

Legend gets noticed

Tom Chalmers, Britain's youngest publishing m.d., tells **Tom Tivnan** why obscurity is the independents'—and authors'—greatest enemy

The youngest managing director in British publishing arrives at our interview looking the part: he wears ripped jeans, a long hooded jacket and his hair is gelled and spiky. I half expect Tom Chalmers of independent Legend Press to have a skateboard under his arm.

It has been two years since Chalmers, at the tender age of 25, set up Legend. The company trumpets that it is "the UK's youngest-run fiction publisher"—something Chalmers was leery about doing in the beginning. He says: "When I first started, I tried to look older, thinking people wouldn't take us seriously. But after about six months I thought: 'Well, this is what makes us different, so why don't we make the most of it?'"

Though "young-run", it would be unwise to underestimate Legend, as the publisher is slowly carving out a niche of producing cutting edge, contemporary fiction. And embracing the youth angle has paid off, giving Chalmers and Legend increased visibility. Earlier this year, Chalmers was shortlisted for the inaugural British Council/London Book Fair UK Young Publisher of the Year award. This autumn, he is shortlisted for the UK Young Entrepreneur of the Year prize at the Real Business/CBI Growing Business Awards, which have been called "the business Oscars" by prime minister Gordon Brown.

Into the Dragons' Den

In October, Chalmers met the Real Business/CBI panel, which included "Dragons' Den" stars Peter Jones and Deborah Meaden. He was grilled by Jones and Meaden on Legend's business model, gross margins and future plans. Chalmers finds out the result at the award ceremony on 28th November.

He is the only publisher on the list and is not exactly bullish about his chances ("I'm up against dot com millionaires"). But he is proud that Legend has been recognised. "Publishing is a business with a lot of risk," he says. "It shows that we have the necessary organisation and focus to rival all the other sectors that we must work with and compete against."

Chalmers grew up in Leicester and graduated with an English degree from Liverpool University in 2002.

He came to London in 2004 and worked for Macmillan, then moved to Charterhouse Communications, a magazine and trade publication specialist, where he became an editorial director for some of their yearbook and mortgage titles.

It was while at Charterhouse, "after a few drinks in the pub", that he decided to start publishing his own books.

A Remarkable beginning

The first Legend title was *The Remarkable Everyday*, a short story collection. "It was a good book to start with," he says. "It was an excellent way to meet different authors and I made a lot of useful contacts."

He continued to work at Charterhouse, running Legend from his home, until he was able to secure a bank loan and a Prince's Trust grant to enable him to go full-time. Legend now has offices in north London, another full-time member of staff and a stable of freelance designers and editors.

Legend has so far released eight contemporary fiction titles, including the recent novel, *The Well-tempered Clavier* by Eton old boy, and former Royal correspondent for the *Sun*, William Coles. Chalmers says he will publish 10 titles in 2008, with that number set to double in 2009. He admits that starting up has been a challenge, with a "steep learning curve", but he has been helped by some fellow independents such as The Friday Project's Scott Pack. Chalmers adds: "It is difficult to start from nothing in a industry which takes six to nine months to make any money."

While he is youthful, Chalmers is also remarkably clear-eyed about the difficulties of a breaking into the retail market. Since the market is tightly controlled by a few players, he says, a publisher has to be prepared with an infrastructure to take full advantage. It is a lesson he learned when a Legend novel, Candi Miller's Africa-set *Salt & Honey*, was included in a Waterstone's three-for-two promotion. "We didn't really take advantage of it as we should have done. It's all about coordination. You can have the biggest publicity splash



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m.d. Legend Press

in the world but you need to have [the book] ready for people to buy."

One area in which Legend is trying to build sales is online. The publisher is web-savvy, with its own website, blog, and Myspace site and a presence on Shelfari, Squidoo and Facebook. "We want to be a 'proper' publisher," Chalmers says, "being represented in all the high street shops and going through the normal channels. But online is an excellent place for smaller independents because it is a level playing-field."

Legend have even begun mining the web for acquisitions. Chalmers recently bought Lee Henshaw's novel *Queer Fish in God's Waiting Room* after seeing Henshaw's blog, "Next to Hemingway", which has members of the public secretly putting Henshaw's self-published book next to Hemingway in the fiction section of bookshops.

It was a blend of independent spirit and self-promotion that drew Chalmers to the book. "You have to get known," he insists. "Producing a book of quality is important, of course, very important. But it really doesn't matter if you don't get people to notice it."