



Journal of Co-operative Studies

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How to cite this article:

Bibby, A. (2023). The Gritstone Publishing co-operative model, seven years on. *Journal of Co-operative Studies*, 56(1), 26-28.

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<https://www.ukscs.coop/pages/journal-of-co-operative-studies>

The Gritstone Publishing Cooperative Model, Seven Years On

Andrew Bibby

This short paper provides an update on Gritstone Publishing Cooperative, which is Britain's first publishing company that is an author-run co-operative. It specialises in both fiction and non-fiction relating to the landscape and countryside. The paper begins with an overview of the benefits of the co-operative business model to self-employed workers, particularly as a solution to precarious work and lack of workers' rights. It then outlines the marketing co-operative model adopted by Gritstone, as well as providing an update on governance structures and recent successes, including launching the Gritstone Social History imprint and the mutual support authors give each other.

There has been interest in recent years in the co-operative movement regarding potential ways that the co-operative business model might be utilised by the self-employed. The key report in this regard was *Not alone: Trade union and co-operative solutions for self-employed workers*, written by Pat Conaty, Alex Bird and Philip Ross and published in 2016.

The authors' starting point for their report was the significant number of self-employed workers in Britain (well over four million at the time), and in particular the issues faced by many self-employed workers finding themselves without conventional employment rights and being forced into a situation of 'precarity'.

The report suggested that there were considerable opportunities for the British trade union movement to organise among the self-employed, using the experiences of several unions in mainland Europe as well as the established practice by British unions such as the National Union of Journalists and Equity in taking freelancers into membership. But the report then went on to suggest that there were potential co-operative solutions too, and mention was made of co-operatively run agencies in Britain being used, for example, by supply teachers, music teachers and actors, as well as some longer-established co-operatives formed, among others, by taxi drivers and driving instructors. Again, the report was able to draw on experiences in other countries, including the *Coopératives d'Activités et d'Emploi* concept in France.

Not alone came out slightly too early to include mention of Gritstone Publishing Cooperative Ltd, which was — and is still — the only publishing business in Britain to be co-operatively run by its author-members. Gritstone (set up in late 2016) came about after four of us, all earning our living professionally from our writing, discussed informally whether there were ways that we could take more control of the publishing process which brought our books to market — and whether by doing so we could capture for ourselves a little more of the value added by the contribution of authors to newly published books. Publishing as an industry has changed fast in recent years and the financial rewards for many authors have been shrinking. The regular Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society survey of authors' income suggested that in 2006 median author earnings were a meagre £12,330. In 2022, the median had fallen even further, to £7,000 (Thomas et al., 2022).

I offered an introduction to the thinking behind Gritstone Publishing in the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* (Bibby, 2018) a short time after the co-operative was established. As I explained then, Gritstone makes use of the familiar marketing co-operative model, widely used by farmers in collectively controlling the way that their produce reaches their markets, as well as by artists and craftspeople selling their work through joint shops or websites. In an identical way, Gritstone collectivises the marketing aspect of book publishing. The co-operative as an entity does not itself oversee the production and printing of our titles, which is something which individual members handle for themselves. Its role rather is to provide a shared imprint and a shared website through which the books written by Gritstone members can find their market. Gritstone effectively provides a half-way house between self-publishing (once frowned on, but

now a relatively common way for authors to produce their books) and conventional publishing businesses.

We have grown slowly but steadily since the co-operative was legally established (using fully mutual co-operative rules under the Companies Act 2006 — this was felt to be quicker and more flexible than using the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act 2014), and have increased our membership from the initial four to the current seven members. The number of books bearing the Gritstone co-operative name has also grown very steadily, and has now reached twenty-one titles. In the process we have widened a little the subject areas of books in our list. We remain primarily a venture publishing books on the countryside, the outdoors, landscape, conservation, and natural history and we also remain strongly rooted in the north of England, where all members live. However in 2022, the co-operative took the decision to launch a new imprint, Gritstone Social History, and I was very pleased to be able to get this new imprint under way with my recent book *These Houses are Ours: Co-operative and Community-led Housing Alternatives, 1870-1919*. It feels appropriate that a book about early co-operative housing should come out through a co-operative.

Gritstone books find their readers partly through our website (www.gritstonecoop.co.uk), which includes conventional e-commerce facilities, but also through traditional bookselling outlets. We use an established book trade distributor who in turn supplies to independent bookshops, to Waterstones, to Amazon, and also to the main trade wholesaler Gardners Books. Given the large number of new books published each year (perhaps around 200,000 in Britain alone), marketing remains by far the hardest challenge for any publisher, large or small, and we are conscious that it is still not as easy to come across our books as we would like. Nevertheless, Spring 2023 saw the launch of two titles which have already done very well, Eileen Jones's (2023) *p is for parkrun* (on the Saturday morning open-to-all just-turn-up 5K parkrun phenomenon) and Chris Goddard's (2023) first volume of what will become a four volume guide to the brand-new national *The England Coast Path*. These books are lavishly illustrated and, like all the titles which come out under the Gritstone imprint, professionally produced and printed.

The co-operative has developed what we think are strong internal governance structures, with roles shared between the members. Co-operative meetings take place about every three months, usually face-to-face in West Yorkshire (although Zoom proved very useful during the COVID-19 lockdown), and these provide an opportunity not just to ensure the effective running of the business but also for members to discuss their forthcoming work. Writing is of course a solitary pursuit. Being in a co-operative with other writers provides a supportive environment to share ideas and difficulties. Indeed, the guidelines for Gritstone which the co-operative has agreed include one objective as being “to encourage members to take an interest in each other's work and to offer informal support and solidarity”.

This support is something which writers can no longer rely on from commercial publishers. As one of the co-operative's members puts it:

In my limited experience of working with a large mainstream publisher, the business culture is shifting away from seeing the author as a key member of a supportive team, and more as a supplier (of words).

There is much less constructively critical support than in the past and less likelihood of a sustained relationship (however good your writing) if your last book is not commercially successful, he says, adding: “Our co-operative structure and small size enable us to retain some of those ‘old ways’”.

A glance at our annual accounts on the Companies Register very quickly establishes that the costs of running the co-operative are modest. The co-operative deducts a small commission (at present 5%) from website sales before passing the income directly to members, and this has proved adequate in covering costs. Members meet the direct design and print costs of their books themselves, and also keep for themselves any sales income they achieve which has not

been brought about through Gritstone's website. The emphasis has been on keeping everything as simple as possible.

Although as a fully mutual co-operative Gritstone only handles books written by its own members, we feel that — seven years in — we have already a strong backlist of titles, one which any small mainstream publisher would be happy to have. We regularly discuss our future strategy, and we anticipate that the co-operative will continue to grow steadily and organically; when appropriate we will certainly consider approaches from other professional writers interested in joining the co-operative. Our growth from four members to five, then six and now seven members has strengthened our practice and secured a strong foundation for the future.

In essence, then, we feel that we have a co-operative business model which is definitely working very effectively for us — indeed (though there is a similar authors' co-operative operating in the US) we are just a little surprised that no other British authors have yet to decide to follow the same path.

The Author

Andrew Bibby is a writer and journalist, with a particular interest in the co-operative model. His earlier book, *All Our Own Work* (Merlin, 2015), is an account of early British productive co-operatives, focusing on the celebrated co-operative textile mill in Hebden Bridge which was run by its workers. His writings on co-operative business can be accessed at <http://www.andrewbibby.com/coops.html>. His most recent book *These houses are ours: Co-operative and community-led housing alternatives, 1870-1919* is reviewed in this issue of the *Journal*.

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