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Books. Forgan tells *The Bookseller*: “We’re working most closely with OpenAI [the company that created ChatGPT]. Often the techniques for them translate pretty well to [other AI assistants] Claude and Gemini.”

ChatGPT is the fastest-adopted consumer technology application in history, so it’s hardly surprising that people might start to ask it to help them find books. Experts seem to agree that the next iteration of AI will be ‘agentic’, meaning that we will give our AIs enough information about ourselves, including access to our money, to cut out the digital processes we’re accustomed to, such as visiting an online shop.



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Fox and Fable’s Robin Fang

Lee Dibble, marketing and communications director at Pan Macmillan, says: “It depends on how long it takes for consumers to feel comfortable to allow AI agents to buy things on their behalf, but it probably won’t be that long. People feel quite uncomfortable about it now, but as we trust [AIs] more and more, it will be a massive shift. We may not even visit retailer sites. We’ll be saying: ‘I want this particular product’, and the AI agent will go and find it for you, tell you where the cheapest one is, and then you say: ‘Great, buy it.’ It’ll be bots talking to each other, then buying books.”

Most digital information about books comes from metadata files called ONIX, filled out by publishers during distribution to retailers, wholesalers and libraries. ONIX is an XML-based international system consisting of tags of description, genre and other carefully put-together, important details. Until the dawn of AI, the onus was on Search Engine Optimisation (SEO). The question now is how to make ONIX best speak the language of AI.

Fox and Fable is getting in early on a selling technology that is conversational and, potentially, well placed to take advantage of an agentic future even in a space crowded with established retailers. Its founders admit that while using a chatbot to find books is currently likely to send you to Amazon, much of this digital territory remains up for grabs.

Fang tells *The Bookseller*: “Our website is optimised for AEO (Answer Engine Optimisation), and we focus more research on what works than other retailers. Many retailers receive ONIX metadata [from publishers], but not all make that data available to AI search agents or optimise it properly for them.”

procurement, Robin Fang, graduated from the London School of Economics last year. Both men also hold senior positions at Telemachus, a “venture factory” describing itself as a collection of “business units”, with the objective of taking “inefficient businesses and cloning them from scratch using LLMs”.

So far, Fox and Fable, which sells books directly to consumers, but also has a warehouse in Leighton Buzzard and sells wholesale to bookshops, has spent more than £754,000 buying 236,000 books, and says it has built relationships with 33 publishers, including Pan Macmillan, Simon & Schuster and Walker

## Feature

# How AI is driving more customers than social media for one bookshop

With AI assistants shaping how readers discover titles online, venture-backed start-up Fox and Fable is betting that ‘answer engines’ could become publishing’s next crucial sales channel

Digital bookshop Fox and Fable started trading a year ago. On the surface, it looks like any other bookseller – but unlike most independent retailers, its founders claim to have secured “a few million” in venture capital backing (mostly from Seedcamp and Backed VC) and work directly with OpenAI and other tech companies to help Large Language Models (LLMs) recommend its books to consumers.

Fox and Fable’s CEO Ruairidh Forgan graduated from the University of Cambridge three years ago with a physics degree. Its head of



Robin Fang, Fox and Fable’s head of procurement (far left), and with colleagues Arthur and Aish (left)

Meryl Halls, managing director of the Booksellers Association, says AI cannot replicate bookshops’ appeal

outstripping sales from social platforms. “We’ve seen a 400% rise month-on-month from ChatGPT-referred sessions of people going on ChatGPT, typing something in, and coming to our website because it’s been linked. This means it’s by far our fastest-growing channel – above paid social, above TikTok or Instagram shops. And, of course, these consumers are much more likely to convert because they’ve been recommended,” Fang says.

Publishing might have been an unwitting early battleground in the development of AI when tech companies began either licensing or using pirated works to train LLMs, but book-selling is set to open up another front. Amazon recently killed its Rufus chatbot in favour of Alexa for Shopping, and it doesn’t allow third-party LLMs to crawl it, meaning the information it contains will be limited off-platform as this space develops.

The wider implications for retail of the predicted shift in consumer behaviour linked to chatbots remain to be seen, but Meryl Halls, managing director of the Booksellers Association (BA), is confident that independent bookshops will endure. “The BA recognises that, as with any major technological shift, consumers, businesses and booksellers will ultimately make their own choices about how and to what extent they engage with AI. What gives us confidence is the proven ability of bricks-and-mortar bookshops to adapt and evolve,” she says.

Halls adds: “At a time when many people are seeking meaningful offline connection in an increasingly digital world, bookshops provide something unique, personal and irreplaceable. That experience cannot be replicated by Amazon, algorithms or AI. The continued growth of independent bookshops, with numbers expected to reach a 15-year high in 2026, demonstrates the enduring value readers place on these spaces.”

Fox and Fable’s founders are aware of negative attitudes to AI in their dealings with publishers who, they claim, “don’t really know what to do with us”. Forgan and Fang are clear that their approach doesn’t require the ingestion of a copyrighted work, and that ONIX metadata is enough to feed the LLMs. Under US copyright law, the transformative ingestion of entire books might be viewed as “fair use”, but this isn’t the case under UK law. Either way, Fang and Forgan seem to understand the wariness around AI in the book trade. “I think AI use in publishing is dubious and morally a bit unsure, but I’m very pro AI use in bookselling and getting the books out there,” says Fang. “I think it’s great.”

At a time when parts of the industry are already sounding the alarm about the death of BookTok, the narrowing of space for book reviews or other coverage in the media, and the sheer volume of books being published, Generative Engine Optimisation (GEO) is a huge priority for publishers. The idea of some retailers treating ONIX data in a way that is more or less useful to LLMs for specific shops, however, has been met with scepticism.

Graham Bell, executive director at EDItEUR, the trade standards body for ONIX metadata, says: “If [publishers] are updating metadata for GEO, then almost certainly they’re doing it for all the retailers. That metadata will be widely distributed, including through Nielsen. I’d be a bit disappointed if one bookstore was saying: ‘Update your metadata backlog and only send it to us.’ I’d be surprised too if publishers agreed to do this. Obviously their interest would be to get improved metadata out to everybody.” A further question Bell raises is: why wouldn’t publishers simply share their ONIX data directly with LLMs?

For publishers, the rise of bookselling via LLMs is an opportunity to ‘surface’ backlog and understand consumer behaviour. “It is a really high priority for us,” says Dibble. “We’re doing loads of work to make sure that our books and authors are visible in answer engines – that’s ChatGPT, AI mode on Gemini, Perplexity, all of them. They all have slightly different flavours of what they like.” Dibble confirms that while Pan Macmillan is working with Fox and Fable, they do not have a “special relationship” and are not sending “individualised metadata”.

She adds: “For us, metadata has never been a kind of ‘one and done’. I think you probably find that for most of the big publishers, and probably lots of the small ones too; it’s a



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Booksellers Association MD Meryl Halls

constant evolving, re-energising of your metadata and the product data, so that it kind of works with all the algorithms to be visible. Now with LLMs, it’s a whole new ball game.”

Fox and Fable is a nascent business not old enough to have filed its first annual accounts, but it says its LLM-based search referrals is



QUESTIONS Matilda Battersby