



Book review: Being a Successful Interpreter: Adding Value and Delivering Excellence

Jonathan Downie's book re-examines interpreters' business and professional practices in an ever-changing world.

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Being a Successful Interpreter: Adding Value and Delivering Excellence

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Jonathan Downie has produced the first ever CPD book for conference interpreters - all the existing literature being aimed at students, trainers or researchers. And for that and other reasons, it's a must read. Downie suggests we rethink such basics as our attitude to continued training; how we interact with our associations; how we see and sell our service to customers; and how we eat. It's thought-provoking and in places radical stuff.

The book is split into 10 chapters in each of which Downie puts forward ideas that might already be commonplace in other industries but which are nothing short of revolutionary in conference interpreting (and I can only speak for CI). They cover a surprisingly broad range of interesting and useful topics - training, marketing, associations are obvious, but nutrition, branding and humour less so. In each chapter Downie sets out his own ideas for change and then backs them up with an interview with an interpreter who is also an expert in that particular field. And the list of interviewees is a very good panorama of knowledgeable and interesting interpreters, some even well known in our little world. Others less so. There is Elisabet Tiselius on expertise, Ebru Diriker on research, Judy and Dagmar Jenner on marketing, Matthew Perret on humour and more. Many of them are AIIC members by the way!

Downie's main messages are that interpreters should: (1) see themselves as a business and a brand that adds value for their client; (2) train & improve their core skills of interpreting rather than just ancillary skills or learning new languages, and (3) work together to do these things in communities of interpreters, large and small.

But actually every one of the ten chapters could be seen as the springboard for a much wider debate about an issue that there isn't space for here. All of these can be done better, Downie argues, if you're eating well, fit and healthy and able to have a laugh about it from time to time. And that is a great

message.

But the goals of Downie's book actually go much further than the title suggests. If enough of us follow his lead then not only will we be better interpreters but interpreting will be a better profession. And that too is a great message.

In this it seems like Downie might be at the interface between two generations of interpreters. He's old enough to understand the old hands and young enough to appreciate the youngsters (a term generously applied to anyone under 35 in this profession.). Initiatives like InterpretTimeBank and Speechpool; the steady increase in further training courses available; and the trickle of blog posts that show interpreters describing themselves as businesses do suggest that in this book Downie reflects a real movement.

The book is thought provoking, revolutionary and inspiring but in places it's also infuriating.

In the very first pages Downie talks about "AIIC standard rates" which haven't existed for 20+ years, and in Chapter 2, in a brief foray into initial training, he proposes "associations putting their stamp of approval on excellent courses" apparently unaware of the AIIC Schools Directory.

Some of you will also find Downie's repeated mantra of "adding value" grates, not least of all because the one concrete example he gives - of working out what the speaker was trying to achieve in what context - seemed to me to equate to good preparation. Downie also repeatedly talks about interpreters needing to break out of a model in which we are "neutral" and "invisible" - terms with which I just couldn't identify. And he doesn't define these terms for the reader nor explain where this idea comes from.

All that being said, this is a book that needed to be written, and needs to be read. I hope it's the first of many continuing and professional development (CPD) books, be it by Downie or others. Downie has brought together many minor, interesting but often unnoticed threads in interpreting and woven them into a manifesto for the future.

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