

Authors tell the story of publishing

Jeremy Fisher, executive director, Australian Society of Authors

In 1950, Miles Franklin wrote, 'Without an indigenous literature people can remain alien in their own soil. An unsung country does not fully exist or enjoy adequate international exchange of the inner life. Further, a country must be portrayed by those who hate it or love it as their dwelling place, familiarly, or remain dumb among its contemporaries.'

An indigenous literature has been developing in the 55 years since these words were written. It is an essential part of our cultural identity with an impact wider than simply those who read books for pleasure.

As Gillian Armstrong indicated to those assembled for the presentation of the 2005 Miles Franklin Award, from the first winner, Patrick White's *Voss* in 1957, to the present, the winners have provided a rich vein of stories for filmmakers. Films such as Armstrong's *My Brilliant Career* and *Oscar and Lucinda* have their genesis in strong Australian works of fiction. Even an original film-script such as that for Ray Lawrence's *Lantana* owes much to the imagery of Eleanor Dark's *Lantana Lane*.

Unhappily, however, we are still largely an unsung country. Recently, we seem to have lost the small appet-ite we had for Australian films. They earned a paltry \$11 878 014 in 2004, only 1.3 per cent of box office. The situation improved slightly in 2005 with the success of films such as *Little fish* and *The proposition*. But neither in films nor books do Australian narratives dominate popular culture, as we might expect them to do at this stage of our cultural development. Even on television, Australian content on Australian television amounts to only 24 per cent of the total content broadcast. In contrast, 96 per cent of the content broadcast on US television

is produced in that country and likewise 91 per cent of the content broadcast on British television. Canada manages to broadcast 75 per cent Canadian content on its television services.

Sales of Australian fiction fell in 2003–2004. Authors are worried that Australians are no longer interested in their indigenous literature. This worry is supported by anecdotal evidence from agents, writers and publishers that only books that guarantee sales above a relatively high baseline are offered contracts. This means that newer writers have a greater difficulty in being published and publishers require established writers to produce 'more of the same' rather than explore different themes and subjects.

But are sales falling because publishers are not publishing what readers want? Or is it because readers no longer want to read fiction? The jury is still out. It's true that sales of non-fiction are booming. Some of that non-fiction is very challenging. It may be that, in fiction, publishers are not challenging readers sufficiently to ensure engagement. The film industry provides support for this: *Look both ways*, *Little fish* and *The proposition* are challenging movies, none deliberately pitched at the mainstream market, yet all are performing well. In music too, independent Australian artists are outperforming the mainstream artists in sales and market penetration.

These issues and more are canvassed in detail in a new research paper from the Australian Society of Authors, *Current Publishing Practice* (\$5 for members; \$15 for non-members). The paper examines the publishing industry from an author's viewpoint. It reveals that establishing a media presence for an author, and thus some mass-market credibility, may cost many thousands of dollars.

This sort of expenditure is not viable for a publisher anticipating a moderate return on a new novel or scholarly biography. Authors' reputations have therefore tended to develop incrementally: through word of mouth, by winning literary prizes, favourable reviews, appearances at writers' festivals and appearances in non-commercial or fringe media, yet, as literary agent Jenny Darling notes, there is 'amnesia in the industry that most authors are not an overnight success.'

The creation of a recognised author is a slow process that does not fit well with publishers' desires for immediate profits. A 'writer' with an immediately recognisable profile — a

sports star, perhaps, an errant politician, or a television star — is a safer option in guaranteeing sales. Homogeneity in publishing decisions is a surer course of action for publishers rather than promoting new, untried voices. For this reason, most publishing decisions are reactive, rather than proactive. As businesses driven by the need to make profits for shareholders or partners, publishers as a matter of course seek to attain the greatest return on their investment.

In practice, however, this conservatism often translates into 'follow the leader'. Publishers are always chasing the last successful book, rather than looking for something new to challenge and entertain readers. Sales and marketing strategies encourage this, even when editorial attitudes might veer towards recognisably different works. So, with the Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* having sold over 1 million copies in Australia in 2004–2005, we can expect to see a range of books attempting to emulate that success, much as books similar to J K Rowling's 'Harry Potter' series emerged after its success, even though there were many interesting variations already available in a flourishing fantasy genre.

Publishers take whatever information they can gain from their limited market research to attempt to minimise their risk and exposure and guarantee sales. This research is essentially reactive as it follows from publishing decisions already made. But the sales of Dan Brown and J K Rowling came as a surprise, their extreme success not envisaged by their publishers. Rowling had her manuscripts rejected time and again before being successfully published. Jenny Darling makes the point that Dan Brown was not an overnight success.

Current Publishing Practice is available (\$5 for members; \$15 for non-members) from the Australian Society of Authors, PO Box 1566, Strawberry Hills NSW 2012. <http://www.asauthors.org>

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