WE WANT TO TELL THE STORY AGAIN: PUBLISHING THE CANONGATE MYTHS

by

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Abstract

The Canongate *Myths* series is one of the most creative and unusual projects in contemporary publishing. This report presents an over-arching analysis of the series, and provides insight on its many aspects, from the commissioning of the individual books to the design process, and from an understanding of the project’s market within the United Kingdom to the unique structure of the *Myths’* foreign rights agreements. The evolution of the project is discussed, as well as its future at Canongate Books and at participating foreign publishers.

Keywords

*Canongate Myths; Canongate Books; Independent Alliance; series publishing; independent book publishing; Scottish publishers; twentieth-century publishing history*
To my two grandmothers, who inspired me to begin and who helped me to finish.

To my family, who made me cups of tea at all the right moments.

And, of course, to Mark, who helped me swim upstream.
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Myths are universal and timeless stories that reflect and shape our lives— they explore our desires, our fears, our longings, and provide narratives that remind us what it means to be human. The *Myths* series brings together some of the world’s finest writers, each of whom has retold a myth in a contemporary and memorable way.

— from the frontispiece to every *Myths* title

Introduction
This report is an analysis of the Canongate *Myths* project from its inception until today (mid-2009). The intention is to provide a history of the *Myths*— the original concept and its cultural relevance—and then to discuss the viability of the *Myths* as an ongoing publishing project. All aspects of the publishing process are relevant to this analysis, and so the paper will additionally reveal elements of the workings of an independent publishing house. I will trace one project from its initial concept to its design and refinement, and to the reassessment and redirection of publishing strategies as the project matured.

It is tempting to suggest that the *Myths* project has run its course; that the reasons why not to continue publishing the series outweigh the reasons why it may still be viable, albeit with a certain amount of rejigging, to publish the *Myths* successfully. A certain ennui displayed by the media toward the project, the lack of enthusiasm for the project within Canongate itself, the less-than-stellar sales figures for a number of the *Myths* titles, the possibility of certain foreign publishers bowing out of the project as their markets and strategies change—all of these are reasons for serious reassessment. Yet there are equally important reasons why the *Myths* may well continue to be successful for at least a few years to come: the positive critical reception of most of the *Myths* titles, the high profile of
authors still under contract to deliver *Myths*; the investment made by foreign publishers, the idea that the project ultimately contributes a strong backlist.

Because the *Myths* project has no obvious comparison (later in this paper it will be compared and contrasted to various projects in order to highlight the differences), the development of the project was based on a fair amount of educated guesswork. Now that the project has matured, it is time to step back and assess the successes and the difficulties met along the way. This evaluation exemplifies the kind of self-criticism essential for the long-term success of publishing houses, independent or otherwise: markets change with astonishing speed; new technologies render certain elements of publishing obsolete; authors fail to fulfill contracts. All of these circumstances make the constant analysis of strategy an essential part of book publishing. The industry must be informed about market trends and real-time sales figures, as there are so many demands on the consumer’s attention, from other books to video games, online media, films, music, etcetera. Technology is now catching up to this need. A resource such as Nielsen BookScan (the Canadian equivalent is BookNet) allows publishers to track book sales over specific periods of time, and to discern where certain marketing and publicity efforts are rewarded with higher sales, or where a new jacket edition of a book resulted in a spike in sales, or indeed, where a promotion campaign failed to produce any significant result. Such knowledge makes it possible for publishers to spend a book’s marketing budget where it counts. This report makes use of these kinds of data, when available (actual figures are confidential and are not disclosed).

There are a number of issues that will be raised in the revisioning of the publishing strategy for Canongate’s *Myths* series. It is my aim in this report to assess the project as it appeared during the period that I worked at the company (2007–2008), and to consider the future of the *Myths* at Canongate.
Background

Contemporary independent publishing in the United Kingdom

Over the past few decades, the number of publishers in the U.K. has been dwindling: “It is estimated that in the 1950s London had about two hundred significant publishers. Now [in 2001] there are less than thirty.”² Many of these “significant” publishers are no longer independent, but belong to media conglomerates such as Bertelsmann, Time Warner, and Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation. Yet independent companies – Canongate and its ilk – still exist, and continue to brave the challenges of a highly competitive, multinational-dominated industry, publishing début fiction, translated work from beyond the borders of the English-language world, out-of-print texts that are not part of the established canon, poetry – work that today does not often find a home in a more corporate publishing environment. In the U.K., a group of these publishers have banded together to form the Independent Alliance. Comprising Faber & Faber, Canongate, Atlantic, Icon, Profile, Short Books, and Quercus, these book publishers form a powerful and idiosyncratic core of independent book publishing in a market glutted with genre fiction and celebrity biographies. (See Appendix A for more information on the Independent Alliance.) These publishers, and others like them, retain the spirit of trade publishing – the knowledge that a book is a risk, but a risk that, if taken, is often rewarding.

The culture versus commerce debate, in brief

In Europe and in America, publishing has a long tradition as an intellectually and politically engaged profession. Publishers have always prided themselves on their ability to balance the imperative of making money with that of publishing worthwhile books. In recent years, as the ownership of publishing has changed, that equation has altered. It is now increasingly the case that the owner’s only interest is in making money and as much of it as possible.”³
As André Schiffrin points out, books do, in fact, have to be worth something, in monetary terms, both to the author and to the publisher. If there were no financial reward, there would be a significant drop in cultural output. Authors and publishers must eat and be clothed like the rest of us, and have time enough for the slow embers of thought and art to be brought to flame and spark upon the page. And therefore publishers must make their business pay: “Questions of mere trade and business and questions relating to a man’s mortal soul somehow don’t seem to blend; yet the truth would appear to be that all these things are inextricably intertwined. Literature may be the food of the soul, but those who create it and provide it have bodies as well as souls.”

Paul Delaney, in his book *Literature, Money and the Marketplace*, looks at the imposed divide that exists between cultural production and economic production, a divide that trade publishers find themselves straddling uncomfortably. Many simply place themselves squarely on one side or another, reinforcing the sense of division. Delaney assesses this gap as an imposition by the ‘contempt for commerce’ native to the upper classes, who believed that the worlds of high culture and of commerce were utterly divided: the former their own realm, and the latter the bourgeois imperative. In Great Britain, Delaney’s analysis is particularly apt, and in Canada a similar prejudice is evident (in my opinion, it comes part and parcel with the Anglo heritage) both in the demographics of English-language publishing and in the continuing debate – about the difference between publishing for profit and publishing for the sake of literature – that continues in board meetings, in publishing courses, and in the trade press. “The paradox of marketing books is that each one has value by virtue of being unique and yet, as a consumer product, it can be measured on a common monetary scale. Money reduces even the most complex artifacts to the crude question: ‘how much is it worth?’ but this power of abstraction does not simplify the critic’s task.”
For Canongate, the concern is whether it can maintain a balance between plying a trade and supporting a vibrant literary tradition. As Laura J. Miller writes, in her particularly useful study of the bookselling trade, *Reluctant Capitalists*, “the business of books presents one of the best cases for seeing the importance of joining together an economic and cultural analysis.”

Canongate’s *Myths* series provides a healthy challenge for a traditional economic assessment. While the project may be seen in an economic light – the prominence of the authors involved in the project, and therefore the calculated possibility of higher sales, as well as the projected success of the series in the backlist are certainly serious considerations of the project – it draws from and contributes to the tradition of literary excellence, and brings new voices to the English-speaking readership. These elements tend not to live among the profit and loss statements and target marketing profiles of a robust project analysis.

It remains to be seen whether the high conceptual ideals of the *Myths* series can remain intact in the face of the need for profitability – whether the balance between culture and cash can be preserved in today’s temperamental literary marketplace; indeed, this question forms the crux of this report.

The marketplace in early 2009

Any contemporary analysis of business strategy must be prefaced by a brief mention of the current economic climate – or, as U.S. President Barack Obama recently put it, the ‘economic crisis of historic proportions’. While the publishing industry in the U.S. is so far the most seriously affected victim of the recession, book publishers in the U.K. and in Canada have not seen the sweeping economic downturn seriously affect them … yet.

According to an article in the *Globe & Mail* on February 18, 2009, book sales in Canada are actually up. And for Canongate Books, the financial picture looks stunningly positive; in a recent
analysis in the *Bookseller* of sales growth in all major sectors of the British publishing industry, the year ended particularly well for Canongate.

Going by sales growth, the clear indie winner in 2008 was Canongate. After a 2007 which m.d. Jamie Byng admitted was ‘unquestionably bad’, Canongate grew 155.1% in value terms and 158% in volume, thanks in large part to the duo of mass-market Obama books – *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope* – with other highlights *The Mighty Book of Boosh* and Rebecca Miller’s *The Private Lives of Pippa Lee*.10

In June 2009, Canongate was named publisher of the year at the British book industry awards.

Of the other members of the Independent Alliance only Quercus and Granta grew in 2008, and many experienced a decline in sales. With an uncertain year ahead, and as the long shadow of a major recession casts gloom over the book trade as a whole, the mood remains “realistically pessimistic”.11 Acquisition budgets at all levels of the trade will be tightened, and there will likely be shifts in expectations of how books are published – for example, publishing directly into b-format paperback will take the place of the traditional hardcover first edition (a shift that has already begun).12 Roland Phillips, the managing director at John Murray, thinks it unlikely that any contracts will be cancelled in the wake of the credit crunch. He does add, however, that “more than ever we are concentrating on the schedule, where each book fits in our internal selling and with the slots in the market, particularly in fiction.”13 The trend is clearly to trim where trimming is possible, and at Canongate it is likely that the *Myths* series, with its high production values and relatively low sales, will be subject to a further pruning.

Predictions also point toward the continued success, in the words of Simon Trewin (United Agents), of “brand names with the feel-good factor or ‘comfort zone’” that will “flourish in coming months as credit-crunchased book-buyers turn to tried-and-trusted names”14, a trend that worked for Canongate in 2008 with its major successes: the Barack Obama titles; a literary chick-lit Richard and
Judy hit, *The Private Lives of Pippa Lee*; and *The Mighty Book of Boosh* (the Mighty Boosh is a massively popular sketch comedy act in the U.K.). With these successes in mind, there may be less room for smaller, more literary, or experimental titles in the coming seasons, as the long-term effect of the recession becomes tangible.

The question at stake for independent book publishers is whether the recession will have deeply deleterious effects on their trade, or whether smaller companies will be able to weather the economic downturn – and whether books are going to be one commodity that stays popular during a time when other luxuries seem out of reach. We hope for the latter.

A short history of Canongate Books

Trade book publishing is by nature a cottage industry, decentralized, improvisational, personal; best performed by small groups of like-minded people, devoted to their craft, jealous of their autonomy, sensitive to the needs of writers and to the diverse interests of reader.\(^5\)

The offices at 14 High Street, in the old town of Edinburgh, have been filled by one or another of Canongate Books’ various incarnations since the early 1970s. Founded in 1973 as Canongate Publishing, the company was for many years solely a Scottish-interest publisher. Alasdair Grey, the author of *Lanark* – a quintessentially Scottish novel – was Canongate Publishing’s major author (to this day he remains a strong backlist author for Canongate Books). However, “exclusively publishing Scottish books for Scottish audiences”\(^6\) did not, by the early nineties, translate to a profitable business. By 1993, the company was in receivership, and its future looked uncertain. But Canongate was about to be rescued, and by a rather unlikely man. At the time, Jamie Byng worked at Canongate as an intern in the publicity department. In 1994, with the help of his stepfather, Sir Christopher Bland, and in partnership with Hugh Andrew, one of the company’s sales reps, Byng bought up the
struggling company. “[H]is fate was sealed when he walked into Canongate for the first time... His own personal coalface. The feel of it, the excitement. The low-ceilinged, higgledy-piggledy offices with manuscripts piled high on the floor.”

Independent again, Canongate became, in 1994, the Canongate Books that exists today. In 1996, Canongate acquired a small, rabidly independent magazine called Rebel Inc., founded by a man named Kevin Williamson (its slogan was “Fuck the Mainstream”, which gives a good sense of its political identity). Rebel Inc. became an imprint of Canongate Books, and brought a gritty, edgy list of Scottish fiction to the list (Rebel Inc. was the originating magazine for an excerpt from a novel by a local man named Irvine Welsh, a story that went on to become the book, and then the movie, Trainspotting). An acrimonious split with Kevin Williamson in 1996 left Canongate without Rebel Inc., but with a reputation for edgy, genre-busting works of fiction, supported by another of its imprints, Payback Press (which published fiction by Black authors, particularly crime novels).

Still, despite the occasional injection of private money from the owners, Canongate struggled, as is the wont of small and fiercely independent publishing houses; the late nineties saw Canongate in the throes of financial distress. In 2001 Byng expanded Canongate’s horizons by setting up an office in the United States (an editor and his assistant rent office space at Grove Atlantic in New York). Canongate also partly owns Text Publishing, a respected trade publisher in Australia, which was founded in 1994 by Michael Heyward – still the publisher and managing director.

In 2002, however, Canongate had one of its biggest breaks: Jamie Byng’s impassioned letter to a young Canadian author named Yann Martel, describing his love for Martel’s new book, lured Martel away from his publisher, Faber. With Martel came The Life of Pi, the 2002 Man Booker Prize winner. That year Canongate won the Publisher of the Year award, and opened an office in London (the company’s headquarters remain in Edinburgh). And with The Life of Pi came a new lease on life for Canongate.
Over the years, as Canongate Books has altered its publishing perspective, there has been criticism from those who believe that the shift from a Scottish-only publishing program to an international one has compromised the company's integrity. But Jamie Byng does not think that "a Scottish publishing house should only publish Scottish writers. That's a blinkered way of understanding what a Scottish publishing house should do..." Instead, the potential that Canongate has for growth — in its readership, in its profitability, in its capacity to publish truly worthwhile books — should be seen as an asset to Scotland's cultural community. (This debate is a familiar one to Canadian publishing companies struggling to define themselves both within the national and international cultural arenas.) Canongate still publishes a wide range of Scottish authors — most notably through its Canongate Classics series, which is currently being digitized, along with — purportedly — its entire backlist. And interest in writers from the 'margins' of the United Kingdom is strong, with Scottish, Irish, and Welsh authors heading upcoming lists. In 2009 Canongate will publish a debut novel by a young Dubliner, Trevor Byrne (Ghosts and Lightning); a debut novel by a female Welsh author (The Earth Hums in B Flat), and a new edition of Caradog Prichard's classic Welsh novel, One Moonlit Night. As Ali Smith, the author of the Myths' title Girl meets boy, wrote: 'Of course, Scottish writing isn't marginal now. It's fashionable. Who knows how long that will last. But then U.K. identity is changing. The changes in art in Scotland and Ireland and Wales are having an effect on English identity, which to me is really exciting.'

On Canongate's website, there is an excellent description of Canongate's publishing policies: "Canongate continues to nurture and publish new talent from around the world, whilst retaining the essence of the Scottish Canon. We have no specific agenda other than to promote and publish challenging, quality work from as broad a perspective as we are able." And this is exactly what Canongate does. With its fellow independents, Canongate is managing not only to pursue the laudable project of publishing culturally important writing, but it is
making a success of it — a success that will hopefully be continued over what is without doubt going to be a precarious year for publishers. As André Schiffrin, long-time publisher of Pantheon Books, writes, “sheer size does not guarantee diversity of content.” In many ways a small publishing house has advantages over its grander, wealthier cousins: the energy that surrounds a book is felt by the whole staff, and can be one of the greatest strengths a book has. From the publisher to the sales assistant, from the production manager to the rights intern, and from the senior editor to the receptionist — everybody feels the buzz.
The *Myths*

Origins

Publishers and agents receive novels retelling ancient myths by almost every post. As a rule, the manuscripts go straight on to the reject pile. But Canongate has actually put together a series of the things by big-name or up-and-coming international talent. At least now they have the perfect response for all the no-hopers: “Sorry, we’ve only just done that one.”

The *Myths* project was conceived in 1999 by Jamie Byng, along with three other publishers, Morgan Entrekin (at Grove Atlantic in the U.S.), Louise Dennys (at Knopf Canada) and Arnulf Conradi (then at Berlin Verlag, in Germany), in what Margaret Atwood wrote of as “one of those legendary, superheated Frankfurt Book Fair evenings”. Over the next six years, meeting biannually at the London and Frankfurt book fairs to assess their progress, this core group of publishers worked hard to convince not only authors to sign on to write *Myths*, but publishers across the globe to publish them.

At the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2005, a passionate and optimistic group of publishers and editors met to officially launch the *Myths* series. In a piece for the Sunday Times about the launch of the *Myths*, Kenny Farquharson wrote that “The Frankfurt fair is a crucial event for every publisher, and this year’s is perhaps the most important of Byng’s career. It sees the launch of a pet project six years in the making.” And it is to be a project thirty-three years in the doing, too. With three books a year, every year, the *Myths* publishing project is projected to last until 2038 – a date that in 2009, four years in, seems unimaginably far away.

Jamie Byng is indivisible from the *Myths* project: it is his grand plan, and the immense optimism of the project reflects much of his own character. Brad Martin, the present CEO and president of Random House Canada, speaks highly of Byng: “Jamie is doing some very innovative
and creative publishing … I can’t think of anything like the *Myths* ever being done before. He’s a publishing iconoclast.” The *Myths* series represents what many believe to be the first project of its kind undertaken in modern publishing, and it is both immensely risky and extraordinarily praiseworthy – as one journalist put it, a truly Herculean project. At the time of the launch, journalists, fellow publishers, and authors were agreed in their praise of Canongate’s latest endeavour: “Canongate has now started another project that will have rival publishers wondering why they didn’t think of it themselves… The prospect is mouth-watering.” The project is, simply, to bring a hand-picked group of authors together – some high-profile and some more obscure, but all highly original, wonderful writers – to retell myths from around the world; their motto is clear: We Want to Tell the Story Again.

For the project to be a success, certain elements had to be in place. One of the reasons why Canongate might have decided that they would be able to successfully publish the *Myths* series is that the Pocket Canons worked so well. The Pocket Canons is a series that Canongate published, alongside Grove Atlantic in the U.S., in the late nineties. The series paired the individual books of the Bible with modern poets, musicians, philosophers, and novelists (A.S. Byatt, Joanna Trollope, Louis de Bernières, Fay Weldon, Nick Cave, Bono, and the Dalai Lama, among many others). The *Pocket Canons*, precursor to the *Myths*, was a dramatic repackaging of the Bible into tiny, literally “pocket” sized booklets that along with the scripture contained introductions by contemporary writers and musicians. Canongate put together “a sharp, instantly recognisable design for the entire collection. Beyond repackaging scripture, the series dispelled the whiff of incense by allowing readers to approach the Bible’s distinct sections as works of literature. The enterprise was an unqualified success.” The Pocket Canons have been translated into twelve languages, and have sold over a million copies around the world. The success of this project may well have got Canongate thinking
about another series in a similar vein. The formula for the *Myths* is similar, in a way: marry an author with an idea and let them riff on it in their own inimitable manner.

Towards a Supreme Fiction

What is certain is that writers and novelists and poets, people who have a visceral need to tell stories, find themselves coming back again and again to those narrative shapes and forms and structures we call Myths.

– Philip Pullman, “A word or two about Myths”

Modern writers have drawn from ancient myth before, in more or less explicit ways: James Joyce, Robert Graves, Marion Zimmer Bradley, W.B. Yeats, Tomson Highway, Richard Wagner, Rainer Maria Rilke, Neil Gaiman, Ryunosuke Akutagawa … to name only a few, at random. The scope of the project is unusual, though. To expand the myth-hoard to include all cultures – from Celtic to Russian, Greek and Roman to Mayan, Chinese to Yugoslavian – and to work alongside publishers from across the world in order to do so: this is what Canongate has done to make the series so exciting.

Jamie Byng feels that these stories have “a universal appeal because they deal with fundamental human emotions”. In his wide-ranging work *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, Christopher Booker suggests that in telling and retelling these fundamental stories, humans come close to a “hidden, universal language, a nucleus of situations and figures which are the very stuff from which stories are made.” This universality lies at the centre of the *Myths* project – the sense that the social patterns that form our stories translate throughout all cultures, that the language of myth, found in social patterns rather than in discrete languages, is something humans all share. Karen Armstrong writes, in her introductory text in the *Myths* series, that
There is never a single, orthodox version of a myth. As our circumstances change, we need to tell our stories differently in order to bring out their timeless truth ... we shall see that human nature does not change much, and that many of these Myths, devised in societies that could not be more different from our own, still address our most essential fears and desires. 31

The Myths series attempts to formalize this universality, to carve out a space in a world that does not always acknowledge the ancient nature of our stories. As a critic posited, “Because we live in a print-heavy age, the publisher Canongate has sponsored as our myth-merchants not stonemasons, painters or dramatists, but wordsmiths.” 32

The curious brood

Myths don't tell us what lies beyond the world, they tell us what is in it. Canongate’s series is a clutch of mongrel eggs. As with Leda’s nest in the Spartan foothills, it is never clear if each shell hides a warrior or a saviour, Helen or Klytemnestra. But thank God the curious brood exists. 33

There are currently ten Myths in print, and two more scheduled for publication in 2009 (for a full list of Myths titles, see Appendix B). In November 2005, the first three were published: Karen Armstrong’s non-fiction introductory work, A Short History of Myth, Margaret Atwood’s The Penelopiad (a vivid retelling of the story of Odysseus, from a witty feminist perspective) and Jeanette Winterson’s Weight (the myth of Atlas, the bearer of the world’s Weight, from Atlas’s hard-done-by point of view). The next year, three more were published, in November again. David Grossman wrote an extended essay, Lion’s Honey, on the myth of Samson, the biblical figure who was betrayed by his mother, his lover, his wife, and who finally, through his last desperate act, killed himself and
three thousand Philistines. Of the two novels that season, one pushed the concept of the parallel
novel to an extreme: in The Helmet of Horror, Victor Pelevin, an up-and-coming Russian author, riffs
on the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, in a surreal hybrid of the cyber age and classical
mythology, “a labyrinthine examination of epistemological uncertainty”.

In a more traditional vein, Alexander McCall Smith – author of the bestselling No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency
novels – wrote a beautiful short novel on the Celtic god of love, Dream Angus. In November 2007, Canongate
published Ali Smith’s Girl meets boy, a gloriously playful retelling of the myth of Iphis, one of “the few
happy stories Ovid wrote”, as well as Where Three Roads Meet, by the Australian author Salley Vickers, a remarkable tale of the blinded Oedipus undergoing analysis by Freud (a character as nearly
mythic as a modern man can be). The third myth of 2007, Binu and the Great Wall of China, is a story
hitherto untold in English, by a Chinese writer named Su Tong. He writes of Binu, a woman whose
husband was stolen away in order to help build the Great Wall of China, and her magical frog.

This past year, 2008, marked a change in publishing strategy for the Myths; instead of a
combined publication in November, the most recent crop of Myths are to be published individually,
over three seasons, starting with Michel Faber’s The Fire Gospel, published in November 2008, the
imagined discovery of a new Gospel (and one of the funniest send-ups of the publishing industry
I’ve read). The Fire Gospel was the only original publication of a Myths title in 2008, although
paperbacks of the three previous titles were released that year. Michel Faber’s book will be followed
by the Croatian writer Dubravka Ugresic’s tale of a Russian mythological character, Baba Yaga; Baba
Yaga Laid an Egg is to be released in May 2009. Coming out in August 2009, Klas Östergren’s book,
The Hurricane Party, sets Norse myth in a dystopian futuristic scenario. Titles still to come include
myths by A.S. Byatt, Milton Hatoum, A Lai, Natsuo Kirino, Tomás Eloy Martínez, and Chinua
Achebe.
Commissioning and Editing the *Myths*

What is a *Myth*?

How is the definition of an appropriate myth reached? And what qualifies (or doesn’t) as mythic? Could contemporary myths count? What is the difference between retelling a myth, and telling about a myth? How much non-fiction should be included? Just how much editorial control does Canongate have over the work? All of these questions are integral to the development of the *Myths* series, and have been subject to reconsideration throughout the project. The individuals who form the core group of *Myths* editors debate these questions on an ongoing basis and have recognized the need to redefine the project as the series matures. It would seem essential to have an author brief that provides some structure – without this, the project is left so open that it would be difficult to define the readership. The original author brief, and the one that still stands, is as follows: Read Chapter Twelve of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Brief, indeed.

The basic editorial terms are as follows: the *Myths* are intended to represent “a diverse range of international writers”, each of whom contributes a work of 25,000 to 30,000 words. The work must be a retelling of a myth of the author’s choice, from any culture, in a contemporary setting. Although there are two non-fiction exceptions so far – Karen Armstrong’s *A Short History of Myth* and David Grossman’s *Lion’s Honey* – the works are primarily fiction.

Some authors knew immediately what they were going to write about, like Jeanette Winterson. “When I was asked to choose a myth, I realised I had chosen already. The story of Atlas holding up the world was in my mind before the phone call had ended. If the call had not come, perhaps I would never have written the story, but when it did, that story was waiting to be written.”
Commissioning

Margaret Atwood – one of the first authors commissioned for the project – had some typically witty commentary on the experience of being approached by Jamie Byng to write a Myth. “My suspicions were turned into The Penelopiad after I was ambushed by Jamie Byng of Canongate at breakfast, and because of my own weakness of will and a Vulcan mind-meld that he puts on people who haven’t yet had their morning coffee, I found myself agreeing to his Myths scheme.”

The Myths authors are chosen not just for their stature in the world of letters, but because they have some real contribution to make to the project, some unique spark in their language, the capacity to tell a story afresh within the echo chamber of literature. One of the defining characteristics of the Myths concept is its interest in bringing new voices to readers, particularly voices from other countries, from other languages. This can be difficult, as some of the unknown writers are a harder sell, especially in translation, and especially when, because of the language barrier and the expense of bringing an author from another country or continent, the writer is unavailable for publicity purposes.

It remains vital for Canongate to continue to commission further works. At this stage of the project, Canongate must be able to show that the series has a good track record in terms of both critical reception and sales. In other words, prospective authors must be able to see that the project will reflect well on their careers, and reward them financially as well. There must also be the assurance of interest in the project on the part of the readership.

Basic guidelines for commissioning new authors for the Myths include the following considerations:

1. Pick authors not just for their stature, but because they have some real contribution to make to the dialogue.
2. Consider each prospective author in terms of their likelihood of selling well in at least three territories, including the U.K.

3. Approach the author well in advance, so as to give them enough time to write their piece, and to ensure excellence.

4. Ensure that it will be all right for the author’s usual publisher to relinquish their author to another house for the *Myths* title.

Any newly commissioned title must be considered in terms of strength of prose/narrative, marketability, cultural importance, financial feasibility, and resonance with publishing program of company and – in the case of the *Myths* – series identity. Within the *Myths*, however, the author is chosen on the basis of previous writings alone: the selection of the myth, the form that the retelling will take – all this is left in the author’s hands.

**The editor’s role**

It is important to clarify just how much input the *Myths* editor has into the individual books:

Canongate does not tell the author which myth to take as inspiration, but the editor must have some control over the work. One of the most intriguing, and difficult, elements of the *Myths* editor’s job is working with an author who is used to his or her own editor. Authors and their editors often have an intense working relationship, and it is as potentially unsettling for an author to have to face a new editor, as it is uncomfortable for the new editor to approach the work of an author they deeply respect (and may indeed be slightly intimidated by). How much hands-on work the new editor can do with the author must depend on how confident the author is about working with a new editor and how confident the editor is. If the *Myths* editor is unable to work effectively with the author, then the quality of the work, and of the series as a whole, suffers.
Myths authors, given that they have other publishers and publishing commitments, tend to write their Myths in between their main works. This presents some problems, namely that the delivery of the manuscript is often delayed because of other obligations, and that the quality of the piece may be compromised. This problem was mentioned informally by staff at Canongate, and it may be part of the reason why the rights department has faced some difficulty in selling the rights to certain—unnamed—Myths to foreign publishers. It is imperative that the quality of the work be at the same high standard as the author’s usual work, in order to avoid the stigma of being a secondary work.

Editors must also have the prerogative to turn down a commissioned Myth manuscript if it does not meet a sufficiently high standard. Excellence is crucial to the project if the Myths series is to be taken as seriously by reviewers and by the public as it takes itself. The books must not be seen as works written in between more important projects, and must be viewed by readers of the authors’ other books as must-reads. Unfortunately, there is a sense among the staff and among readers and critics that the Myths books are not at as high a standard as they could be; this is likely partly true, and partly a question of public perception. Why the Myths titles have encountered this opinion is an interesting question, and it is linked to both the concept of a series, and to the act of commissioning a piece of writing rather than having it arrive, unbidden and miraculous, on the publisher’s doorstep.

Some of the reviews have pointed toward a lack of conviction in the telling:

Canongate’s series is an ambitious, risky project, potentially profound and potentially trivial. As its first productions reveal, an essential element is a genuine chemistry between the author and the chosen subject. As editors line up more writers for this series, they should ask a key question: ‘Do you, really, really want to tell this particular story?’

The phrase “potentially profound and potentially trivial” is an excellent description of the narrow line the Myths series as a whole must walk. In a post-structuralist sense, of course, all texts are “retellings”;
this view would render the retellings of the *Myths* series presumptive, self-aware – “trivial”. But in a literary world that does value the author’s individual voice, and the pluralism of a global myth-hoard, the retellings become valuable – “profound”. The series is about the author as much as it is about the Myth, and about the truly attractive concept of establishing a multicultural collection of our most potent stories, by an equally multicultural range of authors.

**Modern Myths?**

The definition of a Myth is complex. So far, the series has included retelling of *Myths* from various countries, and two authors have taken Biblical figures as the mythical inspiration for their books. But what about more modern *Myths*? Michel Faber, the author of *The Fire Gospel* (published in November 2007),

> grew up thinking that history is the stuff that makes newspaper headlines and gets analyzed by journalists, while myth was something that primitive people swapped around the campfire. The distinction seemed quite simple … Recently I realized that the distinction is nonsense. We are living in a post-Enlightenment era of mythology, a volcanic eruption of new legends. Savage, virile metaphors to rival anything from the Bible or the Bhagavad-Gita hold sway in our awed and anxious world.¹¹

Faber’s words are a challenge to the *Myths* project – to embrace a new, “savage” crowd of *Myths*, still in the making, is to widen the scope of the *Myths* project far beyond its original horizons. Yet for the project to continue, and for it to continue to garner critical and media attention, it needs to contain something that challenges and transcends the traditional definition of myth. Sometimes the retelling – in new form – is enough (again, think of Joyce’s retelling of the Cyclops myth, in that “volcanic eruption” of a Chapter Twelve). While it is pleasurable – in Philip Pullman’s words, a “sensuous” pleasure – to rework the old, powerful stories, there must be the conviction, the need to express
some part of the story that has not been expressed before: to not simply tell the story again, but to
tell a new story.
Analysis by Department: How does the *Myths* series work?

**Basic contracts**

Canongate uses a basic head contract for all *Myths* authors, which covers the following (standard) issues. World rights are purchased for all *Myths* (which makes Canongate responsible for all rights sales), along with book club, serial, hardback, paperback, audio and electronic rights. All authors are offered identical terms. The advances that Canongate can offer for the *Myths* are lower than the advances the authors usually command; for each Myth, the advance is about £50,000 – impressively low, given the current climate of large advances (while this figure may sound high to many Canadian readers, bear in mind that this figure represents the low end of midlist fiction advances in the U.K. and is the total advance for all editions). The reasoning behind these lower advances is that as the project is intended to last a long time, and the titles are intended to become solid active backlist titles for Canongate, the royalties accrued over time will make the process profitable for the author, as well as for Canongate. The goal was to produce a series that will be read a hundred years from now, and that will endure as strong backlist for the company.

**Foreign rights**

Given the international aspect of the *Myths* project, the rights department is a critical part of the publishing picture. Responsible, first of all, for drawing up contracts between Canongate and the authors commissioned to write a myth, the rights department must work at selling the commissioned *Myths* to the thirty-nine other publishers around the world who are involved in the project. Indeed, the monies made from rights sales to the *Myths* publishers in other territories keep the project afloat, as domestic book sales are not able to support some of the titles.

The sublicences for the *Myths* are relatively small; again, as with the advances, they are much less than the sort of figure that the authors could garner for one of their other works. There is a
standard contract for the *Myths*, between Canongate, as the proprietor of the title, and the foreign publishers which covers the basic terms of agreement, including rights granted, advances, royalties, copyright, subsidiary rights, termination of contract, and complimentary copies. No specific mention is made of digital rights – the contract simply states that all rights not specified within the contract remain in Canongate’s hands.

The rights department must also regulate the branding agreement for the *Myths* series, as the individual countries develop their own authors under the umbrella project of the *Myths*, as well as keeping an eye on these authors to see if they are suitable to include in Canongate’s own *Myths* list. The critical meetings for the *Myths* series are held at key rights fairs every year, in London and, more importantly, in Frankfurt, and so the rights manager at Canongate, Olivia Leeper, plays at least as important a role in the project as the editor. The Canongate *Myths* microsite puts it this way: this project represents the only ‘long-term global publishing project’ of its kind, and rights sales are central to its continuing existence.

All of these elements are integral to the complex yet immensely flexible structure of the series – the *Myths* publishing scenario is designed as a co-operative rather than a top-down affair, in which the publisher within each participating country is encouraged to engender further *Myths*, suitable for their domestic market. (On the other hand, any myth commissioned by Canongate should have the potential to be sold into at least two or three other countries, in order to earn enough money to cover not only the advance but the high production costs of the *Myths* series in the U.K.) Each foreign publisher, under the umbrella of the *Myths* series, pursues its own customized *Myths* project – there are no absolutes in terms of design treatment or editorial approach, apart from an obligation to sign on for six of Canongate’s original titles (although even this is no longer an absolute). More will be said about this later.
Canongate has a simple contract covering the use of the *Myths* brand, which is fundamental to the umbrella structure of the project. For an extra fee, the *Myths* logo may be used on other products, to promote the series. The use of the logo is optional, however. Canongate, as the originator of the series, holds the licence for the *Myths* brand, which it sublicenses to each of the foreign publishers. It is a fee based upon a royalty of 2 percent of sales, rather than a flat fee, and this means that the fee is correlated to the sales of individual titles. If any title is less profitable, then the branding fee is proportionately smaller. This was seen as a fair way to ensure that the foreign publishers were able to keep their project costs down.

The *Myths* brand is intended to transcend publishers’ individual brands, the effect of which is to link all editions of the *Myths*, across language barriers and political boundaries. This transcendence of individual publishers’ brands is one of the fundamental theoretical conceits of the series: *Myths* are universal – the individual stories are rooted in disparate cultures and languages, of course, but in their capacity as the original stories, they spring from a universal impulse to narrate, to give voice to the human condition.

Many *Myths* publishers, including those in China, Poland, Israel, Portugal, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Bulgaria, Russia, Germany, and the Netherlands, have developed the series within their own country, publishing further titles under the umbrella brand of the *Myths*, by authors who are well-known within their respective countries but who may not ultimately cross over into, for instance, the U.K. market. If another country becomes interested in one of these extra *Myths*, then the foreign rights will be sold. This kind of growth is precisely what makes the *Myths* project interesting: earlier in this report the universality of myth was put forward as part of the project’s inspiration, yet mythology is also inherent to a sense of cultural identity. It is fitting that these countries are finding ways to use the *Myths* project to spark new retellings of their own stories, their individual mythologies.
The publishers who came in at the beginning were obliged to sign up for a minimum of six of the *Myths* that Canongate originates; this arrangement gives some flexibility in terms of which authors will work best in the market in the respective countries. Rizzoli, in Italy, has signed up for fourteen of the titles, whereas Latvia, the Czech Republic and India, to name only a few, have so far signed up for only six. Almost without exception, all countries signed up to publish the first three titles, as well as Victor Pelevin's *The Helmet of Horror*. (For a recent list of foreign publishers and the titles they are contracted to publish, see Appendix D.) In the past couple of years, the newest additions to the list of foreign publishers, particularly those with small markets, were not required to sign on for the minimum six titles. The original group of thirty-three publishers has grown to thirty-nine over the past five years; Canongate's rights department is still seeking new countries to include in the project (Romania is the most recent country to join the group). For countries like Romania and Indonesia, which have smaller markets, the advance required to purchase the rights to one of Canongate's original *Myths* is reduced. The sliding scale of sublicensing fees is one strategy that Canongate has had to develop in order to continue publishing the *Myths*: it is essential to the longevity - and to the original concept - of the *Myths* project that Canongate continues to find new countries to work with, as the rights sales allow for author advances to be earned out (in most cases) and for the series to continue to grow.

One way to improve the possibility of rights sales to foreign territories is to extend the rights offer to a publisher other than the *Myths* publisher, possibly the publisher of the individual author's other books. So far, this has only been attempted with Michel Faber's *Myth*, and it is unproblematic, as Canongate is the originating publisher of Michel Faber's other novels. However, the idea has been mooted to submit other authors' works in the same way, and this is where I foresee some conflict of interest. If the book is to be sold in foreign territories as simply an author's latest novel, then the philosophy under which the original contracts were drawn up between Canongate and the author no
longer applies, and those contracts become unfair. A *Myths* title is commissioned to be a *Myth*, and the contractual structure that was originally envisioned supported this – the author might receive less money than the usual advance, in the expectation that the book will become an important part of a project to advance new and unusual voices. If Canongate continues to shift the focus of the project toward the author, then the contractual structure must change, too – as long as the new titles are truly part of the *Myths* series, it remains fair. As Canongate moves away from the series, I think that the contracts should reflect that shift.

Recently there has been difficulty surrounding the issue of cancelled contracts – at least two of the authors commissioned to write a *Myth*, Donna Tartt and Nicolas Ammaniti, have pulled out of their contracts. Logistically, this is difficult for Canongate’s rights and accounting departments, as they will have to find ways to refund (or possibly reallocate) the moneys already collected from foreign *Myths* publishers for the cancelled titles. Beyond the logistics, the cancellation of two authors could be symptomatic of the uncertainty that currently affects the project as a whole.

Design and production

The *Myths* project has been described as ‘Jamie’s baby’, but another originating influence, on the physical aspects of the project, was Angus Hyland, Series Art Director for the *Myths*. Hyland has designed, over the past eleven years, many of Canongate’s most beautiful books, including the distinctive cover for *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Michel Faber’s best-selling novel of Victorian London. With the *Myths* series Hyland was handed what amounted to carte blanche as a creative brief. The results – the details of which are outlined below – are the elegant, original, and eminently tactile books that comprise the original hardcover series. (Canongate, and Hyland, were shortlisted for Best Brand or Series Identity in the 2007 British Book Design and Production Awards.) ‘These *Myths* are sacred stories,’ says Hyland. ‘They encompass the whole fabric of human experience;
expressing beliefs that mould the very foundations of culture and these new retellings are fine examples of the numerous ways we keep on reinterpreting these tales.' In keeping with that vision, Hyland intended the original hardcover editions of the *Myths* to be ‘tiny jewels created to shine out from the bookshelf’. 

The *Myths* project has presented, since its inception, a series of design challenges that are worth exploring in detail, as they are closely allied with the identity and the future of the project. As Canongate enters its fifth year of publishing the *Myths*, without consistently earning the revenues needed to sustain the project, the need to re-evaluate the series as a series is growing. It is essential to the longevity of the project to find and maintain a balance between high production values and the profitability of the series, and the hunt for this balance has led Canongate to rethink aspects of the *Myths* project as a whole.

Perhaps the defining challenge has been to create a design that manages to link the books to each other: from the beginning, it was important to have design elements that would translate to each of the completely different books that comprise the series. The single element that the series has in common is that the stories are all based on a myth. The author, writing style, geography, origin of the myth – all these elements are different in each book. And the myth itself is sometimes obscure, unfamiliar, or unrecognizable in its new form. Some of the authors are high-profile (Margaret Atwood, Jeanette Winterson, Ali Smith) and came to the project carrying their fans with them; others are relatively unknown (Su Tong, David Grossman, and Victor Pelevin are well-known in China, Israel, and Russia respectively, but not to U.K. readers). Therefore, the look of the series had to be flexible enough to reflect the individuality of the books while managing to gather the disparate titles together into a recognizable group.

The design concept that came back from Hyland and his design house, Pentagram, epitomized the project: high-quality and aesthetically pleasing, the *Myths* would be books to collect
and to enjoy not just for their stories, but also for their look and feel. Each book would follow the
same format: b-format (5 ¼” x 8”) hardcover for the first edition, with an illustrative wrapper in full
colour on uncoated stock, black and white endpapers with a motif drawn from the cover, two
colours inside (the running heads and a subtle typographic detail in each footer are a rich red);
unusually luxurious stock for the book block (100 grams), and the text itself set in the elegant Van
Dijck, between lavish margins. The Myths were designed to be gift books, and to attract a market
niche that Canongate has accessed in the past: the collector.

![Myths Logo](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

The Myths logo, also designed by Hyland, is unassuming, and common to all editions of the books.
The spare, line-drawn oval, with an equally simple human figure, arms crossed, inside, was inspired
by Cycladic culture and, according to Hyland, ‘represents the birth of the oral tradition, yet at the
same time it has a modern art quality and this helps to convey the timelessness of the Myths’.

However, this subtle logo was very nearly left off the cover of the most recent Myths title to be
published, and was only added during the final stages.

Original hardcover editions

The illustrative covers tied the series together while allowing each cover to reflect the individuality of
the stories: as Angus Hyland writes, “Each cover has been illustrated and hand-lettered to create a
unified artwork that allows for an individual signature within a series identity. The intention was to have each cover created by a high-profile illustrator from the same country as the author. The first three – *The Penelopiad*, *Weight*, and *A Short History of Myth* – designed by Nina Chakrabarti, Marion Deuchars and Roderick Mills, respectively – epitomize the *Myths*’ design ideals. Mills, notably, designed covers for Zadie Smith’s *The Autograph Man*; Deuchars, who is Scottish, has worked with Jamie Oliver and Penguin Modern Classics; and Chakrabarti, who was born in Calcutta and lives in England, has worked as a designer for Habitat, the furniture company, as well as Marks & Spencer. The following three titles in the series were also designed by renowned illustrators, although not ones necessarily from the same country as the author: Sara Fanelli, who did the work on *The Helmet of Horror*, illustrates for the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker* and the Royal Mail; Alan Baker, who designed *Lion’s Honey*, has designed all the Roddy Doyle books, as well as illustrating Bill Bryson’s *Mail on Sunday* column. This plan, combined with the high production specs, give the first two seasons’ books the beauty and impact that the project seemed to demand.

![Figures 2-4](image)

*A Short History of Myth* © 2003, Roderick Mills; *Weight* © 2003, Marion Deuchars; *The Penelopiad*, © 2003, Nina Chakrabarti. All by permission of Canongate Books.
Changes to design and production

The *Myths* are proving to be an expensive undertaking. While Canongate could expect titles by authors like Margaret Atwood, on the strength of her name, to sell through enough copies to underwrite the design costs, books by lesser-known authors in the series were simply not going to sell enough copies to justify the cost of the illustrators, and the goal of the *Myths* was not simply to draw in high-profile authors, but also authors who, while less commercially successful, would bring an interesting or provocative voice to the *Myths*. In order to pursue this goal, it became necessary to revisit the production specifications. The first six books in the *Myths* series have covers designed by independent illustrators; for the three that were published in the fall of 2007 (and for the three that are to be published starting in November 2008), steps have been taken to reduce the production costs for the hardcover editions. The jackets are not all designed by renowned designers, and while they mostly retain the illustrative covers and high-quality look, they have a slightly more generic aspect (the exception is the wonderful cover for *Girl meets boy*, in my opinion).
While the first three *Myths* titles were printed at Legoprint, in Italy, and the rest of the titles at a German printer, GGP Media (the two-colour text required the precise and very high-quality technology available at these European printers), the upcoming titles, *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* and *The Hurricane Party*, will not include the striking rubric of the previous texts, and will therefore be printed at Mackay’s, a printer in the U.K., in black only. The format, too, is subject to change. While *Baba*
Yaga Laid an Egg will originate in b-format hardcover to match the rest of the series, The Hurricane Party will be a Demy (6” x 9”) paperback in the original edition. The change in format is calculated. Because sales are likely to be small within the U.K., releasing a paperback original will mean the book can be sold into the export market (a sensible decision). In addition to changes in format, both of these titles will also be longer than the original stipulated length for Myths titles – another sign of a shift away from the series identity.

Paperback editions

The first three books went into paperback in 2006, before the next three titles came out, and discussion at the time was focused on the issue of how to retain the look and feel of the series. As much of the design identity of the Myths is in its collector’s-item quality, the paperback editions of the first three titles remained close to the series look.

FIGURES 12–14
By 2007 the cost of production and the low domestic sales for *Myths* in translation, as well as a growing difficulty in finding foreign rights sales for forthcoming titles, made it clear that the *Myths* series needed to undergo a major shift in order to keep it in the black, and the paperback editions of the *Myths* became the point at which Canongate could position the books within the marketplace, rather than within the series (Table 2 shows typical paperback sales).

These covers illustrate the difference between publishing the *Myths* with the design emphasis on the series and publishing them with the emphasis on the books as individual titles. The paperbacks, with their photographic design elements, are more like Canongate’s non-*Myth* titles and have a more mass market feel, and often create visual links between Myth titles and other titles by the respective authors. The newest cover for *The Penelopiad* looks more like Margaret Atwood’s other books than it does a *Myths* title. (See next page.)
The new cover for *The Penelopiad* instigated a spike in sales, and it is reasonable to assume that this is because Canongate consciously positioned the new edition in the market as a Margaret Atwood title and not as a *Myth*. Once the design of *The Penelopiad* was changed, sales increased, although any design change usually bumps up sales. As Andrew Hunter, the creative director of Redpath, an Edinburgh-based design agency, says, “In a world increasingly filled with visual stimuli, audiences are simply conditioned to pick up visual triggers. From the clothes we wear, to the interior decoration of our house, to the car we drive, we send out signals about the way we live and the values we adhere to. We ask to be judged by our covers.”

A “strong visual identity” is key to the concept of a brand. The average bookstore browser is, in my opinion, more likely to be attracted to a book cover that is recognizably part of an author’s oeuvre – in those cases where the author’s brand is more recognizable than the *Myths* brand. As with *The Penelopiad*, sales of a backlist title may strengthen once the cover is aligned with the author’s other
book covers. Other authors for whom this strategy may work include Alexander McCall Smith (for a selection of his book covers in the U.K. editions, see page 39), Ali Smith, and Jeanette Winterson.

It is important that the Myths series be flexible enough, at least in the paperback editions, not only to fit in with the look of the individual author's other books, but also to suit trends in cover design, and it is impossible to assume that one look will suit the series throughout its life. While the hardcover edition remains series-oriented, the paperback edition is where Canongate can shift the focus toward the author, both in the design and in the cover copy. Every title that first appears in hardback is relaunched with the paperback edition, which presents the opportunity to make this shift. For now, reprints give the publisher a chance to breathe fresh life into a book through a new cover design.

Marketing

There is a great deal of difference between a market-driven idea and a 'concept project', although both tend to be initiated by a publisher. An example of a market-driven publishing project is the Little Black Dress series, published by Headline in the U.K. A fully developed spin-off from the chick-lit phenomenon, the Little Black Dress books appear to be carefully targeted to a specific, and large, demographic: 'Like a penchant for purchasing very pretty but completely impractical shoes, Little Black Dress books are an essential part of every girl's life.' The website (www.littleblackdressbooks.com) is strongly branded, and is more than just a book information site. It offers a lifestyle. As Gil Davies writes, when commissioning a book, 'the focus of everyone's mind will be the specific market need that the book is designed to meet.' From the design to the copy, all the elements of the Little Black Dress books and website are a result of careful orientation to a specific market.
But what is the “specific market” for the Myths? The Myths series is a concept project in the sense that it was developed because the publisher felt strongly that it was worthwhile, in publishing rather than in financial or market terms. A concept project is not a reaction to the marketplace, although it is designed to find success there. From the outset, the Myths project was driven by the sense that such a compelling concept would draw readers.

The Canongate brand

Canongate seems acutely aware of the value of its own brand, although in a recent conference the marketing manager made it clear that while Canongate is well known within the industry, the publisher’s brand is not recognized by the general readership. In 2007 Canongate held a company-wide discussion of the defining attributes of a Canongate book. With a list full of books that defy attempts to be neatly categorized, the debate circled around definitions like edgy, literary, cool, genre-breaking, and profound. Someone said that a Canongate Book was a book that you couldn’t put down, that kept you reading through the night. Much of what Canongate does, from discussions like these, to the exclusive parties it holds at the London Book Fair and the monthly Canongate club night in Edinburgh – called Irregular, it’s a mash-up of music, readings, stand-up, and video art – to the new community-building look and feel of their website, which went live in the spring of 2008, is done to build a brand identity as an edgy, cool contributor of new, and, hopefully, profound ideas to the literary world. The Myths series could only be at home at a place like Canongate – a place that challenges easy categorization, led by a passionate and idealistic individual. Allied to a strong line of independent, author-driven fiction, a publisher-driven concept project seems like a good idea, and one that could enhance the visibility of the house, as the Pocket Canons did. Yet as a formula, the Pocket Canons were more immediately easy to grasp; as a series, they were finite. The Myths are less easy to categorize, and publication is intended to stretch over a much longer time – thirty-three years.
Identifying the *Myths* as a series

The *Myths* occupy an unusual place within traditional literary publishing. Perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of marketing the *Myths* has been to define what they are, as individual titles and as a series. The *Myths* defy most traditional definitions of a series, in that they are bound together only by a concept – they do not share an author, a genre, or even a theme, beyond that of “retelling a myth”. They may be better described as a “line”, which is akin to an imprint and in which the author and the content differ while being published under a common name, yet they are officially identified by Canongate as a series.

Are people aware of the *Myths* series as a series? A book series is usually built around a strong identifying component. This could be a character and a theme, as in a series of detective novels such as Ian Rankin’s Inspector Rebus novels, or Sue Grafton’s series, which has a further unifying theme, the alphabet (*A is for Alibi*, etcetera). These books are clearly recognizable by the author’s name, too. Author, central character, theme: each of these components serves to cohere a series and make it more visible in the marketplace: when these components are in place, there is no need to introduce the book, in the way that one needs to with a one-off title, to sales reps or book buyers or the consumer. The publisher of a traditional series will likely establish a 'series look' for the books, creating a visual link between the books as well as a thematic and narrative link. The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency books – in Canadian and British editions – are wonderful examples of narrative design for a series of books.
Canongate publishes a series that is even more recognizable: the *Collected Peanuts*, by Charles M. Schultz. Not only is there a unifying theme, cast of characters, and common author, there is the highly recognizable graphic element, the immense cultural resonance of the cartoon figures of Charlie Brown, Snoopy and friends. This series, as one member of Canongate put it, sells itself. The landscape format and the gorgeous reproduction creates the “collectible” look of the series, and the titles indicate its retrospective and unabridged nature: *The Collected Peanuts: 1950–52*, *The Collected Peanuts: 1953–54*, and so on. These visual and titular clues serve to identify and cohere the series. In this case, Canongate did not originate the design (Fantagraphics in the U.S. originated the collected editions and provided the design).
The *Myths* bear a much more subtle marking on their covers — not much beyond the small *Myths* logo, in fact, draws the reader’s attention to the series identity. When the *Myths* are lined up together, they make a handsome set, but little about the books themselves suggests to a prospective buyer that there are other books in the series, that other books are linked — in concept and in design — to the one in her hand. While the Peanuts books will be lined up together on the bookstore shelf, in the Humour or Graphica section, the *Myths* will all be filed under their respective authors’ names, in the alphabetical-by-author Fiction department. It is true that Canongate could negotiate dual placement at the bookstores, but it is unlikely that such an arrangement would last very long once the titles become backlist. And woe betide the two non-fiction titles (*A Short History of Myth* and *Lion’s Honey*). Most often they are tucked away under… Philosophy? Religion? Mythology? The Canongate *Myths* series is not typical, in that the individual books are not linked by character, author, or (apart from the overarching idea of retelling a myth) by a distinct theme.

**Publicity**

The *Myths* series was formally announced at a press conference on March 11, 2005, and followed up by a piece in *The Times* the next day. Karen Armstrong spoke at the press conference, along with Jamie Byng and Patrice Hoffman, from Flammarion Press in France. There was a great effort, led by Fiona McMurrrough (of FMcM, the out-of-house publicity agency responsible for publicizing the
Myths) to promote the Myths during the run-up to publication in 2005, which included an embargo on the titles, apart from Karen Armstrong’s History, which lasted up until the publication date. However, a few trustworthy media contacts were slipped copies of the books, in preparation for the launch in the fall. All countries participated in this embargo. (For the original publicity schedule, please see Appendix E.)

In a major deal, The Times serialized the Myths, with extracts from Weight and The Penelopiad, as well as articles by Karen Armstrong and Margaret Atwood. Further publicity was secured by a series of interviews with the authors, both on the BBC and in national newspapers, including The Times, the Independent, and the Guardian, as well as reviews and features in all the leading papers in England, Scotland, and Ireland. The launch itself took place on October 21, 2005, in Frankfurt. (Before the launch, many ideas about what form it would take were mooted, including a fancy-dress party complete with guests in mythical costumes, and a dramatization of a myth.) Following the party, there were events across the U.K. and Ireland, including a reading of The Penelopiad, directed by Phyllida Lloyd, at St. James’ Church in Piccadilly.

All the publishers shared the costs associated with the Myths publicity, including the events at the London and Frankfurt book fairs. Canongate’s own combined marketing and publicity budget for the first titles was £60,000, and 1,500 proof copies of the books were reserved for marketing and publicity purposes. Brochures were made up to promote the Myths for the sell-in, and the front cover of the Bookseller featured the project. The grand scale of the publicity efforts for these first three books was never replicated for the launch of the further titles, and is unlikely to be repeated. Media interest in the project, as a project, is waning, although as individual titles the Myths are compelling, and recent titles have garnered many reviews. For authors with higher profiles, the media spend is still considerable (Canongate budgeted nearly £15,000 for the marketing of the paperback edition of Salley Vickers’ novel, Where Three Roads Meet).
Although reviews came thick and fast, and were generally very positive in the first year of the project, it has proved hard to maintain media coverage of the project. Apart from publicity generated at the time of publication, the idea of the *Myths* – while compelling – may not have taken hold of the imagination of a wide market. This issue has led, along with many other factors, to the change in the approach to publishing the *Myths*. A sharper focus on the author, and on the merits of the book itself, rather than on the *Myths* series, garners more reviews and more media minutes.

Examples of the sort of publicity that the *Myths* now look for include BBC Radio 4 dramatizations; reading group guides; reviews by the major broadsheets; interviews, both on the radio and in print; and occasionally, when possible, author tours including readings at bookshops across the U.K. It is also always helpful to tie in current events to the publication of any book: the interest in China generated by the Beijing Olympics was used to support publicity pitches for *Binu and the Great Wall of China*. Michel Faber’s *The Fire Gospel* played off the tremendous recent success of two books that debunked Christianity, *The God Delusion*, by Richard Dawkins, and *God is Not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens. For the media, the news that Canongate is adding to its series – a series that the media have already covered, more than once – is intrinsically uninteresting. The media would be interested in how the individual book or author ties into a current event or trend. According to Mary Schendlinger, senior editor of *Geist* magazine, “To send out news that a publishing house has added more things to its series is pretty dull, like emphasizing Toyota’s great line of cars rather than, e.g., its new environmentally sound car.”

The *Myths* backlist and the Internet

As one of the goals in publishing the *Myths* was to create a strong backlist, it is important to look at ways in which Canongate can continue to drive readers to the *Myths* titles – a publisher cannot really depend upon the sales strength of their front list to drive backlist sales, and so it is necessary to be
ingenious in promoting the backlist. At the moment, however, the backlist depends exclusively on
the publicity generated by the latest *Myth* titles, using reprints as an opportunity to re-jacket the book,
if – as with *The Penelopiad* – it is worth the extra cost in design, and a microsite is being maintained.

The immediately obvious way to bring readers to the *Myth* backlist is through online
promotion; at the present moment the *Myth* live on the publisher’s website, as well as on their own
microsite, www.theMyths.co.uk. This site is basic (although more fully realized than any other *Myth*
publisher’s version): it exists as a shallow, information-based tool that provides information about
the origins of the project, a brief description of each title, author biographies, and a list of the foreign
publishers involved in the project. The site has a small, constantly changing widget that pulls
definitions of the various *Myth* from Wikipedia and other online sources. Yet the site could be more
dynamic. In order to harness the power of the web to connect readers with books, the website could
provide a forum discussion between publishers, the scholarly community, storytellers, authors, and,
most importantly, readers. If the website exists in order to profile the project, then there must be
greater facility for interaction. Contemporary online readership expects to have the capacity to
interact with web content through video clips (such as a video of the RSC production of *The
Penelopiad*), podcasts, online interviews, and comment boards. Storytelling is a fluid medium, woven
from many threads. To effectively tell the story of the *Myth* project, the website needs to weave a
story of its own about the project through links and conversations.

Social networking venues like Twitter, publisher blogs, and Facebook have recently become
essential tools in book marketing. Facebook groups facilitate communication not only within one
market, but in a global community of readers, writers, and scholars. Twitter provides a constantly
updated – and simple to use – stream of information. Canongate has a Facebook page, and it would
be interesting to see whether a *Myth* Facebook page would attract any friends, and whether it would
continue to have a life of its own after being launched. The difficulty with social networking is that it
demands a large amount of time for upkeep – dormant websites and stale news drive viewers away.

Canongate’s online marketer has many projects, with new ones coming in every month, and the *Myths* series is no longer a major focus of the company. The time spent online is given to higher-profile projects and to Canongate’s new website.

Twitter in particular has become a highly effective tool for getting the word out about book-related news, and in an informal, accessible way – and one that is not as demanding of company time. “Twitter has quickly become the preeminent way to go about “micro-blogging,” sending short real-time comments to the world (if it’s looking) and especially to anyone who signs up as a follower.”

This makes it possibly the most useful medium for instant updates about the *Myths* series and *Myths* authors. With just 140 characters, you have to be brief – there’s just enough room to post a headline and a link for further information.

“Twitter is a ‘disruptive’ technology because it is in ‘real time,’” says Louis Gray, a technology blogger. “With blogging, “there’s still a lag between when they post and [when] you get it… If you want to find out something that is happening immediately, the place to go is Twitter and not Google anymore. And that’s revolutionary.” As far as it goes, of course; it is currently the most talked-about social networking device in the book industry, but whether the book-world buzz that it has the power to create will translate into sales, or even go very far beyond the Twitter accounts of ‘followers’ directly involved in the book industry, has yet to be seen. Nevertheless, Twitter and other social networking tools can provide up-to-the-minute feedback on your own and your competitors’ marketing efforts.

Some more unusual avenues could be taken in the effort to continue to promote the *Myths*, one of which is to continue a dialogue with the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), who produced a play based on *The Penelopiad* in 2006. A critical success, it illustrated one way in which the concept of
the *Myths* series may be taken into other media, thus promoting the series as a whole. Other initiatives could include podcasts or online interviews with the authors.

Of course, any further development will cost the publisher in time spent, at the very least, and while the *Myths* project remains in a state of flux, Canongate may feel a certain disrelish toward pouring further resources into the *Myths* website, or setting up Facebook pages or Twitter streams. (For a few months in 2008, the licence for the *Myths* microsite lapsed, and so the site was inaccessible. At the very least, it is now back up and running, although it is more or less fallow.)

In 2008, Canongate launched its new website, MeetAtTheGate.com, an interactive, dialogue-based website that is unlike almost any other publisher’s online space. It remains to be seen whether there will be any space for the *Myths* within this exciting forum.

Sales

While the *Myths* project was received well by booksellers and media alike, it is possible that the concept of the project is simply too amorphous for the marketplace to absorb, and that what is exciting as an idea may not in actuality have legs strong enough to carry the project through the next twenty-five years. While the concept is a critical success, sales data alone can provide the basis for an informed assessment of the continued feasibility of the project. Are the books – as backlist titles – selling well enough to continue to reprint them? What effect does a jacket redesign have on the sales of a backlisted *Myths* title? Do the sales of *Myths* titles by more prominent authors justify the continued commissioning of titles by lesser-known authors (and therefore more financially risky for Canongate)?

In the tables below, sales of a number of *Myths* titles are represented. The decline in sales in June 2008 is misleading: the drop reflects incomplete sales data for that month, as the sales volume
was drawn from a live source early in June. All data depicted in the following three tables are drawn from Nielsen BookScan. Actual sales figures are not shown.

**First three years: hardcover editions**

![Graph showing sales of hardcover editions over time]

TABLE 1: SALES OF HARDCOVER EDITIONS

Sales of the original hardcover editions confirm some important assumptions about the *Myths* series. Although the titles by authors in translation (David Grossman, Victor Pelevin) have not done well (indeed, sales data was not available from Nielsen BookScan at the time of access for *The Helmet of Horror* or *Lion's Honey*), the titles all sell about the same number of copies in hardcover – Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*, the only exception, sold nearly three times as many copies in the first months after publication as the others. The fact that the Christmas season coincided with the publication dates of the first three years of the *Myths* series no doubt helped to spur sales. As can be
expected, sales of the hardcover edition peter out at the point the paperback editions are released. Small sales of the hardcover editions continue – the luxurious production values of the hardcover probably have something to do with this; as a gift, the hardcover editions retain value in the marketplace.

**First three years: paperback editions**

Unfortunately, I only have partial information for paperback sales, but some interesting conclusions can be drawn from the limited figures that I do have. First of all, it is more than evident that *The Penelopiad* worked very well in paperback upon its release in June 2006 – and a serious spike in sales occurred the following Christmas. The other title shown here that showed real success in paperback is Alexander McCall Smith’s *Dream Angus*, which did well in hardcover and continued to do well in

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- **Short History of Myth**
- **Penelopiad**
- **Weight**
- **Dream Angus**

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paperback. Sales for all the early *Myths* titles continue to sell in paperback, although not in large numbers; and as always, Christmas gives the sales a boost.

The only example so far of the successful rejacketing of a Myth has been with *The Penelopiad*, which was re-released in early 2008 with a new cover design. A corresponding jump in sales is visible; whether the rejacketing of other titles will spur enough of an increase in sales to justify the cost of rejacketing is debatable, but the precedent is set for a paperback redesign once a reprint is needed. (See Table 3, below.)

![The Penelopiad: paperback life sales](image)

**TABLE 3: SALES OF THE PENELOPIAD, HARDCOVER AND PAPERBACK**
The rise in sales in the early months of 2008, peaking at the beginning of February, illustrate the effectiveness of repackaging a backlisted *Myth*, and the renewed marketing effort at the time of its release.

The sales figures show clearly that the one great success the *Myths* series has had so far has been with Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*. While this title sold well (Canongate printed 50,000 at first, and has since reprinted with a new jacket design), *The Penelopiad* has not done as well as other titles by Atwood. Sales are crucial to the survival of the project, so it is important to understand why this is true. In Salley Vickers’ case, the paperback edition of one of her previous novels sold more than 40,000 copies in the U.K. alone, yet her *Myths* title has sold far fewer. Michel Faber’s historical novel, *The Crimson Petal and the White* (published by Canongate in 2002), has sold more than 200,000 copies in hardcover and paperback combined. *The Fire Gospel*, Faber’s contribution to the *Myths* series, has not been nearly as successful.

The original marketing spend on the *Myths* series, in 2005, was £30,000. The marketing budget is now assigned to *Myths* titles on a book-by-book basis: one of the more recent titles, Salley Vickers’ *Where Three Roads Meet*, was allocated a £15,000 marketing spend for the paperback edition (Vickers toured the U.K., and *Where Three Roads Meet* had 3 for 2 placement at Waterstones), another title, *Binu and the Great Wall of China*, had no marketing budget at all for its paperback release.
The *Myths* in the International Marketplace

“A blessing struck like a thunder”

In 2005, the publishers involved in the *Myths* project believed that it had great resonance in the cultural community. The effusive praise expressed by these publishers reflected the cultural good that the *Myths* symbolized. Sophia, the Russian publishing house, invoked Russia’s dying mythologies, and called the new retellings ‘a mythology for the twenty-first century and beyond’. According to De Bezige Bij, the publisher in the Netherlands, in its marketing materials, the stories, are ‘jewels of Modern Literature’. The Israeli publisher portrays the newly fashioned stories of the *Myths* as ‘the ultimate expressions of a new kind of universal intimacy’. Munhakdongne, in Korea, envisions the *Myths* series as “a blessing struck like a thunder for Korean readers”, and the German publisher, Berlin Verlag, calls the *Myths* “cornerstones of the masterplan of human consciousness”. These comments speak directly of the optimism and enthusiasm for the series at its inception. The project connected with and inspired publishers from thirty-three different countries. The early attitudes of the foreign publishers involved in this project highlight just how extensive a cultural contribution they felt the *Myths* series made at the national and global levels. They were sold on the initial concept, but it is another matter whether the same exhilaration was felt by readers.

The foreign publishers of the *Myths* have experienced varying degrees of success. Although some publishers are beginning to back away from the project as it stands, new publishers are still coming on board. (Pakistan is a recent addition to the list of countries with *Myths* publishers, although a company name does not appear on the *Myths* microsite.)

Alternate approaches to publishing strategy

Alpha Books, in China, have had considerable success with their *Myths* program, with a number of Chinese authors writing on Chinese *Myths* alongside the *Myths* from Canongate, but they have
mentioned that they may perhaps have just as much success without the *Myths* brand. Znac, in Poland, and Slovart, in Slovakia, have drawn in new authors, too, thus fulfilling the original intent of the *Myths* to be a truly international publishing project, incorporating new voices. It does raise the question, however, whether these new voices will find their way into the English-speaking markets – the chance that an unknown Slovakian author will be published by a company in the highly competitive English market, at a time when publishers are more aware than ever of the bottom line, is slim. Indeed, as the publisher of the *Myths* at Grove Atlantic has mentioned, there is some worry that the quality of the *Myths* from foreign authors has not so far been good enough to make the leap to Canongate’s list. However, the possibility exists that as all *Myths* submissions are circulated throughout the community of publishers involved in the *Myths* project, there may be interest in a foreign title from a publisher other than Canongate. A foreign title may also be bought by a publisher not otherwise associated with the *Myths* series. For example, a small Canadian publisher could pick up a *Myths* author without being directly involved with the *Myths* project.

At Berlin Verlag, Germany’s *Myths* publisher, however, the experiment has not proved to be as successful as originally hoped: early enthusiasm and support of the project have not translated into sales. Berlin Verlag felt that the bias toward authors writing in English alienated its market. However, Berlin Verlag will be publishing Michel Faber’s *The Fire Gospel*, as he has worked for BV in the past, and there are other titles to come that will be tempting for it: A.S. Byatt, Chinua Achebe, and Philip Pullman will likely deliver in the next two years. It remains to be seen, however, how long Berlin Verlag will continue publishing the *Myths*. It appears as though the strategy in publishing the *Myths* must be decided by assessing what works well in each individual market. In some cases it is better to play down the series aspect; in others the series provides a strong backdrop to the individual titles.
Alternate approaches to book design

While many of the *Myths* publishers have used the cover designs of the original Canongate editions, others have created a wholly different look for the series. Both have their strengths: carrying through the cover design helps to cohere the series as an international publishing act, whereas creating their own design strategy allows each publisher to adapt the series to the needs of its own marketplace.

Alpha Books (China), Znac (Poland), Alma littera (Lithuania), Geopoetica (Serbia), and Slovart (Slovakia) have fully realized, definitive, highly attractive series designs – Michael Schellenberg, of Knopf Canada, pointed out that the success of the *Myths* series has been most apparent in Eastern European countries – and De Bezige Biz (Netherlands) is in the process of redesigning the series one title at a time, as they need to be reprinted. At Tammi, Finland’s *Myths* publisher, the *Myths* program has not been as successful: one source mentioned that the Finnish critics had a difficult time establishing what the *Myths* were all about.

The *Myths* at Knopf Canada

Michael Schellenberg, associate publisher at Random House Canada, is an enthusiastic supporter of the *Myths* in Canada, but he is realistic about the current state of the *Myths* project within the Canadian market. Schellenberg offered some comments about the inception of the project, and the difficulties involved in keeping the series fresh and relevant.

Originally the intention of Random House Canada had been to publish all the Canongate titles and to commission further books from Canadian authors – in the spirit of the *Myths’* first principles – to engender a domestic stable of stories, including Native American contributions. The commissioning of further titles from Canadian authors never took place. Although Knopf made
efforts to pair authors with titles for the *Myths* project, the attempts came to nothing, for unspecified reasons.

The first two seasons of *Myths* published by Knopf in Canada were given a distinct series identity, markedly different from the U.K.’s design approach.

The covers are elegant, but they look more like university textbooks than works of contemporary literature. In this manifestation, the visual interpretation of series membership seems far too strong, overwhelming their identity as works of contemporary literature. Such a strong series design moves in the opposite direction to that of other publishers. For example, over the past few years, publishers of the classics have been busy repackaging their texts – from Penguin’s striking Great Ideas design to the New Canadian Library’s striped covers – in order to get away from the university textbook look and get new audiences interested. Following the first three titles, Knopf relinquished the original series look and began to use the British covers, assessing each cover to ensure that it would be appropriate for the Canadian market.
Knopf Canada’s design efforts are an example of an undefined design strategy, with some Myths currently being offered with the staid series design and some with the British covers.

Within Knopf Canada, the backlist of Myths is left to fend for itself, which is standard practice and isn’t particularly indicative of neglect. If the webpage on Random House/Knopf’s website devoted to the series can be considered a good indication of company interest, as of June 2009 it had not been updated for at least a year, even though in the fall of 2008 Knopf published Michel Faber’s The Fire Gospel. Knopf will not be publishing Baba Yaga Laid an Egg or The Hurricane Party, the latest offerings from Canongate in the Myths series. Now that Knopf has published the titles it was contractually obligated to publish, they are assessing the Myths on a title-by-title basis. It is not clear whether Knopf intends to publish any further Myths – it seems to depend very much on what Canongate intends for the series. Uncertainty plagues the project as it enters the Fall 2009 season, on both sides of the Atlantic.
Moving Ahead

Changing strategies

There are – and must be – continued shifts in Canongate’s approach to publishing the *Myths*. Changing production values and altered publishing schedules, shifting the focus toward the *Myths* as individual titles and away from their place in the series – these are some of the changes that are already underway. But questions remain. Will the longevity of the series be threatened by these changes and by the changing marketplace, and will the decline in production values compromise the value of the books themselves? Will the shift in focus from the series to individual authors compromise the concept of the series, and therefore reduce the likelihood of other authors signing on to write books for the *Myths*?

In order to remain relevant, the series must retain its original objective of bringing new voices to the table, bolstered by the sales of *Myths* by more prominent, or marketable, authors. It can be dangerous to piggyback less profitable books on more profitable ones (although is very common), but in this case – if the series is to continue – it may be necessary. Alongside Michel Faber’s *Myth, The Fire Gospel*, Canongate is publishing two relatively unknown authors, both in translation: Dubravka Ugresic and Klas Östergren.

Yet with new projects on the go, including a new series called *A Night Out With…* and a continuing shift in the editorial programming for the company as a whole, the *Myths* are slowly being pushed to the back burner. The publishing strategy for the two *Myths* scheduled for publication in 2009 shows a tendency toward this gradual decline in focus on the *Myths* series; changes in format and diminished production values give notice that emphasis has moved away from the series. Not only that, but Klas Östergren, the author of *The Hurricane Party*, is already a Canongate author, and it is perhaps merely a lucky coincidence that the book happens to have mythic elements to the narrative.
— Canongate would have published this book anyway, and so it serves a double duty. By no means is the project over — there are more Myths under contract, and they will be published as Myths, as far as anyone at Canongate is aware. The Brazilian writer Milton Hatoum has a myth, The Orphans of Eldorado, scheduled for publication in 2010. But a shift is underway, and it remains to be seen how many more new commissions there will be. Some attrition among the ranks of foreign publishers will likely take place, and different publishers from within the participating countries may take over individual Myths.

An uncertain fate

Canongate has succeeded so far in introducing unknown authors to the British literary community — Victor Pelevin and the soon-to-be-published Dubravka Ugresic are notable examples. And the Myths have achieved, by all accounts, great success in some of the Eastern European countries that participate in the project. Yet the original production values have been found to be unsustainable, and sales figures prove that although the big-name authors manage to capture a substantial readership, unknown — and particularly foreign — authors remain unsupported. The fate of the project remains uncertain, and if Canongate continues to publish Myths titles as it is doing now, there will be no clear-cut end to the project — no bang, but rather a long, drawn-out whimper. Yet for many Canongate staff members there remains an emotional attachment to the Myths, as well as a sense that it would be unfair to the other publishers involved if Canongate washed its hands of the project.

Canongate’s three projects — the Pocket Canons, the Myths series, A Night Out With… — are unusual within the world of contemporary publishing, in that they are rather old-fashioned projects, with grand aspirations. They combine the power of old texts (the Bible, myth and legend, and poetry from the great British canon) with contemporary — even cutting edge — authors. Publishing complex,
conceptual projects in a competitive market, where books fight for attention with many different media, is a risky business, particularly when some of the books are translations, by unknown authors. Yet this is publishing at its best, challenging readers to take on old ideas and new voices.

Janus, god of gateways and gatekeepers, change, and janitors

If I may be so bold as to invoke an old Roman god, I think the spirit of Janus best suits the *Myths*, and Canongate itself. Janus has two faces, and he looks forward and backward; he is the god of gateways, of change and of tradition. He would recognize the work that a company like Canongate does as it looks back at what has worked in the past and gazes ahead to create a precedent for creative publishing, for new and challenging projects that might stimulate new income and dialogue. (The name of Canongate’s new website, MeetAtTheGate, invokes Janus, the gatekeeper.) And the *Myths* project is Janus-like as well. The authors of the *Myths* go deep into our collective mythologies to bring the old stories forward, in a way that strikes new chords of meaning, and resonates with the power of myth. This is the very essence of Janus – telling the story, again.
Notes

1 The U.K. sales data was collected mid-June 2008, and was available for only a selection of the *Myths* titles currently in print. Notably unavailable was data for *The Helmet of Horror* and *Lion’s Honey*, but I have been told that these two titles in particular had low sales numbers. Also missing are the *Myths* paperback editions of *Girl meets boy* and *Where Three Roads Meet*, published in Canongate’s Spring 2008 list.


3 Schiffrin, 6

4 Birkett, Sir Norman, *Books Are Essential*, 9

5 Delaney, Paul, *Literature, Money and the Marketplace*, 1

6 Delaney, 13

7 Miller, Laura J., from *Reluctant Capitalists*, 6

8 Fisher, Irving, from ‘Out of Keynes’ shadow’ (*The Economist*, February 12, 2009)

9 Coté, Marc, from ‘Why is everybody picking on us?’ (*Globe & Mail* Books section online, February 13, 2009)

10 Author unknown, from ‘Weathering the storm: publisher performance’. (*Bookseller* online, January 22, 2009)

11 Jones, Philip, from ‘HarperCollins hit by EUK collapse’. (*Bookseller* online, February 8, 2009)

12 Page, Benedicte, from ‘Credit crunch forces rethink on new titles’ (*Bookseller* online, February 15, 2009)

13 ibid.

14 Page, Bendicte, from ‘Buyers scared, say agents’. (*Bookseller* online, November 20, 2008)


16 Deveney, Catharine, from ‘The Mane Man’ (*Scotsman*, October 24, 2005)

17 ibid.
The Life of Pi success story continues – in 2009, the seventh year of its existence, The Life of Pi is in innumerable reprints, and a gorgeous new edition came out in 2008, fully illustrated by the Croatian illustrator Tomislav Torjanac.

Deveney, Catharine, from ‘The Mane Man’ (Scotsman, October 24, 2005)

Turpin, Adrian, from an interview with Ali Smith, ‘Accidental writer has a dig at Highland life’ (The Sunday Times, April 16, 2006)

meetatthegate.com

Schiffrin, 7

Barnacle, Hugo, from ‘New Hits from Old Myths’ (The Sunday Times, April 6, 2006)

Atwood, Margaret, from ‘The Myths Series and Me’ (Publishers Weekly, November 28, 2005)

Farquharson, Kenny, from ‘The publishing man behind the Myths’ (The Sunday Times, October 23, 2005)

ibid.

Gurria-Quintana, Angel, from ‘Myth Understood’ (Financial Times, October 28, 2005)

ibid.

Farquharson, Kenny, from ‘The publishing man behind the Myths’ (The Sunday Times, October 23, 2005)

Booker, Christopher, from The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories, 6

Armstrong, Karen, from A Short History of Myth, 16

Hughes, Bettany, from ‘More Ancient Myths Revisited’ (The Times, November 2, 2007)

ibid.

From the original Myths launch information package, 2005

Turpin, Adrian, from an interview with Ali Smith, ‘Accidental writer has a dig at Highland life’ (The Sunday Times, April 16, 2006)

From the minutes of the Myths editorial meeting at Frankfurt, October 2006.
Chapter 12 of *Ulysses* is named 'The Cyclops', and is a retelling of the story (from Homer's *Odyssey*) of Odysseus blinding the Cyclops. It is a strange, difficult and wholly original retelling of an ancient myth – a rewriting of a familiar text in an unfamiliar and challenging manner.

Alberge, Dalya, from 'Authors Take on Herculean Task of Retelling Myths'. Interview with Jeanette Winterson (*The Times*, March 12, 2005)

Atwood, Margaret, from 'What a Tangled Web She Wove' (*The Times*, October 22, 2005)

Alexander, Caroline, from 'Myths Made Modern' (*New York Times*, December 11, 2005)

Faber, Michel, from 'World's Top Writers Recruited to Rewrite Ancient Tales' (CBC, October 21, 2005)

Tivnan, Tom, from "Author advances: it's good for some". (*Bookseller*, February 6, 2009)

Hyland, Angus, from the original *Myths* launch package, 2005

ibid.

ibid.

Andrew Hunter (quoted), in Danuta Kane’s article ‘How not to be a one-hit wonder’ (*The Deal: The Official Magazine of the London Book Fair*, October 8, 2007)

Alan Giles, from ‘A stand on brands’ (bookseller.com, July 18, 2008)

Davies, Gil, from *Book Commissioning and Acquisition*, 18


ibid.

Publisher’s statements from *Myths* statements from foreign publishers’ document – see Appendix C for full list of publishers’ statements.

Canongate’s previous experience with interesting takes on traditional print publishing – like the *Pocket Canons* and the *Myths* – have given impetus to a new series, which so far includes one published title, *A Night Out With Robert Burns*. The *A Night Out With...* series is another take on the concept of matching a concept to a chosen author, in this series the contemporary author Andrew O’Hagan – author of *Our Fathers* (1999), *Personality* (2003) and *Be Near Me* (2006) – is matched with a famous poet, in order to present and reinterpret the poet’s work in an original and
often personal manner. The success of the Robert Burns anthology has encouraged Canongate to imagine a series of books along the same lines, a high-profile modern writer matched with a high-profile poet. Upcoming is Colm Toibin with W.B. Yeats, and there are further possible combinations in the works (combinations have been mooted that involve Kafka and Shakespeare).
Appendices

A. The Independent Alliance

"This Independent Alliance began last year, when a group of fiercely independent publishers, Atlantic, Canongate, Faber, Icon, Profile, Short Books and Quercus, came together to consolidate their sales in the U.K. in the hope of being able to compete more effectively with the conglomerates. Led by Faber, the results have been strikingly successful and the pygmies now find it much easier to walk among the giants without being stamped on. It pushed open doors to Tesco, Asda, Amazon, and Woolworths that had been firmly shut before. The cooperative model appears to offer the power of the conglomerates without any loss of the editorial independence and character cherished by small publishers. The challenge was to extend the benefits of the Alliance to the beleaguered independent booksellers. As their market share has declined and all efforts have focused on the bestseller lists, publishers – at their peril – have neglected the independent bookshops. So the Alliance has created more favourable terms, comparable to those given to the chains, for the independents. There are going to be special promotions – summer reading and Christmas campaigns – and Alliance authors will be asked to focus their bookshop marketing activities on the independents."

– Andrew Franklin, publisher of Profile Books, from the Guardian

"The Independent Alliance is a global alliance of seven U.K. publishers and their international partners who share a common vision of editorial excellence, original, diverse publishing, innovation in marketing and commercial success.

The founding publishers of the Independent Alliance were Faber and Faber, Atlantic Books, Canongate, Icon Books, Profile Books and Short Books, who came to partnership in July 2005. Quercus Publishing joined in September 2005 and Serpent’s Tail, part of Profile Books in January
2007. Faber and Faber provides the sales force and administrative team for Independent Alliance publishers.

In 2006 the Independent Alliance announced a range of exclusive benefits for its independent counterparts in bookselling, including increased terms, point of sale and dedicated promotions on titles from leading authors, aimed to help them promote their businesses and boost sales. Together, the publishers and booksellers are a unique umbrella organisation representing shared core values - Independence, Integrity, Quality and Range – in an increasingly centralised marketplace.”

– From the Profile Books website
B. Full list of *Myths* titles, with bibliographic details

**Karen Armstrong**  
*A Short History of Myth*  
First published November 2005  
Hardback ISBN: 9781841956442  

**Margaret Atwood**  
*The Penelopiad*  
First published November 2005  
Hardback ISBN: 9781841956459  

**Jeanette Winterson**  
*Weight*  
First published November 2007  
Hardback ISBN: 9781841959863  

**Philip Pullman**  
*A Word or Two About Myths*  
First published November 2005  
Hardback ISBN: 9781841957265  
Paperback ISBN: 9781841959474 (not available in the paperback box set)

**David Grossman**  
*Lion's Honey*  
First published June 2006  
Hardback ISBN: 9781841955656  

**Alexander McCall Smith**  
*Dream Angus*  
First published October 2006  
Hardback ISBN: 9781841958422  

**Victor Pelevin**  
*The Helmet of Horror*  
First published March 2006  
Hardback ISBN: 9781841957050  
Ali Smith  
*Girl meets boy*  
First published November 2007  
Hardback ISBN: 9781841958699  

Su Tong  
*Binu and the Great Wall of China*  
First published November 2007  
Hardback ISBN: 9781841959047  

Salley Vickers  
*Where Three Roads Meet*  
First published November 2007  
Hardback ISBN: 9781841959863  

Michel Faber  
*The Fire Gospel*  
First published November 2008  
Hardback ISBN: 9781847672780  

Dubravka Ugresic  
*Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*  
First published May 2009  
Hardback ISBN: 9781847670663  

Klas Östergren  
*The Hurricane Party*  
To be published August 2009
C. Foreign publishers’ *Myths* statements

Sophia, Russia

“Russia is a mythical land – in scope, in size and in essence. A country of such national, cultural and religious diversity is a natural habitat of myths. They lie at the core of Russian consciousness that rests on collective thinking and shared doing.

In the past Russia used to shake and stun the world with its mythology. Those were myths of power, superiority and control. But old myths have collapsed, and today Russia needs new ties and links to keep itself together and to move forward. It is looking for stories that appeal to our common values and to such human qualities that promote peace and happiness for all, as opposed to the one and only.

*The Myths* project provides an exciting and unique opportunity to create just that – a new mythology that will bridge the past and the present, the east and west, the old and the new. A mythology for the twenty-first century and beyond.”

Cappelens, Norway

“Cappelens is very proud to be one of twenty-five publishers participating in the international publication of the *Myths* series. For Cappelens, this means taking part in a unique and ambitious literary project that touches the common grounds of human existence. By reinterpreting classical myths, some of the world’s most interesting contemporary authors give new life and relevance to stories that deal with immortal subjects. This huge international cooperation is an extraordinary way of drawing attention to the dreams, fears and experiences that human beings have in common regardless of historical time and national identity.”
Salamandra, Spain

“Are myths universal? Are they still relevant in our lives? Do they still reinforce our culture’s deepest values and aspirations? Since the early stages of the *Myths* series, Salamandra recognized in it a truly original and innovative publishing spirit, concerned with trying to answer old questions in a new and meaningful way. Its simple premise – top contemporary writers retell myths – holds enormous potential, as does its international scope.”

Editions Boréal, Québec, Canada

“The myth speaks to both the private and the collective body. It reveals the secret structures of identity while allowing them to be shared by everyone. The myth is a journey into that which defines us profoundly as well as an open window onto the world. It allows us to express that which distinguishes and defines us while bringing light to the bonds that unite all cultures.

Land of meetings and exchanges, Québec well understands the creative power of the myth. On its territory, Aboriginal and European myths – expressed in either French or English – rapidly came together to give birth to a unique culture. For a publishing house like Boréal, our participation in this project is an opportunity to showcase our cultural heritage, while reaffirming its universal appeal and all that it owes to the imagination of the many people of diverse origins which contributed to its creation.”

De Bezige Bij, Netherlands

“*Myth is the mother of all literature. It lives on in modern literature through its desire to explore the great questions of life. Love and war, death and immortality, the challenge and fear of the unknown, the sadness of betrayal and the destructive power of jealousy – all these are essential issues in old Myths as well as in modern literature. We are so honored to be part of one of the most exciting*
international publishing ventures, with so many of the greatest authors alive forming Myths into jewels of Modern Literature.”

Rizzoli, Italy

“Myth is a part of human nature. It addresses two defining needs of humankind; the need to tell stories and the need to find meaning in the universe. Since the dawn of the scientific revolution, Western culture has been trying to get rid of the myth. Yet its heroes, its symbols and its stories continue to challenge and fascinate us. For this reason Rizzoli is proud to be part of a project which is not only a tribute to myth’s inexhaustible ability to speak to our hearts and our minds, but also one of the most ambitious and exciting publishing events of recent years.”

Yedioth Ahronoth Publishing House, Israel

“Of course I had no choice but to join the happy troupe of publishers from all over the globe when I heard about the new Myths series. Several years before I bumped into that ingenious thing – so simple yet so fresh – the little bible books. Who the hell – I wondered – is this publisher? Alas, the bible is ours, the Hebrews, and we couldn’t think of how to do it in our privileged, original language. So I kept waiting, ambushing, in fact. And of course – again came Jamie, and there was no way to resist. Would anybody take the biblical (‘our’) myth, say, of the rainbow in the clouds and transform it into the shared dream of world peace? Or would anyone retell the great love story of that sad suicide-bomber, the shaven, humiliated Samson?

I can’t wait to fill our shelves with these small handsome books, which for me as editor will be the ultimate expression of a new kind of universal intimacy.”
Munhakdongne, Korea

“We have a great expectation on this coming myth series, stories that were given new lives by prominent writers of each country. It is like waiting for each country’s traditional food to come to a table, made by its best cooks. Our mouths are already watering.

Korea is a country with a history longer than 5,000 years and a memory of deep and rich mythologies. Also Koreans have a large interest in mythologies of the world. This project will be a blessing struck like a thunder for Korean readers with an interest in mythology.”

Knopf, Canada

“Storytelling has always been our guide through this world; and the ancient myths – in all their potent, ever-changing forms – shed the clearest light on the struggles we encounter daily and the longings that pull us forward. For such a gathering of great writers to come together in our time to offer this dazzling gift of retelling and reinvention is a golden moment in the long history of storytelling. It’s a privilege for Knopf Canada to be able to join forces with so many of the finest publishers today to play a role in this extraordinary event.”

Berlin Verlag, Germany

“The Myths – cornerstones of the masterplan of human consciousness. Retold in this wonderful series by authors of world renown. Retold in mesmerizing stories that oscillate between the past and the present, between the universal and the individual. A grand enterprise that we are more than proud to participate in.”
D. Foreign publishers and currently contrasted *Myths*

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70
E. Original publicity schedule for *Myths* series launch

**THE MYTHS**

**Key Confirmed Publicity**

**Serialisation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Publication/Programme Details</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Saturday 15/22nd October</td>
<td>The Times: Major two part deal with extracts from <em>Weight</em> and <em>The Penelopiad</em> as well as commissioned articles by Karen Armstrong and Margaret Atwood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday 28th October</td>
<td>National Television: Interview Margaret Atwood re <em>The Penelopiad</em></td>
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<td>Review by panel of the series</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Atwood also appears as panellist</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sunday 23rd October</td>
<td>National Radio: Artworks 30 minute documentary on Canongate to include coverage of <em>The Myths</em> project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monday 24th October</td>
<td>National Print Interviews: Margaret Atwood, The Sunday Times, The Independent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday 2nd November</td>
<td>BBC Radio 4: Interview with Jeanette Winterson</td>
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<tr>
<td>BBC Radio 3</td>
<td>Interview with Karen Armstrong and Margaret Atwood</td>
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<td>BBC Radio 3</td>
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**Margaret Atwood**

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<thead>
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<tr>
<td>Sunday 23rd October</td>
<td>The Sunday Times: News Review</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friday 28th October</td>
<td>The Independent: Books Page</td>
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**Jeanette Winterson**

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Saturday 22nd October</td>
<td>The Guardian: Saturday Review</td>
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Print Features

New Statesman  Feature on Myths, by Jamie Byng, 21st Oct
Prospect  Feature on Myths, date tbc
The Economist  Feature on Myths, date tbc
The Liberal  Feature by Marina Warner, date tbc
TES  Feature by Adele Geras, date tbc
Time Magazine  Review/feature, date tbc
Metro  Interview with Atwood and Armstrong, all editions

National Reviews

The Spectator  Lead review, Friday 21st October
Guardian  Mary Beard review/feature 22/10
Daily Telegraph  confirmed review, 22/10
Observer  confirmed review, 23/10
Sunday Times  confirmed review, 23/10
Sunday Telegraph  confirmed review, 23/10
Financial Times  confirmed review 29/10
Literary Review  confirmed review, date tbc
Daily Mail  confirmed review, date tbc
London Review of Books  confirmed review, date tbc
TLS  confirmed review, date tbc
THES  confirmed review, date tbc

Key Confirmed Publicity - Scotland

Jeanette Winterson
The Scotsman  Interview, Saturday 22nd October
Sunday Herald  Interview, Sunday 23rd October

Karen Armstrong, Margaret Atwood, Jamie Byng
The Scotsman  roundtable discussion/feature with
                  David Robinson, Saturday 22nd October

Jamie Byng
Sunday Herald  3,000 word feature, Sunday 23rd October
Sunday Times Scotland  Interview/feature, Sunday 23rd October

Further Print
Sunday Herald/Scottish Review of Books  review/feature
Scotland on Sunday  review/feature
The List  short feature
The Big Issue, Scotland  review/feature

Broadcast
BBC Radio Scotland  Interview with Karen Armstrong, Margaret Atwood
                    and Richard Holloway

Cover Stories
**Print Features**

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**National Reviews**

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**Key Confirmed Publicity - Scotland**

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**Karen Armstrong, Margaret Atwood, Jamie Byng**

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**Further Print**

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<td>short feature</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Big Issue, Scotland</td>
<td>review/feature</td>
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Confirmed Publicity – Ireland

TV
RTE 1, The View

Radio
RTE Radio, Pat Kenny

Print
The Irish Times
Sunday Independent
Sunday Tribune

Confirmed Events UK and Ireland
St James’s Piccadilly
London

Wednesday 26th October
A special event sponsored by The Times
A staged reading of part of The Penelopiad, a new play by Margaret Atwood, with Margaret Atwood as Penelope, directed by Phyllida Lloyd and with music by Jason Carr commissioned by the National Theatre Studio. It will be performed at St James’s Church, Piccadilly, Wednesday 26 October, 6.30 pm. The performance will be followed by a question and answer session with Margaret Atwood, chaired by Erica Wagner, Literary Editor of The Times.

University College Dublin

Friday 28th October
Margaret Atwood received honorary degree from UCD Historical and Literary Society

Liberty Hall, Dublin

Sunday 30th October
Karen Armstrong and Margaret Atwood Evening event in association with Waterstone’s
References

Books


Birkett, Rt. Hon. Sir Norman, P.C., et al. *Books are Essential*. London: André Deutsch, 1951. This is an immensely entertaining – and useful – little book, containing a collection of perceptive essays on the state of the book business in England after the Second World War. While some aspects of the issues are dated, many of the difficulties the authors describe have changed very little over the past sixty years.


Articles

http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article425719.ece

http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/11/books/review/11alexander.html?_r=1&ex=1183262400&en=5e7dbf55b8bc27d9&ei=5070&oref=slogin


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Coté, Marc. ‘Why is Everybody Picking on Us?’. From the *Globe & Mail* Books Section online, February 13, 2009.

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Accessed February 18, 2009

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http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/7ba47e2646e111da8c9b0000e2511e8.html?nclick_check=1

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Turpin, Adrian. ‘Accidental Writer Has a Dig at Highland Life’. Interview with Ali Smith. Sunday Times, April 16, 2006. http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/newspapers/sunday_times/scotland/article705586.ece

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www.meetatthegate.com
www.faber.co.uk
www.profilebooks.com
www.quercusbooks.co.uk
www.iconbooks.co.uk

Other websites used

(for information regarding Angus Hyland and Pentagram)

http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/collective/A3583325
(for information regarding Kevin Williamson and Rebel Inc., accessed December 27, 2007)

http://www.themanbookerprize.com/prize/books/42
(for information regarding The Life of Pi, accessed February 16, 2009)

(for information about BookNet Canada, accessed February 16, 2009)

www.littleblackdressbooks.com
Other documents

“Authors contracted by other territories”


Contracts

Rights Sale agreement between Canongate and foreign publisher
Brand Holder agreement between Canongate and foreign publisher

“Key confirmed publicity U.K.” (from FMcM, publicity firm directing *Myths* launch)

Marketing/Publicity Plans

*The Fire Gospel*, by Michel Faber (original hardcover, September 2008)
*Binu and the Great Wall of China*, by Su Tong (paperback, July 2008)
*Myths*, various (three original hardcovers, October 21, 2005)
*A Night Out With Robert Burns*, arranged by Andrew O’Hagan (November 2007)

Minutes from Editorial Group meetings

October 18, 2005 (Frankfurt)
October 9, 2007 (Frankfurt)

Minutes from *Myths* meetings (with all foreign publishers)

October 18, 2005 (Frankfurt)
March 11, 2005 (London)
October 9, 2007 (Frankfurt)

“Myths contracted by other territories”, as of 2007.

“Myths currently contracted by Canongate”, as of October, 2007.

“Myths statements from foreign publishers”.


Pullman, Philip. “A word or two about Myths”. Pamphlet published alongside the *Myths* titles.

Title information sheet

*Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*, by Dubravka Ugresic

Interviews


Jenny Henderson, production manager. Interview with the author, January 30th, 2008.
Olivia Leeper, rights manager for the *Myths*. Interview with the author, February 15, 2008.

Sheila McAinsh, interview with the author, January 27, 2008.

Michael Schellenburg, Associate Publisher of Knopf Canada. Telephone interview with the author, April 17, 2009.