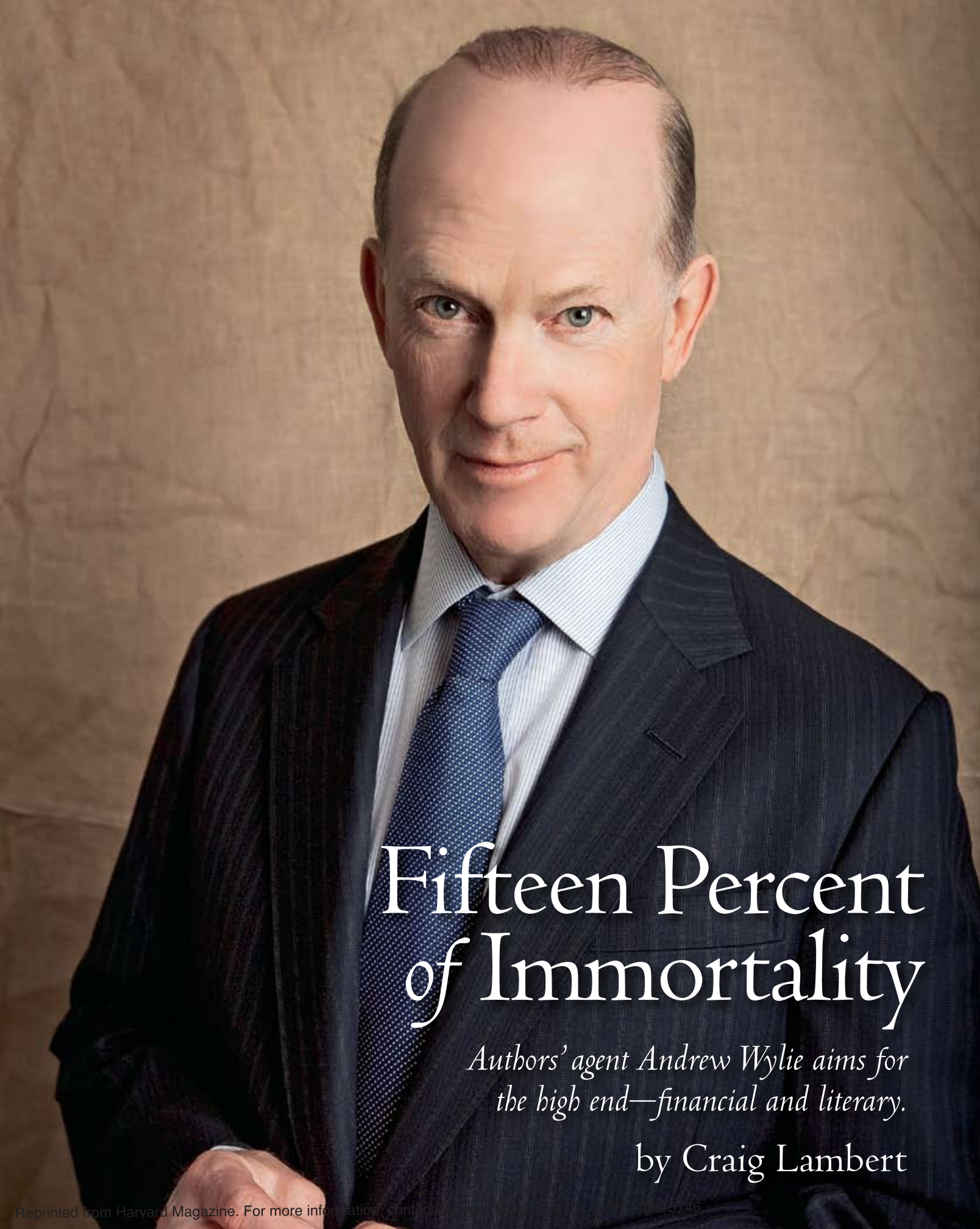

Fifteen Percent *of* Immortality

Authors' agent Andrew Wylie aims for the high end—financial and literary.

by Craig Lambert

All book publishing is divided into two parts: frontlist and backlist. Frontlist books are newly published titles; the large publishers generally roll out two crops annually, the "spring" and the "fall" lists, much as fashion houses produce spring and fall collections. Backlist books are previously published titles that are still in print. Traditionally, the way to build a profitable book-publishing business has been to cultivate a strong backlist: the up-front expenses of acquiring, editing, and producing a book have been taken care of, and so all that remains is selling units from inventory at a profit. Yet the frontlist is where the sizzle is, if not the steak. Nearly all the media attention that the book industry receives dwells on new titles or the astonishing advances paid to authors like John Grisham (and non-authors like Larry King or Sarah Palin).

Wylie upends this pattern. Ignoring the frontlist hype, he has sought to make accomplished writers profitable by concentrating on the backlist. "Shakespeare is more important than Danielle Steel in large part because his work is more lasting," he explains. "So you have to negotiate with an eye toward capturing that long-term value."

His agency works to strengthen and maintain the value of authors like Calvino and Bellow, for example, by getting publishers to keep their works in print. It's a multinational effort. Book contracts in the United States typically remain in force as long as the copyright does, but a foreign contract is a license to publish a certain book for a specific length of time, typically seven to 10 years. "So every seven years, Philip Roth has a negotiation in Spain, Italy, France, Germany, and so on," Wylie explains. "And he sells a lot of books there—a Roth book often sells 200,000 to 300,000 copies in France, for example. You multiply that by the 40-odd books he's written and you have quite a negotiation." (Wylie also triggered a mini-renaissance for *New Yorker* icon William Maxwell near the end of the author's life, with a spate of re-issues and consequent reviews of his books. "I don't think his [Wylie's] motives were mercenary at all," says author David Updike '79, a longtime client. "He knew Maxwell was a quality writer whose books deserved to be in the bookstores.")

The power of the backlist proved persuasive to Norman Mailer '43, who was in the market for a new agent after his representative, Scott Meredith, died in 1993. Wylie approached Mailer with a spreadsheet: 12 of Mailer's books had fallen out of print, and his works appeared in 12 languages on average—translating into 144 fallow titles. Say the annual royalties for each approximated $1,000; then their inactivity meant Mailer was sacrificing $144,000 or so per year in royalty income. The careful homework and reasoned argument won Mailer as a long-term client, and the Wylie agency represents Mailer's literary estate today.

"We went after the most important writers in their respective languages," Wylie says, "and we brought to those estates the same discipline of properly assessing the value of the writer's work. What happened was an appreciation in revenue to the Calvino estate of 2,000 percent. More or less the same with [Jorge Luis]

Wylie in his book-lined New York office

Borges. When you make that kind of difference, you recalibrate the priorities of the publishing industry somewhat, so that they place a higher value on work that lasts over time."

When Wylie entered the business, American agents sold overseas rights through a network of sub-agents located in Scandinavia, Italy, Germany, France, and so on. A U.S. agent who had just sold a book to an American publisher would mail its manuscript to each sub-agent and ask them to sell it in his or her territory. "Those sub-agents were flooded with books because they represented a number of American agencies—they had more books than they could read," Wylie says. "They hadn't ever encountered the author, so there was no personal engagement in what they were selling, and so they didn't convey the same enthusiasm. That system didn't work.

"You have to get on a plane and go to Paris and Milan and Munich and Beijing and Tokyo, and get to know the business there as well as you know the business in New York," Wylie continues. "The way you do that is a combination of frequent visits, business meetings, social meetings—lunch and dinner—getting friendly with the people who run these companies, and getting inside the culture of each country. You've got to get on a jet plane every month. It's pretty exhausting." Though the agency has 50 employees, Wylie has done much of that travel himself. He began going to London once a month in 1986 (in 1996 he opened a London office in Bedford Square in a 1775 townhouse with a large garden) and has kept it up ever since, logging a rough total of 1,728,000 air miles to and from England alone.

There are payoffs for the legwork. Philip Roth's revenues, for example, derive roughly 50-50 from the United States and foreign sources. "Many agencies capture the former 50 percent, but they tend to capture only 20 percent of the latter," Wylie says. "We are able to capture that latter 50 percent. So at the start, you're talking about a jump of roughly 30 percent. And there are all sorts of ways to enhance value, country by country. We apply some analysis, and what ordinarily happens is an increase of 300 to 500 percent in revenue." (The agency charges a 15 percent commission domestically today, 20 percent abroad; it was one of the last to work for 10 percent domestically until that proved unsustainable.)

Beyond the results for his authors, Wylie's influence on publishing is controversial. In the pre-Wylie era, for example, an unwritten, gentlemanly rule of agents was that another agent's client was off limits; instead, Wylie applied capitalistic principles that would be routine in nearly any other business. "There aren't many literary agents in New York City who can honestly claim never to have lost a client to Andrew Wylie," wrote Leon Neyfakh '07 in the *New York Observer* this year. (The British press famously dubbed Wylie "The Jackal" in 1995 after Martin Amis deserted his longtime agent, Pat Kavanagh—the wife of Amis's close friend Julian Barnes—for the Wylie agency, which won a reported £500,000 advance for Amis's novel *The Information*.) Wylie's own clients are equally free to leave. "From the beginning, Andrew told me there was no contract, just a handshake," says David Updike. "Either of us was free to terminate the agreement at any time."

While enriching some distinguished authors, Wylie has not always enriched publishers. "Andrew is a friend of mine, and he has a lot of the kind of authors we publish," says Jonathan Galassi '71, president and publisher of Farrar, Straus, and Giroux (see "High Type Culture," November-December 1997, page 38), which probably does more business with Wylie than with any other agency. "We look at the world the same way, in terms of the quality of what we're working with." Still, Galassi believes that "Wylie's strong-arm approach ignores the reality of the publisher's predicament." By pushing hard to keep all the works of major authors in print worldwide, Wylie disregards the fact that "There are too many books that don't have a readership that is constant enough for bookstores to be able to stock them today," Galassi says. "This is what print on demand, online bookstores, and e-books are for." Furthermore, he adds, "Andrew thinks publishers should pay a higher royalty on e-book sales, since we have no printing and distribution costs with them. But publishers often lose money up front and make it up on the back end, if the book sells well. What's important is to figure out an equitable sharing of risks and rewards. The publisher and author need each other; they need to cooperate."

Visit harvardmag.com/extras to hear an excerpt from the interview with Andrew Wylie

The money Wylie lands for writers has to come from somewhere, and there's a strong perception in the industry that he tends to move his authors toward the larger and richer houses. Not necessarily, Wylie says: "The people who care the most about a book offer the most for it. We do a disproportionate amount of business with [Éditions] Gallimard, for example, though they are far from the biggest publisher in France."

Wylie generally represents established writers; the discovery of new novelists and poets often rests with smaller publishers who pay small advances and print only a few thousand copies of a book. Yet these small presses do the legwork of scouting talent, pay for translations if needed, and put heart and soul into cultivating an author's work; large publishing houses and major literary agents need only read the reviews. When a small-press author develops a following, he or she often moves to a bigger publisher with more money, much like major-league baseball stars who leave small-market teams for rich franchises. "We publish people no one has ever heard of," says Barbara Epler '83, editor-in-chief and publisher of New Directions, the small, distinguished literary press founded by James Laughlin '36 (see "Cantos and the Stem Christie," January-February 1995, page 56). New Directions first brought into English translation the work of Wylie clients Roberto Bolaño and W.G. Sebald, for example, who have since become world-renowned authors. "We're like a pearl bed," says Epler, "and you have to keep the oysters alive."

In the house in Sudbury, Massachusetts, where Wylie grew up, surrounded by farmland, the largest room was a library with a fireplace and thousands of books—including, "memorably, three sets of Voltaire—and Voltaire wrote a *lot*," he recalls. "I'd curl up in front of the fire under a blanket and read. There wasn't much talking, only reading. It was relaxing and enjoyable." Wylie has always found the presence of books comforting; he maintains nearly identical libraries in his home on Park Avenue and his place in the Hamptons, to which he and his family decamp for the summer—he runs the agency from its fully equipped office. (Wylie's wife, Camilla, is a serious potter; they have two daughters, Erica, 25, and Alexandra, 16. Nikolas, 39, the son of Wylie's first marriage, works at the agency.)

Conversation among Wylie, his par- *(please turn to page 83)*

FIFTEEN PERCENT OF IMMORTALITY *(continued from page 47)*

ents, and his five sisters involved a contest of "how verbally strong you were. It was all about language and expression, wit, verbal intelligence. Dinner conversations were like sparring matches." Like his father, Wylie entered St. Paul's School, but unlike him, found it "quite snobbish, full of attitudes." His entrepreneurial spirit bloomed, though: he started a small business in cahoots with a cabdriver to ferry St. Paul's students to Boston and supply them, illegally, with liquor. The school dismissed him in 1965, but that didn't preclude his acceptance at Harvard.

In college, he took six courses per semester and lived alone, off-campus, in Somerville; he worked very hard and graduated in three years. Wylie studied with former Emerson lecturer on English literature Robert Lowell (see "The Brahmin Rebel," May-June 2004, page 39) and Harry Levin, then Babbitt professor of comparative literature, whom he persuaded to be his tutor—in part by reciting a long passage from *Finnegans Wake,* of which he says he had learned 17 pages by heart. Albert Lord, then Porter professor of Slavic and comparative literature, taught him to sing Homer in ancient Greek, a talent Wylie used years later to woo and win his first client, I.F. Stone, author of *The Trial of Socrates.*

In the early 1970s, Wylie moved to New York. He drove a taxicab and opened a bookstore in Greenwich Village with his own, "very odd" collection of books (e.g., a German scholarly edition of Heraclites) as inventory. "I had two customers," he recalls: "John Cage and Bob Dylan." Eating the free chicken wings at the legendary Max's Kansas City restaurant brought him into the orbit of Andy Warhol, "who had a tremendous influence on me. He expanded and adjusted my notion of what and how an educated person could think; he had a playful, unconventional approach to reality. There was a very other-worldly atmosphere about him." Wylie also met rock songwriter and photographer Lou Reed, who is now a client and is "as good as François Villon, in my opinion." And he published his own poetry, including the 1972 chapbook *Yellow Flowers.* His literary judgment on his own output: "I figured I wasn't destined to be a poet."

In fact, based on his self-analysis, he might be almost genetically destined to represent writers. "I feel I do not have a personality of my own, so I am constantly in search of a personality," he says. "This might be why I am such a dedicated agent! A writer arrives with a fully formed personality and set of beliefs, powerfully expressed. I become so enraptured by their interests, knowledge, and means of expression that nothing can distract me. My ability to transmit the writer's qualities, to persuasively describe them with admiration, is strong because I have this sort of hollow core: I take on the author's identity. If I spend an hour with Susan Sontag and we walk out of the room together, you won't know which one is Susan!"

If, as he says, he assumes near-ownership of his authors' personalities, that may help explain the ferocity Wylie brings to his defense of their literary assets, aggressively protecting the intellectual property of agency clients newly vulnerable in an online world. When the W.H. Auden estate signed on, the poet's entire oeuvre was available free of charge on the Web, in defiance of copyright law; Wylie assigned five people to work round the clock to shut all the sites down. The lapsing of copyright isn't necessarily an obstacle, either. Wylie is now working with the Royal Shakespeare Company, a team of scholars, Random House, Macmillan, and digital producers to create a First Folio edition of Shakespeare. "If you find a hole like this [there was no First Folio in print in English] in the market and make it your own and protect it with a combination of copyright and the trademark of the Royal Shakespeare Company—a definitive performing troupe—then to all intents and purposes, Shakespeare is who you are," Wylie explains. "And you get paid 10 percent for every copy sold.

"If Lewis Carroll and his estate had properly protected his rights, then global vacationers would be headed to Wonderland instead of Disney World and they'd have a more meaningful vacation experience, because Lewis Carroll is more interesting than Walt Disney," he adds. "And if you could capture the value of Shakespeare, monetize and preserve it, then Microsoft and Google would be subsidiaries of the Royal Shakespeare Company. That's the way I want to organize the world." ▽

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Fiction for Mortal Stakes

THE FATWA THAT IRAN ISSUED in response to Salman Rushdie's 1988 novel *The Satanic Verses* affected his agent, Andrew Wylie, directly. "Tehran was sending out teams of people to kill—Rushdie, primarily, but also those associated with him," Wylie relates. "There was lots of information coming in at warp speed. Visiting Rushdie was an excitement in itself, involving unmarked cars and street corners and high-speed drives going the wrong way down streets. It was a period of intensely heightened experience."

It was also "an act of international terror, a nation condemning an individual from another country to death," he continues. "How do you react to that? Do you cave? Do you withdraw the book from publication? Do you hide and hope it goes away? Or do you stand up to it? It's like a hostage crisis, and Rushdie was effectively held hostage. He and I both felt it was critically important for the publishing world—and for freedom of speech—to arrange for the orderly publication of the paperback edition one year after the hardcover publication."

Normally, that paperback would have appeared in the fall of 1989. Instead, the hardcover publisher, Penguin, declined to publish the paperback edition; furthermore, "each and every publisher in New York refused to publish the paperback or even to participate in the publication of the paperback," Wylie says. "There was a lot of fear, some of it for good reason. The Norwegian publisher of the hardcover was shot three times in the back by a hit squad. But he ordered a reprint from his hospital bed. It was one of American publishing's darkest hours, in my view. The cover for the reaction was, 'I can't put my employees at risk.' The fundamental issue, though, was: Is there freedom of speech, or is there not? It was about having the courage of your convictions." The paperback finally appeared in 1992, from a group of publishers styled "The Consortium." Rushdie is now writing a book on the *fatwa* episode.