

The queen of TV bookclubs Amanda Ross

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As Amanda Ross launches her new TV Book Club, the woman who made Richard & Judy the most powerful couple in publishing talks to Alex Clark



Photograph: Eamonn McCabe

Amanda Ross: 'The idea is that the people on the sofa are just like you at home, in that they are the book club.'

When I meet Amanda Ross, joint managing director of Cactus TV and former producer of *Richard & Judy*, I feel I have to get something out of the way. I tell her that I was part of a panel that, four years ago, placed her at the head of the Observer newspaper's list of the 50

most influential people in publishing, above such industry power players as Gail Rebeck and Tim Hely Hutchinson, and above writers Jacqueline Wilson and Kazuo Ishiguro and cultural commentators such as Jenni Murray. As the creator of Richard Madeley and Judy Finnigan's book club, then entering its third year and a familiar part of their Channel 4 chat show, Ross not only had a huge success on her hands, she had also had a profound impact on the British publishing landscape; by then, writers, publishers and booksellers not only wanted books to garner reviews and prizes; they wanted them to "do a *Richard & Judy*". Have your work chewed over by the golden couple and their celebrity guests on the studio sofa and, perhaps even more importantly, earn the right to have their sticker plastered on your book and, everyone knew, you had hit the big time.

But for Ross, the seemingly unstoppable rise of the book clubs – there was also an annual "Summer Reads" campaign – was not without its downside. Over the past few years, she has attracted a fair amount of criticism, ranging from concern that the programme's enormous sales uplift applies to a limited number of titles and reduces the market for other books, to more ad feminam accusations – that she exercises undue influence on publishers' choices of book jackets and publication schedules, or that she is defiantly unliterary. She is not, it is true, everyone's idea of a publishing "type": she is strikingly friendly and informal when we meet, but she also exudes a sort of no-nonsense steeliness; at one point, in a humorous description of literary discourse, she waves her hand and says "Proust blah blah", which is not the way the literati would generally allow themselves to be heard speaking. She openly declares

that she doesn't like the word literary and she rarely reads book reviews. In that context, was being dubbed publishing's most influential figure a hindrance rather than a help?

"I loved that!" she cries. "It's one of the nicest things that's ever happened to me." She describes going to have her picture taken, along with others on the list, with nobody having any idea of how it was ranked. She found herself being photographed late in the day, alongside writer Sarah Waters: "I said, right, that means I'm number 50 then, and she said, yeah that means we're 49 and 50 . . . Then she was really high up and I was number one, and it was hilarious. I'd come back and said to my husband: 'It's brilliant to even be on the list when it's not my industry at all, I'm sure I'm number 50.' I was really delighted. To be recognised for anything, even if it's not your proper job, is a lovely thing."

Ross's "proper job" is the making of television programmes and, together with her husband Simon Ross, brother to Jonathan and Paul Ross, she runs the production company that brought us *Richard & Judy* and currently shepherds *Saturday Kitchen* and North-east cooking duo *The Hairy Bikers* on to our screens. She is at pains to point out that she regards herself as neither a literary expert nor an industry insider and expresses irritation with a "terrible, horrible" trade website that described her, as she points out "in inverted commas", as a publishing guru. "I've never said that about myself. All I say is, my job is entertainment, that's all I've ever done, so I seem to be good at finding things that are entertaining – well, surprise, surprise. It's my business to find things that are entertaining, and I've used all of those skills and applied them to books." Those skills have transformed the bookselling industry.

Back in 2004, it wasn't that easy to persuade TV bosses that books could deliver prime-time viewing; the view at Channel 4, Ross says, was that "books are really boring on telly". But she thought otherwise: not only was she an enthusiastic reader herself, she had seen the impact of Oprah Winfrey's TV book club in America and, even more significantly, had become aware that every time a book featured on *Richard & Judy* it shot up the bookselling charts, to the extent that retailers such as Waterstone's and Amazon had begun to ask the show to tip them the wink if a book was going to appear. Figuring that the strand could work as long as it was lively and varied, Ross launched *Richard & Judy's Book Club*, selecting 10 books that the hosts and their celebrity guest readers would discuss over 10 weeks, with viewers eventually voting for a winner. At the same time, her company agreed to televise the British Book Awards, hitherto an industry-only affair, at which the *Richard & Judy Book of the Year* award would be presented, garnering sponsorship from the chocolate makers Galaxy and stripping from public view the more trade-related prizes.

The impact was virtually immediate; in that first year, Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*, which won the public vote, and Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea* saw a dramatic increase in sales. *Star of the Sea*, in particular, has become a byword for the show's effect: prior to its appearance, and despite a favourable critical reception, it had enjoyed only modest sales; it ended up selling well in excess of half a million copies. Other writers to benefit have included Audrey Niffenegger, Victoria Hislop, Khaled Hosseini and Kate Mosse, whose novel *Labyrinth* has sold more than a million copies. When Sebold picked up her prize at the British Book awards, she was reported as describing the experience as better than winning an Oscar.

Kate Summerscale, whose prizewinning non-fiction investigation of a Victorian murder, *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher*, featured on the programme last year, told me: "The book was already selling well, but I knew this would bring it new readers. I liked the way the book club mixed up literary and commercial books, and fiction and non-fiction." Last autumn, the *Bookseller* magazine analysed the effect that the *Richard & Judy* clubs have had on the book trade. They estimate that the hundred books featured over

the course of six years have sold 30.8 million copies between them in the UK, representing a consumer spend of £183.3m. Given that the entire high street accounts for approximately £900m-worth of books a year, that is no small feat.

With the club's immediate success, Ross says, everything changed. Her instinct, though, was to keep faith with her original idea, based on the central principle that the viewing audience had to be able to mirror the club's progress on screen. "The problem with most other book shows," she explains, "is that they have too many books and they cover them far too briefly. You can't take in a whole book in three minutes, you've got to do it absolutely properly, so we decided that we'd do it in a book-club type format, because book clubs were starting to be popular. Ironically, when it was a success, Channel 4 were saying 'more, more, more', and I said no, we have to be careful and we have to strategise and have campaigns and then it will have a proper impact. People will lose interest if you do it too often, because you can't keep up with reading."

The identification with her audience is at the heart of Ross's success. Last year, having moved from Channel 4 to digital TV channel Watch, Richard and Judy disappeared from our television sets – for the time being at least. Unwilling to see the demise of what she describes as "my baby, my passion", Ross embarked on a new project, turning a 12-minute segment into a full-length programme. *The TV Book Club* will begin airing tomorrow on More 4, with Monday repeats on Channel 4. The first novel up for discussion will be *The Little Stranger* by Sarah Waters, which was shortlisted for the Man Booker; other featured authors include Nick Hornby, Sarah Dunant and writer of *The Wire* George Pelecanos. In keeping with Ross's aim to introduce viewers to less familiar names, the list also features work by debut crime writer Belinda Bauer and a first novel by doctor Abraham Verghese, *Cutting for Stone*, which Ross lets slip is her favourite (not only is it the quirkiest but, she explains, she also loved *ER*). Ross has recruited five celebrity presenters: comedians Jo Brand and Dave Spikey, actors Nathaniel Parker and Laila Rouass and presenter Gok Wan. "The idea is that the people on the sofa are just like you at home, in that they are the book club. In a book club, someone chooses the books for you; that's what my panel and I do, we choose the books for you. That's the beauty of it, you're given something to read that you wouldn't necessarily read, and then you're free to think and say and do about it whatever you like."

Ross clearly believes in saying what she thinks and encouraging her audiences to do likewise. She appears unafraid of exposing gaps in her knowledge, freely admitting that, before she started the book club, she had no idea that retailers charged publishers for including their titles in special promotions or placing them at the front of store. Neill Denny, editor-in-chief of the Bookseller magazine, which last year gave Ross their award for outstanding contribution to bookselling, comments that, to the somewhat genteel world of literary publishing, she was "a bit of a shock to the system"; but, as he wryly notes, "as soon as it became apparent how much commercial power she wielded, every publisher in London wanted to be her best friend".

Her detachment from the critical establishment and from review culture stems in part from her belief that there is "a different agenda" at play, one in which reviewers concerned with displaying their knowledge have on occasion left her feeling "stupid". She recalls the snootiness of the critics who were "a bit rude about us . . . a daytime show picking literary authors", and the sense of vindication she felt when [David Mitchell's](#) *Cloud Atlas*, an undeniably complex and allusive work of fiction, won the public vote in the club's second year. "My readers proved them wrong," she says.

She is also proud of her independence. Ofcom regulations mean that there can be no financial transactions attached to her selections – she once sent back a pair of Eurostar tickets that arrived with a

book – and, in consequence, she has to be careful not to feature too many titles by one publisher, although she attempts to remain blind to a book's provenance until as late as possible in the selection process. Each publisher or imprint can submit up to six titles, making for an initial haul of around 800 titles, which are then sifted by Ross and a rotating group of three readers, all drawn from the Cactus staff. She also, she says, frequently slips books to other members of the team who seem as though they might have an eye.

She is clear that she would like to be perceived as being supportive of the publishing industry, which she feels is "under a lot of pressure"; at the same time, she throws her hands up in the air when she receives identikit submissions designed to echo her previous selections, or when covers appear that clearly mimic those she has chosen before: "I really don't understand that; I never want to read the same thing twice, I want to be broadened, I want to see lots of different things. People are so much more adventurous than a lot of institutions give us credit for."

Ross's own sense of literary adventurousness started early. Growing up in Essex through what she describes as not a very happy childhood, she could read and write by the time she went to school, and had exhausted the school's library by the time her mother joined a book club on her behalf. At 11, she was making her way through Dickens and fantasising that the lime-kilns in *Great Expectations* were just near where she lived. She went on to study drama at university and puts her frustratingly slow reading speed down to the fact that "when you're reading a book you can be all the characters".

For seven years, Ross explains ruefully, she has not read a classic or any book that couldn't qualify as a potential pick. She has, she says, a large pile of books ready for her retirement. When I suggest that she doesn't look as though she's planning to retire any time soon, she only-half agrees, pointing to the seismic changes in the television industry and the fact that, as the head of a company, she rarely gets time now to do the bits of the job that initially attracted her.

Would she ever start her own publishing company? "I'm too old to start in another industry," she laughs. "I have been approached by various publishers, because they think I've got an eye, they think that I understand what makes a populist book. But I make television programmes, I'm a TV producer, that's what I do and it's wonderful for me to be involved in the publishing world, because they are so much nicer than TV people . . . when I say this to people in publishing, they think they're all really ruthless, they can't believe it, but boy! It's a whole different ball game."

Whatever her plans for the distant future, she is adamant that she will always retain a connection with the book club, which she says is one of the best things that ever happened to her. "Reading is a sacred occupation, in that it's completely democratic; you can be anyone when you're reading, you can be anywhere, you can travel the whole world without leaving your armchair. It's a sacred occupation, but there shouldn't be any limits to what you read; and there should be no boundaries to what you feel you can read."