

TITLE: *Faber & Faber: The Untold Story*

AUTHOR: Toby Faber

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Reviewed by Ann Skea

(Website and Ted Hughes pages: <http://ann.skea.com/>)

Toby Faber is the grandson of Geoffrey Faber who, in 1929, established the publishing firm Faber & Faber. He tells the story of Faber & Faber mostly through original documents, which show not only the many successes of the firm but also the many times that it almost folded. The contents of the book clearly show the uncertainty of book publishing in general, and Toby Faber quotes the old joke that “*If you want to make a small fortune out of literary publishing, start off with a large one*”.

It is not only the every-day problems of publishing and marketing books which must be dealt with, but political and historical events also have their impact. Union disputes, strikes, the cutting of electricity supplies, as well as the changing ways in which readers access and buy their books, have all affected the finances of the firm. And there are vivid accounts of wartime bombs, the construction of bomb-shelters, fire-watching duties, bomb-damage, and, especially, the way that wartime paper rationing and wartime taxation laws severely threatened production

On top of all these difficulties, there is the problem of choosing which manuscripts will become successful books. How, for example, could anyone predict the future importance of T.S.Eliot’s book, *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*, when Eliot himself was doubtful about publishing the poems in the first place. He wrote anxiously to Geoffrey Faber that “*the various Poems might not be good enough. The matter ... may not be at all amusing*” and “*there might be a part that children wouldn’t like and part that adults wouldn’t like and part that nobody would like*”.

Then there was the advice of one of their manuscript readers that a manuscript by an unknown author called William Golding, entitled *Stranger from Within*, was “*Absurd and uninteresting fantasy rubbish + dull. Pointless. Reject*”. Fortunately, other readers thought differently. Golding’s manuscript was published as *Lord of the Flies*, Golding became one of Faber’s most successful authors, and in 1983 he was awarded a Nobel Prize in Literature.

A less happy decision was to reject George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*.

The pleasure of much of this book is the friendly tone of the exchanges between the early directors and shareholders of the firm, and the eloquence with which they express themselves. There are humorous exchanges, frank opinions and, sometimes, jokes. One joke played by American associates on fellow American, T.S.Eliot, resulted in several mock-serious and wonderfully comic written responses which later Chairmen of Faber & Faber mistook as evidence of a serious rift and kept locked away.

For writers, one of the interests of the book is the number of tentative approaches by Faber editors and directors to young novelists and poets who have since become famous literary figures. It is clear that many of these men and women were offered advice and encouragement, and that they were generally very willing to substantially change or rewrite their work on the advice of Faber editors. The list of famous authors and poets who began their careers with Faber’s in this way is long. Many went on to win major literary awards and honours. And being published by Faber & Faber came to be regarded by authors and poets as a mark of quality and literary merit. Vickram Seth wrote: “*I’m very pleased that I am with Faber, which I’ve admired for a long time*”. And Peter Carey, after being approached by Faber Editor, Robert McCrum, wrote back “*I really don’t know what to say except that I am, of course, delighted..... Being a pessimist my only concern is that the world will be totally destroyed before the book comes out*”.

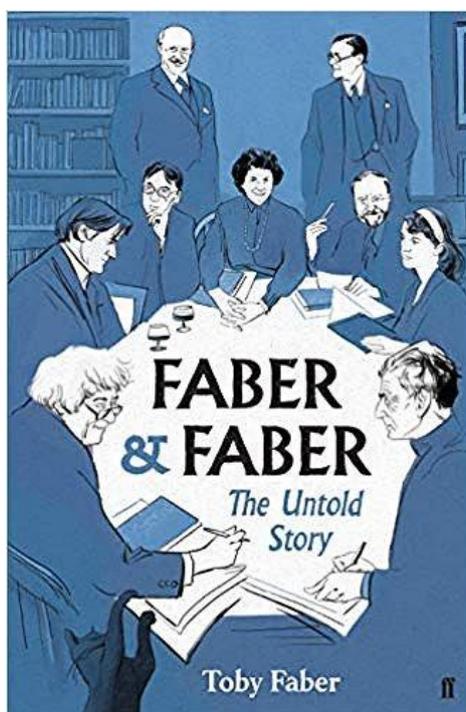
Becoming known as publishers of good, unconventional and innovative literary works frequently brought Fabers to the attention of the censor. Publication of D.H.Lawrence's pamphlet, *Pornography and Obscenity*, resulted in police raids and seized publications and required an explanatory letter from Geoffrey Faber to the Secretary of State for Home Affairs. Correspondence with James Joyce, fragments of whose *Work in Progress* were published in instalments by Faber, is also interesting. These pieces were eventually published in book form as *Finnegan's Wake*, for which, in the Faber Spring Catalogue for 1939, Eliot provided a carefully worded note. Since the work had been "more talked about and written about during its [16 year] period of composition than any previous work of English literature", he wrote, "the publishers feel that they should waste no words in describing [it]"

Photographs are scattered throughout the book, and famous names and faces appear in many of them. I especially like a photograph of W.H Auden, Stephen Spender and Christopher Isherwood, taken in 1935, in which they look like three cheeky teenagers.

In the 50 years of Faber's existence, the firm has often been close to failure, merger or take-over, and retirements and the changing nature of directorship and management has meant that close family involvement in the firm diminished as essential new blood was brought in. These days, as Toby Faber writes, "the Faber family owns exactly half of Faber & Faber. During my childhood in the 1970s it owned it all". The letters in last parts of the book reflect something of this loss of close family connections and there is less of the relaxed communication between editors and directors which is evident in earlier letters. Toby Faber, however, is an eloquent story-teller, and his hope that the book "will evoke a sense of fun: both the fun that people (in general) had and (generally) still have while working at Faber" is well fulfilled.

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Note for Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath Scholars:



As you can see from the dust-jacket, Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath feature in the book.

Ted Hughes first appears in a letter he wrote to 'Editor, Poetry Department' in March 1957, asking if Faber might be willing to publish *Hawk in the Rain* in England. Since he mentions that it had won the First Publication Award in a contest sponsored by the New York City Poetry Centre, it was at first assumed that he was American. Hughes quickly disabused them of this belief and on the basis of a note written to the

poetry editor, Charles Monteith by T.S.Eliot, saying that he was "*inclined to think we ought to take this man*", Faber & Faber accepted the book for publication.

Later letters between Hughes and between various Faber editors discuss Hughes's dismay over the cover of *Wodwo*; and the hesitation over publication of *The Iron Man*, because the story cause "*disquiet*" in the Children's Department. Monteith wrote that he did not think the story "*was any more frightening than many fairy tales*" and, fortunately, Monteith and the "*adult department*" won the day. The suggestion, much later, that Peter Townshend, a member of the Board at Fabers, might "*take a shot*" at turning *The Iron Man* into a musical is also discussed, with Hughes commenting, apropos of the success of the musical *Cats*, that if Townshend "*could make more than a rambling kitten of The Iron Man*" he would be delighted.

The first mention of Sylvia Plath comes in a letter from Monteith to Ted Hughes saying how much he admired Sylvia's poems in *The London Magazine*. The famous photograph of Hughes among the greats - MacNeice, Eliot, Auden and Spender- is included, accompanied by an extract from Sylvia Plath's letter to her mother on 24th June 1960. And there are letters associated with the Faber publication of *Ariel* (Hughes had specific instructions for Faber, based on Plath's ideas for the cover); publication of *The Bell Jar* under Plath's name rather than a pseudonym; and the publication of her *Collected* poems.

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