

Build the Author, Sell the Book: Marketing the Australian Author in the 1990s

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The world of the book has been threatened by economic depression, over production and the development of electronic alternatives. The Australian author negotiates an increasingly complex environment with changing government policies, shifting publishing structures, and uncertain financial rewards. In this economically challenged environment there is an obvious and growing emphasis on marketing and promotion, and the debate about 'the book as commodity' has been enlarged to include that other creation of the media, 'the cult of the author'. This discussion will focus on marketing practices within the Australian writing environment; the growing influence of the award system, the prominence of writers' festivals and literary events, and the role of the review and critical appraisal. These aspects of the book industry are increasingly affecting the role of the author, the attitudes and selection policies of the publisher and are also influencing public perceptions and buying patterns. A major information source is a series of personal interviews I conducted in 1996 and 1997 with specifically-targeted authors, publishers and editors.

Studies of the book industry have shown that Australians are buying more Australian titles, but the readership overall is not increasing (Deveson 1). This means that there is intense competition for sales in a flat market. Australia remains a net importer of books and this is an increasing, not a decreasing trend. A 1992 report stated that, 'The value of "printed book" imports increased by 101% from 1983 to 1991. For children's books, the increase was 154 per cent' (*Book Production* 79). On a global scale, UNESCO reports indicate that approximately one million titles a year will be produced by the turn of the century (Whitney 185). It is estimated that 100,000 of these new titles will be produced in the United Kingdom (Clark 6) and Australia is still a major client of the British export market. HarperCollins, for example, proudly boasts that 250 Australian titles, mainly commissioned works, were released in 1996, but this number is easily swamped by the 3000 titles imported by this company in the same year (Hickey 18). In such a saturated literary market-place, Australian publishers struggle to maintain market share against this oversupply of imported books.

Publishing today is front-list driven, with advertising attention directed to the latest publications (Moran 142); the emphasis is fast production and quick sales.

This is the opposite of publishing for cultural value which John Frow distinguished in conference discussion yesterday as yielding a long-term return on investment compared with short-term return on investment. As the number of titles increases each new author struggles to be noticed in the two to three months of shelf life allocated for an individual title. Small publishers often do not have the resources to promote their lists adequately, while larger publishers selectively promote only their most marketable commodity. The majority of titles receive only routine or token promotion and then fade.

The challenge for the publisher is to build a profile for a writer or to attract attention to one particular title in the midst of a multitude of 'bright, glossy covers and interesting sounding books' (Wiess). Referring to developments in the marketing sector as a 'flummery deluge', Professor Chris Wallace-Crabbe observes that 'new books, however mediocre, tend on the American model to arrive with interviews, broadcasts, published extracts, fancy blurbs and all the trimmings' (Wallace-Crabbe 210). There is no 'removal of the author' from this world (Barthes 116). Rather, the publisher and the mechanisms of the market-place strongly reinforce the 'mythic element' of the author as hero (Williamson 2). The specially selected author (for not all writers achieve celebrity status) and the book are launched and promoted together. As Promotions Manager for Hodder Headline, Andy Palmer, recently declared, 'publicity in the book trade has never been so "professional"' (Palmer qtd in Becker 23), and everyone within the book industry is affected by this orchestrated shift in focus from the content of the text to the literary star and the book as product.

One of the most important systems of appraisal of Australian publications that increasingly influences the market-place is the annual round of awards and prizes handed out to that very small number of authors judged to have excelled. Awards function across all levels of Australian society to signal quality and professionalism, and highlight a particular field of endeavour. The public presentation of a substantial amount of money for exceptional achievement is an accepted civic act that the Australian community understands. Novelist Kate Grenville acknowledged the role of the developing prize culture when she observed in 1988 that,

Prizes give writers headlines in a society where writing doesn't usually make headlines. This society doesn't value writing as much as we'd like it to, but it does value competition. When someone thinks a book is worth giving big money to, books enter a realm that people understand. (566)

As a consequence, literary awards have been incorporated into the promotional infrastructure of the publishing industry, proving to be a highly effective mechanism for maximising media exposure. Writers and their books become the currency that is spotlighted and examined.

The number and variety of Australian literary awards continues to grow, but there are particular prizes that are instrumental in creating a reputation, endowing critical acclaim and attracting media attention. These include the Miles Franklin

Award, the New South Wales and Victorian Premiers' Literary Awards, the Banjo Awards (prior to 1988 known as the National Book Council Awards), the *Australian/Vogel* Award, the A.L.S. Gold Medal, the David Unaipon Award and the Children's Book Council Awards. Each of these awards was established with a particular focus. The Miles Franklin Award, for example, was established 'for the advancement, improvement and betterment of Australian Literature, [and] ... as an incentive to authors' (*Franklin Will* Clause 6). The objective of the N.S.W. Premier's Award is to 'raise and preserve the standards of Australian literature and ... to affirm the community's respect for a free and flourishing literary culture' (Green 179). Each major award now plays a prominent role in contemporary Australian literary culture.

With the continuing unpredictability of direct government funding to authors, the role of awards assumes greater significance within the literary community. Although there is considerable debate about whether it is possible to judge a winner in a literary competition with all entries adequately and appropriately measured, the number of literary awards and prizes is escalating. Competition for each award is intense: the 64 nominations for the 1996 Miles Franklin Award escalated to 84 entries in 1997, before dropping back to 46 entries in 1998 when administrators limited the number of books submitted by each publishing imprint in 1998 (information supplied by Arts Management). However, a highpoint of 300 manuscripts in 1996 for the *Australian/Vogel* Award receded to 210 nominations in both 1997 and 1998 (information supplied by Allen & Unwin).

The prime justification given by authors in support of the award system is the immediate financial benefit; the fact that 'more writers get more money' (Goldsworthy, Interview). This should also be seen as an extension of the buying time argument apparent in debates concerning the effectiveness of government funding. According to novelist David Foster, winning an award can be 'the difference between being able to make another book or not' (Foster). Novelist Amanda Lohrey explains that a major award is the equivalent of another year's writing, 'which is why writers won't attack prizes, because no matter what they think about everything else associated with them, they want that money to go on being available' (Lohrey).

The indirect, but long-term benefit of enhanced literary reputation and professional prestige often results in larger advances from a publisher and a higher media profile. Awards can serve to legitimate the author, adding to the symbolic capital that rests in the author's name, becoming a 'capital of consecration' as Bourdieu insists, that implies a power to consecrate objects and make profits from this operation (Bourdieu 148). In this capacity, awards can create a ripple effect across the literary ecosystem. For example, they are recognised as an important element in assessing applications for government grants. Foster acknowledges that winning the first *Age* Award and one of the first National Book Council Fiction Awards was probably an essential element in his receiving government funding early in his career (Foster). This ability of awards to build an author's reputation or launch a career is demonstrated by the list of winners of the *Australian/Vogel* award

for first novels, which includes Kate Grenville, Gillian Mears, Tim Winton and Brian Castro.

Awards and prizes have served as an effective mechanism for raising the profile of the book industry in general. In an address to the ASAL Conference in 1996, Professor Simon During observed that, 'Prizes effectively function as marketing tools for the publishing sector in its effort to compete with cultural industries richer and with greater reach than itself' (During 3). Publishers are enthusiastic about award-winning books – they tend to sell more copies. An award-winning label adds to the value of the book in the marketplace, serving to justify a book's position on the market shelf and making it a more desirable product. In a saturated market there is a growing reliance on award short-lists as a selection tool by readers and critics since they provide a convenient guide to what is arguably the best of the year's publications.

Lohrey argues, however, that aside from the Children's Book Council awards the only prize that 'significantly improves sales is the Booker', and believes that the main benefit is the prestige and the positive response of the publisher. '[Prizes] impress the publisher ... they know they can use this to promote you. Or if they are not sure of your work, they [are encouraged that] someone likes it' (Lohrey). Awards can create a confidence in the publishers and a confidence in the public that this book is a work of quality or that this author is worth an investment of both time and money.

The media appear to enjoy the story behind each winning announcement, particularly if the awards create controversy or heated responses from the many articulate authors and cultural columnists across the country. The scandal and ensuing debate on the ethical and legal issues surrounding Helen Demidenko/Darville's *The Hand That Signed the Paper* (1995) and the Wanda Koolmatrie/Leon Carmen hoax have certainly captured newspaper headlines. Not surprisingly, it also sells books. Literary agent Lyn Tranter commented on the Darville novel, 'Blind Freddy would realise that the controversy caused by that book increased the sales enormously' (qtd in Slattery, 'Crisis' 21). Among the wider public, it could be argued that the persona of the 'author as rogue' or the 'author as ardent social critic' is generally well accepted.

Writers' festivals

The other major promotional tools that are flourishing with the current focus on broadening audiences and developing readers are writers' festivals and literary events. The importance of these 'public performances' for writers, both as a form of public recognition and as an added source of income, is increasing. Publishers recognise the role of these events, often subsidising sessions and providing moral, if not financial support, for their writers. There is an expectation from publishers that writers will attend and actively promote their work. Increasingly publishers will provide training in public presentation and handling the media.

Among authors these promotional activities are generally regarded as a necessary task, the writer's part of the bargain, a vital element in building their career, and a necessary mechanism to generate sales. Most writers I spoke with believe that they need to be visible in the marketplace if they want to sell books. Academic and author Kerry Goldsworthy was candid about the process when she commented that,

If people do not want to do it, don't do it, but don't complain that you are not selling ... If they want to improve their sales, then they should get out there and be a dancing bear. (Goldsworthy, Interview)

In this environment success favours the author who is a good performer, well-presented and articulate. The more retiring author might still be published, according to historian and author Humphrey McQueen, but there is a risk that, 'Given a choice between two people [a publisher will] go with the one that is so obliging, who'll go anywhere, do anything' (McQueen, Interview). Lohrey believes that there is an even more blatant preference shown by some publishers in recent marketing strategies:

Some publishers won't take older writers unless they're already very well established. They've got an image of [the] young, glamorous, reasonably good looking author – it's come to that – so they can get them in *Vogue* and *HQ* and market them in a certain kind of way. (Lohrey)

One constant criticism of this centring on the author is that the personality of the writer or the stage presentation can significantly affect their critical reception; that it is, as novelist Cassandra Pybus observed, becoming 'more important to be a performer than to be a good writer in the literary world' (Pybus). This is also where Festival organisers are concentrating attention as the public respond enthusiastically to the writer-performer. One commentator remarked that,

People don't go to hear writers mumbling into the pages. They go to hear writers they know will entertain them. Organisers of such readings book those people most likely to deliver a good performance ... Box office considerations are important in the planning of literary events. In academic literary terms the writings of one of the Adelaide guests were second rate. But, by hell, she pulled crowds. (Emery 7)

While admitting that festivals certainly provide a forum for writers, academic and novelist Michael Wilding is concerned about the overall effect of these 'quasi-literary activities' where 'people get the literary experience without buying the books, which is a real problem for the writers trying to live off the royalties' (Wilding). From a different perspective, publisher Craig Munro from the University of Queensland Press expressed a serious difficulty with this marketing em-

phasis on 'personality publishing' rather than 'cultural value'. According to Munro, many writers, especially the young, had developed an unrealistic expectation about the level of attention and promotion that they should receive:

One of the real problems with this trend is that the authors are constructing themselves as personalities before they've even earned the right to be any kind of a public personality. It's the book that is the only thing that can make them famous, not the publisher. (Munro)

Although some authors may be striving to achieve the status of a literary 'personality', the role can create its own set of difficulties and restrictions for the author. Wallace-Crabbe strongly suggests that the persistent pressure on the author to promote their work or their image can become 'extremely harmful':

There is a tendency for people to be spending ages being interviewed by the media, the press, etcetera. which always makes you utter the same clichés over and over again, when during those same weeks you might actually be thinking something original. (Wallace-Crabbe, Interview)

Novelist Rosie Scott commented that initially she enjoyed the literary circuit – the travel, new friendships and wider personal experience. However, she found that the never-ending cycle of promotion became destructive:

You stop being the person you were when you were writing, you become a performer. You can also get a sense of yourself that is too inflated ... it [becomes] very confusing. (Scott)

For some authors this expectation to personally promote or explain a work to an audience, this almost 'tyrannical' centring on the author decried by Barthes (114), can be 'very depressing' (Modjeska qtd in Slattery, 'Stardom' 1). Goldsworthy has described this demand of the audience for the 'bodily presence' of the author as 'dangerous, like people in love', and recalled an outburst by Thea Astley against the 'terribly embarrassing' imposition on an author (Goldsworthy, 'In the Flesh' 44,47). In a more recent instance, J.M. Coetzee refused to be interviewed or answer questions from the audience following a reading at the 1996 Adelaide Arts Festival, insisting that the text should speak for itself. In sympathising with Coetzee, David Malouf commented on the book's autonomy: 'Sooner or later ... these little books are going to have to go their own way without me. I think it's better they start doing it now' (qtd in Slattery, 'Stardom' 1).

As public celebrations of Australian literary culture, literary awards and writers' festivals provide a regular mechanism which focuses large amounts of media space and public attention on Australian writers and Australian books. However, the marketing insistence on evoking the image of the author as celebrity can impose an artificial framework which distorts the book market, interfering with the produc-

tion and reception cycle within the literary ecosystem. It threatens to influence both a writer's approach to their work and a publisher's perception of what should be published and who should be promoted. There is a growing concern that these factors are also influencing genuine critical appraisal – what is chosen for awards, for review and critical examination.

The role of the review

A critical review can take a number of different formats, from a short notice which merely repeats a publisher's press release, to the in-depth critical analysis in a scholarly journal. In this day of 'rationalisms', all forms of literary review are threatened either by the drive to appeal to a broader, popular audience, or by the economic stringencies and uncertainties resulting from decreased funding to literary journals. The space-saving practice of combining reviews of three or four or five major novels into one newspaper column is of strong concern to both authors and publishers. (Lohrey described this as a 'disgrace'). There is also the danger that the review is becoming another form of 'infotainment' as Dale Spender has suggested (22), where the review is shorter, descriptive and supposedly entertaining.

According to author Ian McFarlane a well-written review should 'define literature and provide a timely frame of cultural reference' (27). In the small and interconnected world of Australian literary culture, however, the review does not necessarily function in such a high-minded way. There are claims that reviewers are either unnecessarily vicious or uncritically applaud the mediocre, that 'academics are notoriously negative', or that authors are thin-skinned and want to have both popular success and critical acclaim (Adelaide 13,14). Sophie Cunningham lamented the 'combative' nature of many newspaper reviews, that masks a lack of interest in engaging in constructive literary debate. However, Wallace-Crabbe believes that there is a timidity in the world of the review as well as the world of the poetry editor, and has written that 'too often one reads them and groans, muttering, "Not another great novel this week as well!"' (Wallace-Crabbe, 'Strutters' 210).

Another development that is undermining the role of the review as a valuable and reasoned critical judgement is the tendency to replace the review with the author interview. According to McQueen, the more personal and usually friendly environment of the interview produces 'a form of public relations or unpaid advertising' segment (McQueen, 'Interviewing Writers' 56). The author is basically allowed to sell the book. He commented that, within this framework, 'there is very much a watering down of critical standards and the amount of intelligence, time and effort that is brought to bear on the whole process' (McQueen, Interview).

Foster believes that literary critics and academics are *not* playing a leading role in creating literary value, but are largely following an agenda established by other non-literary forces:

The literary arts follow the media ... They don't realise the processes involved before they even direct their attention to a book ... It is a publicist-driven literary world that the academics jump on afterwards. (Foster)

And the publicity machine working throughout the literary environment is directed to creating the author as celebrity, a literary package, marketable and saleable. This transference of the star system into a literary culture is not new – Dickens mastered the arduous literary tour and public readings long ago. However, academic Susan Lever has argued that academic literary criticism is also being forced to 'ride on the backs of "star" authors' (Lever 230). With the decline of opportunities for scholarly publishing in Australia, the commercial publishers' perception of a talented, culturally valuable author is determining what critical works reach the bookstores. The star author as package deal comes complete with a short, accessible, but not too intense critique marketed to 'the variously interested public' (to borrow David Carter's phrase). This is a gap that the ASAL Literary Studies Series is trying to address, but the difficulties of marketing this specialist list are obvious.

Conclusion

Book production is a high cost, labour intensive industry. In the 1990s the industry has been destabilised by economic recession, changing government policies and the ongoing drama of corporate takeovers and internal company restructuring. Publishing is governed by the financial realities of the modern business world – it is a sales and marketing driven industry. The aggressive promotional strategies within this industry are increasingly determining what books are published and reviewed, and which authors are promoted and rewarded. The intensity of this emphasis is creating a complex and shifting system of interactions between the writer and publisher, the publicity machine and the market-place. In this environment, the role of the 'author as hero' functions as a central organising principle. It is reinforced in the market-place by advertising, the book launch, the author interview and the author tour. Through the popular cultural practices of the writers' festivals, the literary event and public readings, the role of the 'author as entertainer' is also encouraged. The author is both forced to play the game and is governed by the rules of the game, becoming another commodity, a 'publisher's tool', to be manoeuvred and positioned for maximum effect and financial benefit (Slattery, 'Stardom' 1). It is obvious that certain literary stars will benefit by this 'patronage of the media system' (Hall 61). There is also a danger that it will serve to reinforce the tendency to 'reproduce the successful' (Hawthorne) that threatens to dominate selection choices and marketing, and finally to influence public taste and critical reception.

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