book has a big potential, we often have more than one publisher interested in it.

If we have an interest, we proceed to discuss an offer. One of our responsibilities, as representatives of the copyright holder, is to assess if an offer is good or not. So often we go back and ask for improvement. And once we feel that the offer is fair, we forward it to the client. The final approval always comes from the client. Once this approval is in, we issue the contracts on a boilerplate previously agreed on with the client and we send on signature by the publisher and then counter signature by the author.

Given all that is constantly changing in the publishing world, what advice do you have for authors looking to break into the business today?

Write well! Write with passion! And perhaps above all, tell a good story. The internet age has allowed for many stories to be told to a broader audience. But make sure that your story outlives the here and the now and becomes part of that heritage that we proudly call literature.

And with that we'll bring this installment to a close. Thanks again to Mira for her willingness to take part in the interview.