

**David Carter and Anne Galligan, eds. *Making Books: Contemporary Australian Publishing*. St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 2007, 448pp.  
ISBN: 9780702234699 (pbk)  
AU \$39.95**

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For an industry so foundational to western concepts of education, culture, and artistic endeavour, book publishing is a notoriously difficult beast to pin down. Until quite recently it has been viewed not so much as an object of analysis but a conduit for it. Now we are beginning to see signs that it is finally being recognised as both. It is a curious anomaly that the mainstream practices of media studies have tended to leave book publishing out, or at least to set it to one side as a less absorbing case. In fact, the acquisitive urges of media tycoons have pointed the way since at least the 1970s for recognition of books as natural corporate stable-mates of newspapers, magazines, film, television and radio, and, more recently, the array of products delivered exclusively or partially online. Perhaps the neglect comes down to books being the elder statesmen of the group. Such a venerable industry is easily typecast as past it, and its traditional business models have proven reluctant to offer up quite so liberally the “rivers of gold” that newspapers and their successors are known, at least in theory, to produce. Nevertheless, as British industry commentator Eric de Bellaigue has discussed at length,<sup>1</sup> book publishing retains the interest of corporate investors, and the largest enterprises are now integrated into wide, diversified and very powerful media groups. It is still the case, however, that when we think of News Corporation, Murdoch Books will not be the first of its properties to come to mind.

This resistance of book publishing to the interrogatory gaze is in part a consequence of the iconic status of its signature product, and how the power of that object tends to pull focus and limit the range of depth perception. The book, as a concept and a site of experience, is loaded with so many associations, emotions, significances, resonances and jobs to do that it's a wonder such a small and potentially perishable object can contain them all. Yet contain them it does, and often unobtrusively at that. The codex has been with us for thousands of years, movable type for centuries, and these time-spans too make it easier, under ordinary circumstances, to consider the book's existence to be as unexceptionable and necessary as that of the table.

What might be seen to stand in the way of a better view is the resilience of the format itself, the strength of which resides paradoxically in its flexibility

and responsiveness to technological change. With each passing century we have been able to produce cheaper and arguably more attractive books, more quickly and in ever-increasing quantities. Add to this our fascination with what goes on between the covers, that mysterious pact between writer and reader that the object itself makes possible, the imaginative potential offered by such an indirect yet intensely personal communion, and it becomes difficult to concentrate our minds on the rather more prosaic workings of the means of a book's production, and the changing shape of the industry that manages those processes for profit.

*Making Books* is a welcome attempt to establish a bulwark of local vantage points for understanding what, rather surprisingly considering the book's resilience, many regard as having become a sick and bloated animal. Although the collection doesn't endorse this position wholeheartedly, a number of contributions subscribe to elements of the basic negative portrait: aged and anxious, book publishing has been so mauled by decades of globalisation, digitisation, competition from stronger media, and the accompanying feeding frenzy of corporate takeovers that it is now afflicted with chronic overproduction, unrealistic profit expectations, an extremely long tail and the odd atrophied limb. And to top it all off, this very stressed-out creature has lost its soul. On the whole, though, *Making Books* takes an anatomical rather than diagnostic approach to the beast, attempting to highlight the major dilemmas book publishing encounters in its quest to survive rather than deliver the death sentence.

An addition to the growing study of print cultures, *Making Books* has a determinedly contemporary focus, contextualised by frequent comparisons to the mores which held sway in what is often characterised as a gentler age just past. Its insistence on the now distinguishes it from many of the contributions made to the rather narrower discipline of Australian book history, which often concentrates on key periods of the more comfortably distant past: the 1890s and the immediate post-war period being among the most favoured. The major notable exception in this respect, *Paper Empires*,<sup>2</sup> covers the period 1945-2005 and shares with *Making Books* the urge to create an overview in collage. Both incorporate a large number of contributions, placing the perspectives of publishers, writers, editors and assorted industry players alongside those of the historians, critics and business analysts, but on the whole *Making Books* appears to manage this integration more successfully. There is a coherence and elegance of shape here that eluded the editors of *Paper Empires*, perhaps because it is not aiming to take in so broad a historical sweep.

The book is divided into three sections: industry dynamics; the industry and new technologies; and industry sectors and genre publishing. The first of these contains the most engaging contributions, concentrating as it does on the traditionally more glamorous arena of trade or general commercial publishing. Jenny Lee gives a brisk, no-nonsense overview of current industry structure and dynamics, using as her key motif the notion of the imprint, once an avatar of the editorial preoccupations of the publishing house proprietor with whose name it was often synonymous, now functioning for its new multinational owners as a more flexible and less direct vehicle for “branding”. Simone Murray’s essay explores the new consensus on what the core business of publishing comprises in this age of media convergence: generating content rather than making physical books *per se*. Murray charts the multinationals’ attempts to “divorce the lucrative *content* of books from the prohibitively costly *format* of the bound text”, thus releasing copyright, both as content and concept, to roam freely in an open field, capable of being repackaged and streamed across the whole panoply of available media to maximise profit. In the second section Nick Walker and Penelope Davie explore the new business models made possible by online publishing and print on demand. Michael Webster also explains the genesis and rationale of BookScan, the powerful but widely mistrusted method of tracking sales that has been influential in the revamp of publishing’s self-image, particularly in relation to the status of literary publishing.

Other contributors take up with gusto the opportunity to fall prey to nostalgia, cynicism or, even worse, gloom. “The fervent Australian nationalism that fused a radicalism with cultural exploration and created both a market for Australian books and an extraordinary gallery of writers and publishers to produce them is dying”, says Richard Flanagan in his essay. “The cultural nationalist, protectionist movement is over”, agrees Mark Davis, adding that in future “[Literary mid-list titles] will be packaged as fetish objects designed to evoke the memory of literary culture” by the large publishers and lovingly produced in limited runs, on hair’s breadth profit margins, by a handful of small independents. There is something about this line of argument that rankles, possibly because it’s based on such good accounts of what has changed and what might come to pass. But when I read these laments and then think about the dynamism to be found at any major literary festival, or even more so at the spectacle of the Frankfurt Book Fair, the industry’s annual product parade and rights swap, I’m not entirely convinced. Is it just sour grapes at the literary author having been demoted from god to mere celebrity? It reminds me in reverse of one of Davis’ other fields of cogent critique, our own *fin de*

*siècle* clash of the generations. The literary publishing culture of the 60s, 70s and 80s was nothing if not the product of the energy and idealism of the derided baby boomers. Now, in the face of its passing, it seems to be one of the few arenas of energetic cultural production we're allowed to feel sad about. Film, as David Carter points out in his discussion of the marginal but still prestigious phenomenon of Australian literary work, is another that collects our anxieties about how well and how forcefully we project ourselves to the world, and leaves us floundering in the face of our continued status as minnow in a sea of whales.

Shifting the focus from literary publishing to the industry as a whole, there are signs in many sectors of rude health and possibilities for growth. This is the impression the third part of the book leaves. It's publishing, Jim, but not as we know it, and whether or not crime fiction, romance, financial guides or luscious recipe books are your cup of tea, for publishers large and small they are proving a goldmine. Digital technologies offer sustainable publishing opportunities to previously neglected niches (for example, indigenous publishing as discussed by Anita Heiss). The appendices on government assistance for the print publishing "value chain", publishers of Australian literary novels since 1990 and a comprehensive glossary of terms, are useful in a field renowned for its dearth of consistent data.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Eric de Bellaigue, *British Book Publishing as a Business since the 1960s* (London: The British Library, 2004).
- <sup>2</sup> Craig Munro and Robyn Sheahan-Bright (eds.), *Paper Empires: A History of the Book in Australia* (St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 2006).