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Cécile Cottenet, *Literary Agents in the Transatlantic Book Trade. American Fiction, French Rights, and the Hoffman Agency*, London, Routledge, 2017

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Cécile Cottenet's areas of research overlap in her publications. An Associate Professor in American Studies at Aix-Marseilles Université, she drew from American civilization, African American studies, and the history of books and publishing to give insight on Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* in 2012. And in *Literary Agents in the Transatlantic Book Trade*, publishing, literary and print culture is set within civilizational and trade considerations to foreground the importance of book agents.

Cottenet's thoroughly documented study highlights the crucial role of the book agent as a mediator in the importation of US fiction and literature into France in the postwar period. She makes the case that "the international book trade [...] would not have developed as it did in the post-World War II era had it not been for agents working on different continents" (2) and focuses on the Agence Hoffman, established in Paris by Michel Hoffman in 1934, to illustrate the complex and varied functions of French agents.

Hoffman was born in St. Petersburg, escaped Bolshevism and the Nazi regime before settling in Paris. He started by negotiating French rights to Russian and German playwrights and novelists, then became one of the top agents handling foreign rights for American and British authors. The agency he founded, taken over by his sons after his death in 1971, is now the oldest literary agency operating in France. Hoffman and the other French agents, Cottenet points out, were not agents in the Anglo-American sense of author's representatives, but for the most part co-agents (connections working officially as representatives of foreign agencies) and sometimes sub-agents (connections working for foreign publishers or authors), partly due to the specificities of French publishing: in America, it is worth the author's while to entrust secondary rights to an agent, whereas in France the publisher retains them. What Cottenet reveals of Hoffman's energetic personality and numerous abilities will make the sometimes arcane information on publishing rights more palatable to the lay reader; in an average workday this man, and other agents like him, got around the many difficulties that the average reader only painstakingly makes sense of.

The book consists of five chapters. The first, "Mediators in the Pre-War Transatlantic Market", provides the context of the globalization of the book trade, dating it from the first half of the 19th century, spanning the years between the adoption of the Berne Convention in 1886 and the 1930's. Cottenet gives an overview of the growing circulation of transatlantic literature in the interwar years, describing the mediating role of reviewers, scholars and professors, translators, scouts, and, finally, agents, whom she sees as shaping forces. Cottenet describes Hoffman's competition, notably the William A. Bradley Agency, and gives an exposé of Hoffman's business in the 1930's. She shows that these agents, dependent on the sale of rights for their livelihood, relied on international networks in the book trade.

In the second chapter, "New Beginnings: 1944-1946", it is explained that the war years marked a hiatus for Hoffman as an agent, as he enlisted in the French army, was demobilized, went South, and apparently joined the Résistance; he returned to Paris after the liberation in 1944 and resumed his activity. The war slowed the publishing of British or American works in France, too – under the guise of what were officially paper-saving measures, but really was a form of censorship; the more overt form listed banned and prohibited books, and confiscated them from libraries and bookstores. But through it all, there was a demand for the translations of the English-language novels still left on the shelves. Cottenet depicts the changes in French publishing and in American publishers' outlook on foreign markets in the immediate aftermath of the war: French co-agents acted "as diplomats of sorts, in the service of Americans" (63), helping them make the literary but also the political distinctions necessary to avoid publishers whose activities or morals had been suspect during the war. Agents also tracked down pre-war contracts after the disruptions of the war, verifying and renewing terms.

In “New Markets for the Taking: 1946-1955” (Chapter 3), Cottenet argues that as publishing recovered in France and in the United States, US cultural diplomats viewed the Transatlantic book trade as a weapon in the Cold War, notably to combat the strong Communist influence in France. The increase in cultural exchanges in those years is mirrored in Hoffman’s activities, “striving to fulfill his partners’ expectations in terms of information gathering and matchmaking, all the while sustaining pressure and facing new forms of competition” (15).

Chapter 4, “Cultural Transfer and Transatlantic Negotiations”, examines how agents like Hoffman contributed to the “Americanization” of French literature and of publishing, abetting the circulation of the various categories of books – the literary, the midlist novel, and detective/hardboiled fiction – matching titles and genres with publishers, as well as controlling and helping to standardize foreign rights contracts, negotiating advances and royalty scales, and ensuring the quality of translations. Besides protecting U.S. authors, Hoffman was instrumental in popularizing noir fiction in France.

The final chapter, “Bridging the Divide”, posits that agents bridged a cultural and professional divide between the United States and France. They clarified the differences in publishing contracts, regarding volume and serial rights, for instance, or followed up publishers on providing sales statements. Moreover, in the period between 1944 and 1957, monetary transfers and international transactions were made difficult in France by recurrent devaluations and the control of exchanges. Cottenet highlights the role of agents as brokers and fiduciaries, signaling new devaluations and sometimes correcting the specified exchange rates, handling the money transfers or opening special accounts for their clients. Thus, as publishing became increasingly internationalized, the co-agents’ new responsibilities made them ever more useful to their partners.

In her conclusion, Cottenet gives an overview of the improvements in the international protection and regulation of the transatlantic book trade that followed the period under study, starting with the Universal Copyright Convention (UCC) of 1952 and the greater scrutiny paid to rights and payments with the advent of paperbacks, book clubs, and the *Reader’s Digest* in France. The 1957 *Code de la propriété intellectuelle* and the 1977 model for a standard contract proposed by the *Syndicat national de l’édition* and the *Société des Gens de Lettres* helped bring French practices in line with those in United States. As concerns the findings in her study, she insists that agents and co-agents had a part in shaping the transatlantic book trade as economic, political and cultural mediators. Perhaps the most interesting remarks on Hoffman as agent are to be found in this conclusion: Cottenet qualifies the tenor of his role as cultural mediator at a time when “French *intellectuels* [...] viewed American mass culture as noxious and contaminating” and stresses how “he reflected the modernization and rationalization of US publishing to French publishers” (178-179).

Cottenet’s work, centering on the “How” of literary exchanges, is at the crossroads between Cold War and Cultural Diplomacy studies, international histories of print, and more specialized, mainly Anglo-Saxon, accounts on agents. It abounds with facts and examples, the result of Cottenet’s archival work in France and in the United States, and cites correspondence examined for the first time. As there is little scholarship on literary agents, it will be indispensable to academics specialized in publishing history, and specifically of American fiction in France. As for readers who are simply interested in literature, the author’s approach and language are pedagogical enough for her drift to be obvious, and they will find many of her examples relevant. For *Literary Agents in the Transatlantic Book Trade* recreates an era of heightened transatlantic literary exchanges and provides an elucidating account of the decisive role played by what is still a little-known profession in France.

A propos de l'auteur

Amélie Moisy is Associate Professor in Applied Languages at the Université Paris-Est Créteil and a member of the TIES/IMAGER research group. She is the author of a doctoral thesis, a book and numerous articles on Thomas Wolfe; her research and publications also bear on his Southern contemporaries among the Scribner authors, and on 21st century Southern literature.

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