

Inside the **Laguna**

Serbia is a burgeoning rights market, led by Belgrade powerhouse Laguna. Founder Dejan Papic tells **Tom Tivnan** about his firm's origins, the state of the market and his hopes for this year's London Book Fair

Tom Tivnan: Could you discuss the origins of Laguna in the late 1990s, and what its growth strategy has been?

Dejan Papic: Laguna was founded out of sheer enthusiasm, with the publication of a single book that I translated. The title was *The Colour of Magic* by Terry Pratchett, my favourite writer, who was unfamiliar to the Serbian public at the time. With a borrowed \$1,000 I embarked on a publishing business adventure, something completely unknown to me, as I had been a software engineer up until then.

I needed to learn quickly, but also the overall state in our country was critical—those were the months prior to the bombing of Serbia. Many large publishers in Serbia were on the verge of disappearing, burdened by the old behavioural models as well as the complete inertia of the market. Despite the economic crisis, the opportunity opened up for small publishers, who were ready to bring the highest global standards into their business. My plan was to invest in the quality of titles—written by leading, world-famous authors—but also to invest in marketing, an aspect previously mostly overlooked by Serbian publishers.

Starting from the first published title, I started adding new Terry Pratchett titles to Laguna's list—alongside other international writers—up until our first big successes, with books by Tony Parsons and Tracy Chevalier. I invested all the money in publishing new titles and expanding Laguna's organisational structure, so Laguna grew in just a few years from publishing only a few titles a year, to publishing 40 to 50 titles a year. Today the number of published titles per year is 350, with more than 3,000 titles published altogether in the past 17 years.

TT: You are a bookseller too, with your Delfi chain of bookshops. Why did you start the operation, and how do you see the shops developing over the years?

DP: The great global economic crisis started in 2008 and Serbia was not spared. The situation in publishing was particularly bad, since some of



our oldest, most distinguished bookstores were closing, and the only one left in the market was a single monopolistic bookstore chain which had been troubling a lot of publishers with its irregular and often delayed payments.

We were simply forced to take matters into our own hands and make sure our books got their place in the market and, of course, to help our [fellow] publishers do the same.

We have built the chain up to almost 40 stores, with [outlets] in all major cities in Serbia, plus a handful in Bosnia & Herzegovina and Montenegro. All of Laguna's books can be found in Delfi stores, alongside the titles of other Serbian publishers.

TT: Your book club is like a membership scheme; it seems to be an interesting model. Can you explain why you began the club and how it is developing?

DP: Laguna's Book Club now has over 400,000 members, mostly from Serbia but also from abroad. All those people expressed their wish

to join and receive all the benefits the club has to offer. It informs members of books on sale, as well as other discounts, but also gives them an insight into everything happening at Laguna concerning our books and authors. Another wonderful idea stemmed from the Book Club—Laguna's Book Night, the biggest literary event after the Belgrade Book Fair. It is held twice a year and brings together more than 30,000 people into our bookshops.

TT: What is the current state of the Serbian market? How has it been developing in recent years? What are the key trends?

DP: Serbia is still in a great economic crisis; it affects most of the population's standard of living. That is why it sounds incredible that book publishing is one of few sectors of industry in Serbia that experienced expansion from 2008 until the present. A lot of new bookshops opened; production was increasing and the battle for new titles got fierce. Unfortunately, this trend slowed down in the past couple of



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Pictured clockwise from far left: visitors at the Belgrade Book Fair; Laguna's bookshop chain, Delfi; attendees at its popular Book Club; and Laguna founder Dejan Papic.



years and stratification has become indisputable. Smaller publishers are struggling to make ends meet and larger publishers need to use their resources optimally to maintain their usual levels of production.

TT: What sort of foreign rights are you hoping to acquire at the London Book Fair?

DP: As always, Laguna is interested only in the most significant contemporary titles globally. Only such books and authors have a chance in the small but highly competitive Serbian market.

Considering we publish a great variety in terms of genre (for adults as well as for children), fiction and non-fiction, evidently we will have a lot of titles to choose from—it will be quite difficult to make the right decisions.

TT: Are you selling rights, too? If so, is there

Papic founded Laguna in Belgrade in 1998, quickly building the business into the largest publisher in Serbia. Its first shop in its Delfi chain was opened in Belgrade in 2009. Laguna is shortlisted for the The Bookseller's International Adult Trade Publisher of the Year prize—facing off against Interlink from the US and France's Actes Sud—at the LBF International Excellence Awards. The winner will be announced at the fair on 12th April.

an appetite abroad for Serbian books?

DP: Laguna is the largest publisher when it comes to Serbian authors. Almost all leading authors of Serbian prose choose Laguna as their publisher. Our focus has so far been on adequately presenting Serbian authors to the reading audience in Serbian-speaking areas, so we haven't really focused on selling rights abroad. It will be a challenge. But, particularly in the children's market, there is opportunity, and we will commit more seriously to trying to place

our authors abroad. Certainly there are some interesting names and titles on our lists, and it will be something to work on in the future.

TT: Can you talk about the single Association of Publishers and Booksellers organisation you initiated and how that is

helping the Serbian trade in general?

DP: Before our association was founded in 2011, there wasn't a single trade body that could protect the rights of publishers. For example, just prior to the association's founding, VAT was suddenly imposed on books [by the government]; previously, books were exempt. However, publishers were not able to raise their voice against such decision. Some of the biggest Serbian publishers recognised the necessity for such a comprehensive organisation that would bring together a wide circle of publishers and booksellers.

Our association now has around 120 members, including virtually all the biggest publishers and booksellers, as well as smaller organisations. Our association monitors the work of public administration, legislative authorities and is ready to react in situations that require a voice when it comes to our profession. We are also involved in organising of the largest regional book fair, the Belgrade Book Fair.