

# Fifty years of publishing: An interview with Richard Charkin, including excerpts from his memoir “My Back Pages”

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**Abstract.** Martin Wilson interviewed Richard Charkin about his biography “My Back Pages” in APE’s wake-up session on the second day of the conference. In the memoir, Charkin reflects on fifty years in the business in an “undeniably personal history of publishing”. This paper includes excerpts from the memoir, and an introduction by Martin Wilson.

Keywords: Publishing, history, memoir, biography, interview, APE 2024, Academic Publishing in Europe, career

## 1. Introduction

I first met Richard over coffee at the Royal Society for Arts during a thunderstorm. Despite fifty years in publishing, he was fizzing with ideas about his next project. It was a collaboration with a young musician on new ways to enable other musicians around the world to download and use musical scores. Outside, in the pouring rain, the conversation continued full of energy and laughter before he headed off for the bus – umbrellaless and soaked. He left me excited about the future of publishing and thinking how many others he must have touched in this way throughout his career.

Richard’s book “My Back Pages” is packed with humorous anecdotes, interactions with the giants of publishing and insights into the trends that have shaped the industry over the last half century. And while generous about the contributions of others, it was clear from meeting him that he is far more than just an interested observer of people and events, but someone who has actively shaped the industry and continues to do so today.

This was very much the tone of our conversation at APE 2024. He was warmly welcomed at the conference. Many knew him well and most had heard of him. It was a great opportunity for us all to learn from his unique breadth of experience. One of the goals of the conference was “to look backwards in order to move forward”. And this was very much the main thread of the interview. His key message was that we need to reinvent the industry for a new age and new possibilities; we can only do that successfully

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if we respect and build on the unique culture and traditions of our industry. The past is important, but the future is more exciting.

One key theme in the book and interview was the impact technology had in shaping publishing. Richard's own story begins with the microfilm, CD-ROM, floppy disk and word processor. The people who fascinated him most, like Robert Maxwell, were similarly great enthusiasts for inventions and took pride in ensuring that their businesses were equipped with the very latest devices and gadgets. He tells the amusing story of how Maxwell acquired several early word processors. In a demonstration to visiting dignitaries, Maxwell attempted to show how versatile these machines were by attempting to pack up the word processor along with the table it was on. He succeeded in breaking both in the process.

For Richard, it is not the end product that seems to excite him most, but the broader transformative power these new technologies have on the industry. In the second excerpt from his book, he describes the new roles that have developed in publishing as work processes change – from sales reps to marketers to designers and now to engineers.

In my most recent chat with him, he told me about the latest “miracle”. His book has just been transformed into an audio book. In an hour. He went to a studio to give a sample of his voice. With that sample, the technicians produced the audio version in seconds. You can listen to a sample of it now for free on Amazon. He was very excited about this and, of course, other opportunities AI technologies are opening up for the industry. He has always admired the entrepreneurs who have embraced the new. And, of course, that is exactly what he is too.

*Martin Wilson*

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