

The Mexican publishing scene

The humble perspective of an
independent publisher

A country at war

- Mexico is going through what is probably one of the worst periods in its history, in terms of violence: over 100,000 dead and missing as a result of the War on Drugs declared by president Calderon from 2006, onwards.
- Most of the news coming out of Mexico are related to this horror story.

Alarming rates of poverty/inequality

- Mexico's GDP is close to the 10th largest of the world: it's a big economy.
- Per capita GDP of \$10,325.6 USD is ranked about 68 worldwide.
- But...
- Over 50 million people still living under conditions of extreme poverty.
- Minimum wage: about 3.8 USD per day, or 114.75 per month.
- At an average book price of 12 USD, buying one book would take 10% of a person's minimum wage.

The publishing industry

- Total value (2014): 584,350,394.86 USD
- As a fraction of national GDP: 0.0315%.
- Besides size, an even bigger problem: dependency on Government participation and purchases.
- In 2014, out of 306 million of books printed, 165 were printed by and 44 for the Government, which means 68.3% of the books printed.

The Bookstore problem

- There is a total of 1,441 registered bookstores in the country.
- Even taking into account that it's a hugely misleading figure, it would amount to a bookstore per every 78,000 people.
- As a comparison:
- Germany: a bookstore per every 7000 people.
- Argentina: a bookstore per every 12,000 people.
- Spain: a bookstore per every 14,000 people.

The Fixed Price problem

- Traditionally, there's been a very heavy discount system, which has distorted even the public perception of what books should cost.
- In 2006, after a very long and strenuous effort by a group of publishers, a Book Law was passed, but with many flaws, including:
- There is no penalty for anybody who breaks it, thus it's become a sort of moral law. (In a country with a very loose definition of morality and lawfulness).

The commercial publishing scenario

- As it's probably the case in every territory now: a big portion of the market is taken up by the big conglomerates.
- However, a perceived issue is that they tend to focus more on best-sellers and celebrity, self-help books, etc.: it seems that even their Spanish counterparts publish more quality books. A comparison of catalogues of the same imprints of conglomerates would seem to support this idea.
- Corolary: the offer suffers. (Example: the Moawad case).

The Spanish presence

- Over the last few decades, most (if not all) of the important independent or literary publishers have come from Spain (Anagrama, Tusquets, Acantilado, Siruela, Pre-textos and many more). Their books are on offer in Mexico but, except for the few cases where they do local print runs, they arrive in small quantities, at very costly prices.
- A 200 page book can cost almost 40 USD, making it unpayable but for a very small fraction of the population.

Conclusion

- It is a very difficult and dispiriting environment.

However...

- Not all is lost.
- In account of all the chaos (or in fact, precisely maybe because of it):
- There is a thriving literary scene.
- Besides from some household names such as Juan Villoro, Sergio Pitol, Lydia Cacho, Mario Bellatin, Margo Glantz there is a bundle of emerging literary stars, like Valeria Luiselli, Yuri Herrera, Luigi Amara, Luis Felipe Fabre, Carlos Velázquez, Emiliano Monge, Daniel Saldaña, Laia Jufresa, Antonio Ortuño, and other young writers who are in a way expressing the convoluted reality of the country.

In terms of publishing

- There is also a somewhat strangely upcoming publishing scene: over the last 10-15 years, houses like Tumbona, Sexto Piso, Almadía, Caja de Cerillos, El Naranjo, Vaso Roto and some others have opened and published high-quality books.
- Most tend to focus either on local authors, or on books that are somewhat outside of the main market categories.

Book Fairs and Literary Festivals

- Are extremely important, not necessarily in terms of sales (although the sales of some, like Guadalajara, can make almost 10% of a publishers sales for a year, in a ten-day period). Book fairs like Guadalajara, Oaxaca, Monterrey, the Hay Festival, Xalapa and others are sometimes the best way to bring books and authors to interested readers.
- In a market so much based on offer (more than demand), it's a crucial aspect.

Literary Agencies

- Traditionally, there have been almost no literary agencies to speak of in Mexico.
- All the important authors are either represented by a Spanish agency, by their Spanish publishing house or, not represented at all!
- Slowly, there seems to be a shift in terms of splitting rights. Spain is no longer necessarily equal to the whole of the Spanish-speaking world, especially when they're not taking advantage of the territories.

Areas of opportunity for foreign publishers

- A very clear and probably more direct one: encourage the conglomerates, or even the strong independent publishers who acquire rights, to either print specific titles in Mexico, or bring the authors to book fairs or festivals, as even themselves would probably be surprised by the reward.
- Try to sort out the intricacies and look for specific opportunities with (the few) publishers interested in translating books that might fit with their catalogues.