

THE STORIES WE TELL



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My father, who emigrated from Greece to Australia in the late 1930s, used to say "memory is short in Australia... a good and a bad thing". He was certainly pleased to have arrived in a country where ancient grievances didn't seem to exist – certainly not of the Balkan kind so familiar to him. But he wasn't so sure about a place that understood so little about, that made so little of, its past and origins. That so quickly forgot the good and the bad.

Among the first books he read as a young arrival, who had not long taught himself to read and write and speak English, was Eleanor Dark's novel, *The Timeless Land*. He read it during the war years, as a young soldier stationed in the central west of NSW, and always spoke of it as a great introduction to important aspects of Australian life. Not having the money to buy a copy at the time, he borrowed one from a library (in either Parkes or Forbes, as I recall).

Eleanor Dark's tale of first encounters importantly acknowledged the existence of an Aboriginal perspective on the arrival of the white man on this continent. But the greater resurrection and relating of the first people's stories was to be very much the task of Aboriginal activists and authors who came after. In that work, they were helped enormously by new Australian publishers and by public and municipal and school libraries across Australia, each of whom did their bit to make these stories available to student and adult readers.

Local publishing in the 1930s and '40s was, apart from the iconic A&R, a pretty lacklustre affair. The infrastructure that allowed a whole new wave of Indigenous and 'feminist' and 'multicultural' authors to flourish came

later – in the 1960s to '90s. For those Australian authors and publishers and librarians who took part, this effort to get our own stories written and circulated also meant being involved in an exciting form of cultural development. What was created and shared then was (and remains) important for all our sakes. For, echoing my late father, a proper idea of who we are obliges us to maintain the old as much as to add the new.

Australian narratives only do their best cultural 'work' when they are visible and accessible to Australian readers. Given the constraints (and they are many), our libraries today do an excellent job in ensuring our stories are presented to Australian readers. Authors applaud this commitment and wish to work more closely with librarians in order that our stories be as widely available as possible, but we also appreciate that libraries are being squeezed in ways that make it that much more difficult to achieve all our goals.

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Australian authors are currently also anxious that the National Curriculum may not be structured sufficiently well to foreground and use the great literary achievements of the last three or four decades and earlier in the schools. Another battle meanwhile continues in, and around, the universities – it seems most negligent, for instance, that we have only a couple of full professors of Australian literature across the entire country. Memory, to embellish my father's words, should not be *this* short!

The challenge is further intensified by the rise of ebooks. This new format for the delivery of books grows in importance, even if it presently represents less than 15% of trade book sales. For publishers, authors, and readers of Australian texts, however, delivery using this format brings significant issues. Visibility or

'discoverability' online is – to be kind – a work in progress.

The bricks and mortar bookshop, once the principal 'showcase' for books, is becoming less significant to publishers, authors, and, increasingly, readers. Online bookstores are becoming more prevalent, and increasingly patronised by Australian book consumers and readers for both p and ebooks. The largest of these is, of course, Amazon.

But 'Australian stories' are certainly no priority for Amazon. Its goals are primarily commercial – hence its insistence on its own kind of ereader, the Kindle, and its own version of ebook file format. It is most proprietorial over its own interests, but clever enough to gesture towards egalitarianism when it constructs its own form of ebook 'library'.

Offshore-owned technology or rights management companies are not the means by which we can or should develop and relate our stories as Australians. Equally, we should remember

that the English language book market online functions firstly to sell US and UK-created content, the output of US and UK publishing companies (yes, some of these also have Australian operations).

Local authors trying to reach library readers with their own electronic books have to now also contend with some of the new supplier-

aggregators operating in Australia. It seems inequitable that a library or library system seeking to deliver Australian titles as ebooks has to accept the terms of an overseas supplier of ebooks, including where those terms prohibit individual local authors from selling their own books directly to libraries.

Australian authors are very reliant on libraries showcasing us and our work. Ultimately we should be able to take advantage of technological innovation and the benefits of the internet without compromising the creation, advancement, and spread of our own culture.

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