

# Venice's Mauri School 2021: 'The State of the Book'



In Feature Articles by Porter Anderson / February 18, 2021 / [Leave a Comment](#)



*The trials of 2020 and the outlook for 2021 drive discussions of discoverability, digital, and direct-to-consumer relationships in an unusual iteration of Venice's annual 'School of Booksellers.'*



The island of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice, site of the Scuola per Librai Umberto e Elisabetta Mauri. Image - iStockphoto: Imantsu

By Porter Anderson, Editor-in-Chief | [@Porter\\_Anderson](#)

## 'The Virus Is Still in Charge'

**A**s *Publishing Perspectives* readers will remember, the 38th Scuola per Librai Umberto e Elisabetta Mauri program, a "School of Booksellers," was held at the end of last month in a digital format rather than in its customary venue at Venice's Fondazione Giorgio Cini in the former San Giorgio Monastery.

Titled "The State of the Book in Europe," the event on January 29 drew as many as 1,200 attendees from many parts of the world, an unusual chance for many to get a look at this normally much more exclusive symposium.



We've waited until today (February 18) to bring you highlights from the program's discussions because the organizers, led by Achille and Stefano Mauri, wisely spent some time getting English and Italian subtitles onto the recording of the program to make it understandable to more users. What's more, this year's thoughtful presentation of the day itself included simultaneous translation on Zoom with the fine interpreters Sonia Folini and Susanna Fenzo keeping everyone up to speed.

## Achille Mauri: 'Luxury Is So Therapeutic'

Host Nana Lohrengel, secretary-general of the Umberto and Elisabetta Mauri Foundation, opened the day and handed off to the foundation's chief, Achille Mauri. He described what's normally the boat ride to "the most beautiful island in the world—Palladio and Brunelleschi's San Giorgio

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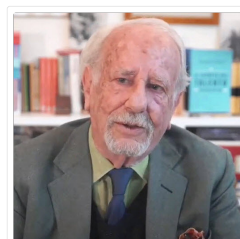
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Maggiore—with “a breakfast of warm pastries” and “a drink of Grignolino,” the red varietal of the Piedmont, “by the labyrinth early in the morning.”

One of the most gracious comments of the entire day came in this brief welcome from Achille Mauri when he explained the special value of the symposium’s traditional, opulent setting. “Luxury,” he said, “is so therapeutic. Zoom can’t compete with that experience.”



Achille Mauri

But Achille and Stefano Mauri’s programming was the next best thing. And as Achille said, it’s critical to take advantage of all perspectives that the industry’s professionals have gathered during the pandemic’s strange interregnum: to learn, innovate, look for new routes forward. Although the assembly couldn’t convene on the island this year, there was a sense of moment, even luxury, to the day in the quality of its speakers and its convivial exchange of voices, some from great distances.

The core of the program, then, was set in three parts.

- Our colleague journalist Giovanna Zucconi moderated a talk about the Italian and international markets with [Ricardo Franco Levi](#), chief of AIE and vice-president of the Federation of European Publishers, and Paolo Ambrosini, head of the booksellers’ association.
- Then “Bookstores as Essential Assets” featured moderator Alberto Ottieri (Messaggerie Italiane); Michael Busch (Thalia); James Daunt (Waterstones, Barnes&Noble); Alberto Rivolta (Feltrinelli); and Ewa Szmidt-Belcarz (Empik Group).
- Lastly, “Solid as a Rock: The Book in a Pandemic World” offered comments from Jesús Badenes (Grupo Planeta); Siv Bublitz (S. Fischer Verlag); Stefano Mauri (Messaggerie Italiane e GeMS); and Arnaud Nourry (Hachette Livres); moderated by *Publishing Perspectives*.

What we’ll do here today is offer you a few of many important points made by the speakers as an outline to reviewing as much of the three-hour program (embedded below) as you’d like.

## At Trittico: ‘We Kept Selling’



At Milan’s Trittico Bookshop, winner of the 15th Luciano and Silvana Mauri Award. Image: UEM

In viewing the newly subtitled event, you’ll find that a clue to the Italian experience of 2020 arrives shortly after Achille Mauri’s welcoming comments, when Pietro Linzalone at Trittico Bookshop in Milan—which won the Luciano e Silvana Mauri Bookshop of the Year Prize—is seen talking briefly about handling the [coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic](#) when it made northern central Italy the first European epicenter of the contagion’s outbreaks.

As the early lockdowns hit, bookseller Linzalone says “We succeeded by drawing not only on our internal resources but also by using the [Libri da Asporto](#) service [a book delivery company] in the beginning. That allowed us to keep selling at a level we never expected,” even while applying for supplemental small-business support.

“We realized it was possible and we kept selling, not just in the store but also by visiting the customers at home.”



Pietro Linzalone

He adds with a smile, “I wouldn’t call it clandestine selling, but we were literally selling books in the street.”

## Books, Discretionary Income, and the Market



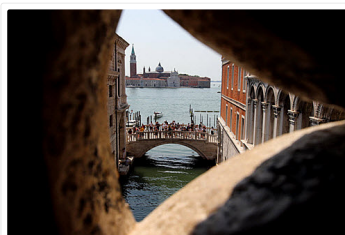
From left above, Giovanna Zucconi and Paolo Ambrosini. Below, Ricardo Franco Levi

Those remarks from bookstore owner Pietro Linzalone echo the relief and scrappy surprise that has warmed the winter for many in the Italian book business. Overall, they're well-positioned, even as "Super Mario" Draghi now takes on the daunting task as the country's new prime minister: trying to stabilize the quaking Italian economy.

Getting into the session with Levi, Ambrosini, and Zucconi, Angelo Tantazzi of the research firm [Prometeia](#) provided a financial assessment and outlook in which he said that discretionary income in Italy was hit by a contraction of 5 percent up and down the country, but state aid had reduced that loss of purchasing power by some 50 percent—obviously a key to Italian consumers' ability to keep buying books.

For commentary from Levi's Association of Italian Publishers ([Associazione Italiana Editori](#), AIE), we'll refer you to [our separate article](#) written shortly after the event on the 29th.

And while the top-line news there was that the Italian book industry saw sales grow by some 2.4 percent last year, Prometeia's Tantazzi does warn in his new presentation that "It's virtually impossible to say how 2021 is going to pan out."



AIE: Italy's Trade Book Publishing Sales **Grow**  
2.4 Percent in 2020

Levi, speaking for AIE, makes the interesting point in his comments that in 2020, while fiction accounted for a third of the market, foreign fiction fared slightly better than Italian fiction. And yet, as has been reflected in many world markets, "The biggest increase during the pandemic year was seen in specialist nonfiction—law, management, literary criticism."

What may be contrary to many other markets' experience is the fall tracked in Italy's children's book sales in 2020. But Levi notes that this decline had been underway for several years prior to the pandemic.

Paolo Ambrosini, for the Italian Booksellers Association ([Associazione Librai Italiani](#), ALI), puts his finger on a key resource that came to the fore in the beleaguered nation's bookshops: "The ability to listen," he says, was "helped by constant dialogue with AIE," the publishers' association."

As *Publishing Perspectives* readers know, [reports on the Italian market](#) have featured programs, initiatives, and government appeals, always made with associated arts organizations. This presents a unified cultural front, on which much of the nation's indispensable tourism industry stands. This would become especially important when the book business addressed government players for critical subsidies and "essential" designations of bookstores amid shopping-center shutdowns, "to remain open, even when areas of Italy were under the strictest lockdown," Ambrosini says.

Added to the change in Rome on February 13—from the Giuseppe Conte government to Draghi's new coalition—there are worrisome unemployment trends, one forecast indicating that Italy's unemployment may rise to 11.6 percent this year, having reached a high of 12.7 percent in 2014.

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**On Amazon in Italy: The US-based retailer has "a clear advantage from a fiscal perspective. This huge operator receives different tax treatment from all other retail companies."**

– Paolo Ambrosini

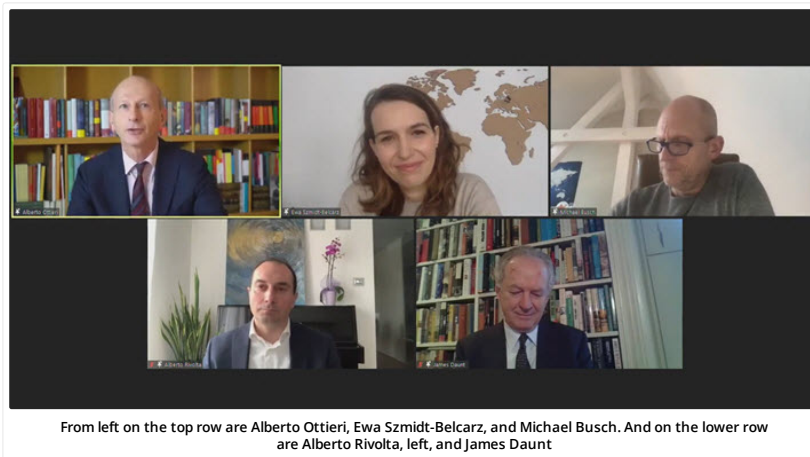
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Ambrosini echoes Levi in reminding attendees, “We cannot afford to relax.” And he makes a pointed reference to what he sees as the rising hegemony of Amazon in the Italian marketplace. The US-based retailer, he says, has “a clear advantage from a fiscal perspective. This huge operator receives different tax treatment from all other retail companies.” It’s an issue, he says, that urgently needs to be addressed.

And as the pandemic arrived last year, a survey showed that “Only 22 percent of our book retailers had a structured online presence”—a similar revelation to those in a number of world markets, of course. Ambrosini says that Italy’s booksellers are working to develop a tool, a platform, that can give them that “structured online presence” lacking for many until now, even as Levi stresses that from the viewpoint of the European publishers’ federation, Italy’s industry has shown exceptional leadership and resilience.

But now, of course, there’s concern around vaccination availability and speed, Tantazzi says, as COVID-19 variants B.1.1.7 and B.1.351 arise: “The virus is still in charge right now.”

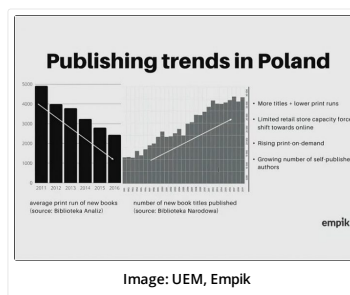
## Bookselling: Online Surges, Physical Imperatives



Ushered in by Messaggerie Italiane’s Alberto Ottier, the Warsaw-based Empik Group’s Ewa Szmidt-Belcarz talks of the inevitable switch in lead revenue generation between print and digital formats. “And this has implications not only for the overall book market,” she says. But though independent stores had made some headway in recent years, “those physical stores in 2020 were not the winners of the situation” last year.

In 2020 over 2019, Szmidt-Belcarz says, ebook sales in Poland gained 34 percent, audiobooks jumped 47 percent. She also points to the rising importance of rights sales into sister entertainment media, words-to-screen “Being very creative,” she says about multi-format development “is important to look at from the ecosystem perspective.”

The German retail power Thalia’s Michael Busch speaks smartly to the key value of “being local” and how “customers are really happy about it” when they feel personally well served.



By way of a compelling bit of proof, Busch says that in the first half of 2020, Thalia gained some five percent of market dominance from Amazon. And while that may sound counterintuitive, he says his assessment of this is that Thalia’s brick-and-mortar presence on the ground translated into that sense of local service for consumers. “We could hand-deliver at the door,” and offer curbside pickups, for example.

Within three years, Busch says, he expects his German network of stores to have leveled up their online outreach while maintaining that “local” presence of physical points of sale. Doubling down on the concept of being as “local” as a physical store is a primary tenet of Thalia’s path forward.

Alberto Rivolta of the swank Italian chain Feltrinelli reminds attendees that 2019 had been a good year for sales in his company, with 2020 starting well—ahead of the pathogen’s assault. “We reached rock bottom in April,” he says, “when the market was basically halved, because of the almost complete closure of bookshops.”

The late-spring and summer bounce-back was strong, though, Rivolta says, leaving the market in almost unchanged at the end of the year, from the vantage point of Feltrinelli’s business.



## Daunt: ‘Those Emotional Elements of Curation’



At the Scuola per Librai Umberto e Elisabetta Mauri. Image: UEM

Among the world’s booksellers, **James Daunt**—the eloquent managing director of the United Kingdom’s Waterstones and the United States’ Barnes & Noble—has both the largest inventory of stores in his transatlantic portfolio as well as the weightiest governmental and political obstacle courses to navigate.

This becomes particularly clear when considered alongside Ricardo’s Levi’s deft ability to bring forth extensive supportive measures from Rome during the course of the pandemic in Italy. Given a central government willing to listen, astute diplomacy can produce cooperative responses.

But “I think we are especially unlucky” in Britain, Daunt says in his comments at Scuola per Librai Umberto e Elisabetta Mauri, “not least to now have in power these people who thought and think Brexit is a good idea. It’s a tragedy that we’re no longer part of Europe.”



Despite the comparative heft of Waterstones and B&N’s online channels, “At the end of the day, we are a bookseller, a physical bookseller,” Daunt says, “in stores that rely on all of those emotional elements of curation that come from our booksellers in nicely invested, good-looking, characterful bookstores with personality.

“I double down on that,” he says, “because we have in our market(s) Amazon with no controls. No control on pricing, no control on monopolistic behaviors. If we are to succeed anywhere, it has to be rooted in our stores.”

The most critical factors there, of course, are centered around the two companies’ people. And in England, Daunt pointed out, “we are closed at the moment with no prospect of reopening for many, many weeks,” which wreaks havoc on cost control. “We lost the end of Christmas in December, and all of November.

“But we have to keep with our booksellers. We must not let our experience disappear. We must keep them employed; we must keep them believing. And we must continue to invest in the physical appearance of our stores.”

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– James Daunt

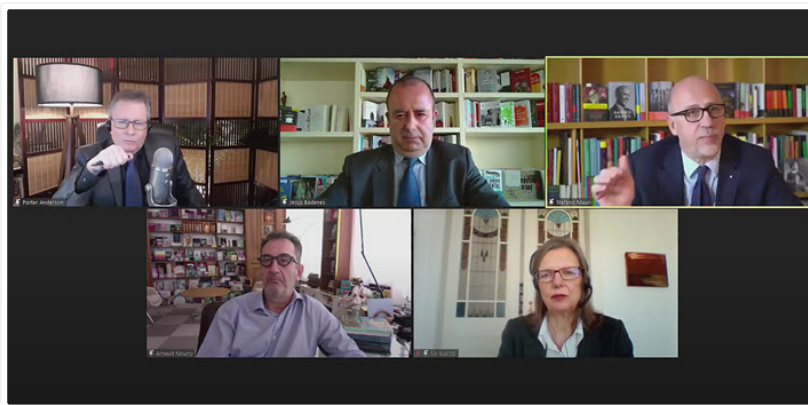
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The pandemic has “forced a concentration in our minds,” he says, on the importance of robust sales in non-book merchandise as well as books. When shops were open, Daunt says, the 2020 traffic was good, sales running stronger than in the prior year with consumers buying “educational puzzles, toys, things that belong with books.

“It’s forced us to confront what works in a bookshop,” he says, “to get rid of the smelly candles, the frippery and concentrate on things, to Michael Busch’s point, that nourish the mind, that bring an energy and purpose to what a bookstore is.”

As he speaks, Daunt says, all of his shops in the UK are closed, “with my competitors open because we have idiots running our country. People are buying lots of books—from Amazon, lots of books in the supermarket, lots of books in the stationery shops, all of which are open.

“Independent bookshops and Waterstones? Nothing.”



Upper row from left, Porter Anderson, Jesús Badenes, and Stefano Mauri. Lower row: Arnaud Nourry and Siv Bublitz

In the final panel of the day, those reviewing the video from the program can see four prominent and highly influential publishers on the international stage come together to look at issues around the experiences of 2020 and the resilience of the book—albeit amid challenges.

The first to speak is Stefano Mauri, whose Messaggerie Italiana is Italy’s largest book and magazine distributor and whose Gruppo editoriale Mauri Spagnol (GeMS) is the country’s second largest publisher. He responds to a question about how he came to name this session “Solid as a Rock: The Book in a Pandemic World.”

“I know it’s provoking,” he says to laughs from his colleagues, “but I’ve been provocative all my life about prophecies on the end of the paper book. In the year 2000, Bill Gates predicted that in 2020 there wouldn’t be any more print books around. And at that time, I asked Jeff Bezos if he believed there would be any books. He said no, absolutely no. Then in 2007 came the Kindle, and Amazon started to predict it would bypass the book,” pushing customers toward its ecosystem’s ebooks. “So many media people have thought that the book’s days were close to an end.

“But in fact, the paper book remains the king,” he says, recalling that in many emergencies such as the international financial crisis, the expectation for many has been that traditional books, reading, and publishing were deeply endangered—similar to the outlook during the pandemic spring of 2020.

“And so the book is ‘solid as a rock,’” he says, “and in my opinion, it’s solid as a rock because of the need of humans for storytelling and the fact that there’s someone good to do the job,” publishing’s authors.

Grupo Planeta’s Jesús Badenes [in 2019 at Berlin’s Publishers’ Forum from Kłopotek spoke](#) with great clarity and wry humor about lessons learned in the financial crisis. This time, he arrives with statistics relevant to Planeta’s observations in a pandemic year.

“At the end of 2019,” he says, “75 percent of the books” in his purview of the Spanish market “were physical books sold through bookstores—not only physical but sold through [brick-and-mortar] bookstores. Twenty-five percent were physical, sold through e-commerce. And five percent were digital books,” he says, “and those statistics are in value terms.

“Now, we jump one year. It’s the end of 2020 in the Spanish market. This 75 percent?—is now 64. Two of three books are still physical books sold in brick-and-mortar bookstores. [But] e-commerce has jumped by 40 percent. And digital formats have also jumped by 50 percent.

“Conclusions about this? Well, it’s normal that after three months of lockdown, physical stores sell less.” And yet, this is no criticism of the stores but of coronavirus consumer-behavior patterns and spread-mitigation regulations that closed the stores, Badenes says. And he has a point here to make that quickly gets a fast nod from Hachette Livre’s Arnaud Nourry as he listens.

“I want to go back to our title, ‘Solid as a Rock,’” Badenes says. “Looking at the year [2020] in which the market has grown 1 percent in physical and 3 percent in digital”—even as neighboring Portugal has seen a 20-percent downturn—“we didn’t feel very solid,” Badenes says, “at the end of March, April, and May. In fact, during this quarter,” Q2 of 2020, “our market shrank by 20 percent.”

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**On the abiding primacy of print: “I’ve been provocative all my life about prophecies on the end of the paper book.”**

– Stefano Mauri

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**On the resilience of the book: “We didn’t feel ‘solid as a rock’ at the end at the end of March, April, and May.”**

– Jesús Badenes

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Badenes specifically echoes James Daunt's comments about the value of a company's people, pointing out that in his case, it has been a committed workforce that kept the Planeta's goals and crisis response on-target and productive: 'Solid as a Rock,' he says, didn't happen without the commitment of many in the workforce whose names we don't know.

Siv Bublitz says that some two years ago, S. Fischer in Germany had begun an effort to cut back on the house's output, something that would prove helpful in the pandemic. "We'd started at an output of roughly 500 books a year. We're now down to 300," she says.

"We haven't cut staff. So it's the same number of people looking after fewer books. And we've not had a decrease in turnover. On the contrary, we've raised turnover with that. So I think it really is the thing to do because in Germany, we're really facing a saturated market. We've got 70,000 new books every year.

"You could argue that it doesn't make a difference if Fischer has 200 fewer books a year than before," she says. "But I think it's more the mindset. We have several hundred books each year but the author has one book. And it really matters to them whether it's a success, whether people look at it, whether it finds a readership. And that's initially where we took our cue."

Germany's industry, of course, [as \*Publishing Perspectives\* readers know](#), had the bad experience of almost making up entire its springtime losses from the first major wave of lockdowns—only to see a second lockdown order go into effect on December 16 in the middle of what had been a robust and accelerating holiday shopping boost.

And Arnaud Nourry, from the viewpoint of the multinational Hachette Livre, recounts a similarly seasonal challenge for the industry in his home market.

"The French market has declined by about 2 percent from last year," he says, "which is not too bad. Globally, Hachette Livre will have had a rather stable 2020 compared to the previous year—which is, compared to the context, rather satisfying. Not to say brilliant. So 'solid as a rock.'"

"In France, we had two confinements. The first was early in the spring with all bookstores closed. They were deemed 'nonessential' stores. It think it was a mistake. To make their lives simple, the administration in November, just before Christmas," decided the same "nonessential" stores would be closed. "And the booksellers had been clever enough to put a lot of pressure on the government to shut down the book departments of Carrefour, Auchan, etcetera"—the large non-bookstore retail points.

"So in November, it was impossible to buy a book in France, with the exception of Amazon and Fnac, of course. And we saw a period in the press, the media, on the Web, of petitions about the 'freedom to buy books,'" a rallying cry from a consumer base frustrated with its lack of access to its own commercial outlets. "

It speaks brilliantly," Nourry says, "about the industry, about the status of books. I didn't see any petitions about the 'freedom to go to the hairdresser.' Not even movie theaters or sports arenas."

The loyal French readership—envied by book professionals in many other parts of the world—had come to the defense of its publishing industry.

"And because of that, Nourry says, "the state of books and the conversation around booksellers has really become one of the key topics of the crisis."

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**On the reality of a saturated market: "We have several hundred books each year but the author has one book."**

– Siv Bublitz

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**On the French readership's demand for its bookshops: "I didn't see any petitions about the 'freedom to go to the hairdresser.'"**

– Arnaud Nourry

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## The Year Ahead



At the Scuola per Librai Umberto e Elisabetta Mauri. Image: UEM

Nourry, Bublit, Badenes, and Mauri made many more points during the course of their discussion, as did everyone who spoke during the 2021 Scuola per Librai Umberto e Elisabetta Mauri program—all of which now can be reviewed in the recording below of the full event with its subtitles.

As Achille Mauri brought the program to an end, he issued a call for the industry to work as a whole to lower returns to no more than 15 percent, “because handling returns is not profitable” for the supply chain at any point. “My suggestion is to slowly reduce the percentage of returns to publishers,” he said, “though it’s not an easy task.”

In his own closing comments, Stefano Mauri would point to three things he might fear for book markets going forward this year, as much of the world struggles to overcome the pandemic’s impact with often halting efforts at vaccination: “Dictatorship,” Mauri said, “monopoly—a kind of private dictatorship and a big issue at this moment—and piracy.”



Stefano Mauri

Badenes would mention the industry’s relationship with its readership ahead as the coronavirus struggle plays out: “E-commerce and digital will remain our challenges.” Acknowledging the relative successes of the business under extraordinary circumstances, he said that “Accessing the readers and consumers will be the most difficult thing,” the critical channel.

And Bublit s nodded. “I totally agree with Jesús,” she said, adding that helping booksellers to engage with consumers was also vital in a growing algorithmic environment—something publishers cannot trust as they can good booksellers.

Artificial intelligence and the visibility of books, Bublit said, “when booksellers are not in their shops,” may not support the context of discoverability needed by the full expanse of the industry’s value—which includes backlist not always easily surfaced online.

“Going direct to the customers,” she said. “It’s engaging with the customer, making it easier for the bookseller to engage with the customer.” And that will succeed very much as a concerted effort among retailers and publishers as the world industry moves through this year’s challenges and beyond.

*Here is the full program for your review, and with its subtitles:*

**#UEM38** Lo stato del libro in Europa - The current State of t...

**LO STATO DEL LIBRO IN EUROPA**  
XXXVIII Seminario – 29 GENNAIO 2021

Apertura: **Achille Mauri** (Messaggerie Italiane)  
Consegna del Premio per Librai Luciano e Silvana Mauri, quindicesima edizione.  
Assegnazione della borsa di lavoro Nick Perren, seconda edizione.

Previsioni per il 2021: dove va la spesa delle famiglie italiane?  
**Angelo Tantazzi** (Prometeia)

Il mercato del libro italiano e internazionale.  
**Paolo Ambrosini** (Associazione Librai Italiani),  
**Ricardo Franco Levi** (Associazione Italiana Editori).  
Modera: **Giovanna Zucconi** (Giornalista).

La libreria come bene essenziale: scenari e prospettive per il futuro.  
**Michael Busch** (Thalia), **James Daunt** (Waterstones e Barnes & Noble),  
**Alberto Rivalta** (Feltrinelli), **Ewa Szmidt-Belcarz** (Empik Group).  
Modera: **Alberto Ottieri** (Messaggerie Italiane).

Solido come una roccia. Il libro nella pandemia.  
**Jesús Badenes** (Grupo Planeta), **Siv Bublit** (S. Fischer Verlag),  
**Stefano Mauri** (Messaggerie Italiane e GeMS), **Arnaud Nourry** (Hachette Livre).  
Modera: **Porter Anderson** (Publishing Perspectives).

Chiusura: **Achille Mauri** (Messaggerie Italiane)

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**THE CURRENT STATE OF THE BOOK IN EUROPE**  
XXXVIII Seminar – JANUARY 29<sup>th</sup> 2021

Opening: **Achille Mauri** (Messaggerie Italiane)  
Assignment of the Booksellers Prize Luciano e Silvana Mauri, 15th edition.  
Assignment of the Nick Perren Internship, 2nd edition.

Forecast for 2021: where is the Italian Family spending going?  
**Angelo Tantazzi** (Prometeia)

Italian and International Book Market.  
**Paolo Ambrosini** (Associazione Librai Italiani),  
**Ricardo Franco Levi** (Associazione Italiana Editori).  
Moderation: **Giovanna Zucconi** (Journalist)

Bookstores as essential Assets: Scenarios and Outlooks for the Future.  
**Michael Busch** (Thalia), **James Daunt** (Waterstones and Barnes & Noble),  
**Alberto Rivalta** (Feltrinelli), **Ewa Szmidt-Belcarz** (Empik Group).  
Moderation: **Alberto Ottieri** (Messaggerie Italiane)

Solid as a Rock. The Book in a pandemic World.  
**Jesús Badenes** (Grupo Planeta), **Siv Bublit** (S. Fischer Verlag),  
**Stefano Mauri** (Messaggerie Italiane and GeMS), **Arnaud Nourry** (Hachette Livre).  
Moderation: **Porter Anderson** (Publishing Perspectives)

Closing: **Achille Mauri** (Messaggerie Italiane)



More from Publishing Perspectives on Italy and its book publishing industry is [here](#). More on Stefano Mauri is [here](#), more on Ricardo Franco Levi is [here](#), and more on bookselling is [here](#).

More from us on the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic is [here](#).

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## Porter Anderson

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Porter Anderson has been named International Trade Press Journalist of the Year in London Book Fair's 2019 International Excellence Awards. He is Editor-in-Chief of Publishing Perspectives. He formerly was Associate Editor for The FutureBook at London's The Bookseller. Anderson also has worked as a senior producer, editor, and anchor with CNN.com, CNN International, and CNN USA, and as an arts critic (National Critics Institute) with The Village Voice and Dallas Times Herald. He co-founded The Hot Sheet, a newsletter for authors, which now is owned and operated by Jane Friedman.

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