

# Cultural Production: commissioning books in contemporary Australia

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My doctoral research explores the cultural practice of editors and publishers who commission books in Australia. The work is both recent and contemporary, covering a book publishing period that has responded to rapid social, political, economic and technological change, from 1970 to 2000. This work-in-progress, draws from the narratives of commissioning editors and publishers, who originate ideas, authors and texts, within the dynamic cultural field that constitutes Australian book publishing. This 'industry narrative' intersects with my own understanding of book commissioning, within the configuration of a cultural and commercial production space, where knowledge is received, interpreted, shaped and commodified.

While the events of authorship and publication are interdependent, what enables the process of a text's creation into book form is the agency of publication, encompassing a raft of wide-ranging activities, across all stages in a book's life-cycle (McLean 58). Editors and publishers are located in a book development and production space which represents an intersection of culture and power. To explore the cultural forces at work, inside and outside Australian book publishing, it is necessary to understand the nature and complexity of how editors and publishers go about the business of commissioning. To reach an understanding of why all stages of cultural production matter, book commissioning must be examined, as this practice relates to issues of identity, representation and institutionalisation within an Australian book publishing culture.

Most studies of Australian Literature focus on the author and the text within scholarly and literary communities, discussing the author as *cause célèbre* through literary criticism. Book editors also identify the author as 'the most important person in the "assembly line"' of book production (Flann and Hill 1). In describing name writers and familiar texts marketed to a literary audience, appearing at book events

or in print reviews and other reception media, Mark Davis refers to a 'culture of nameism' (143). These authors are well known to a literary establishment and yet the identities of editors or publishers who have worked on their books are mostly unknown outside publishing industry circles. While it is uncharacteristic of 'modern' publishers not to take advantage of a promotional opportunity, editors and publishers aren't often enough credited on the imprint page or cover jacket of the book. A throw-away line will often be found in book acknowledgments but even these inclusions don't give away many clues about author-editor-publisher relations. Perhaps this is due to the intensely personal and professional nature of productive publishing collaborations and perhaps also this says something about the role of the editor, in particular, as an 'invisible mender'.

The significance and difficulty in identifying and acknowledging the work of particular editors was discussed by Jackie Yowell, commissioning publisher with Allen & Unwin.

A book can sometimes have more than one editor in its production lifetime and the work is collaborative in-house. If you can single out the responsibility, if you can say 'this person is responsible for this book', that should go on the imprint page, both for the editor or publisher's track record and for the industry. (Brown, Yowell interview)

The purpose in arguing that there is more to Australian literature than authors and texts, is to broaden the discussion to include editors and publishers. Most people know little about book publishing in Australia, the kinds of publishers that exist and what they publish (Schwarz 30). It is argued that 'not many people know what editors do: such knowledge, they think, will not alter their lives' (Costello 19). Along with a public ignorance about most publishing matters, an 'in-house' book production culture has managed to remain mostly mysterious, misunderstood and often maligned.

The scope and nature of the editor's and publisher's work is regarded as critical to the success of the publishing house, where the 'commissioning editor', 'acquisition editor' or 'publisher' can all be doing exactly the same thing (Brown, Weiss interview). In her Australian study of the book as a product of its time, Kathleen McLean refers to the 'editor', also known as the 'commissioning editor' or by the generic term 'publisher'. She positions these entities as central figures in Australian publishing, occupying a central position in Australian book culture, not merely as the physical producers of books but as participants in all aspects of the book's life-cycle (66, 67). Flann and Hill describe the principal role of the publisher (or commissioning editor), as planning and carrying through a successful and innovative publishing program, with a forward list to cover the next two to three years, looking for quality and originality of writing and ideas of historical, social, cultural or educational value (34).

Publishing manager with the University of Queensland Press, Craig Munro, argues that in practice there are surprisingly few examples of authors and texts that

come about through a formal commissioning process; that commissioning is viewed as a more informal and undocumented practice, where publishers often 'suggest' to prospective authors that they might consider working on a particular project (Munro 18). It would seem that book commissioning is not a transparent practice or formally documented until the point of signing the publishing contract, where the financial and legal terms are outlined in the author-publisher agreement, brokering creative relations and business partnerships. Overall, the participants in my research have expressed a frustration with internal bureaucracies. Daily and weekly rounds of administrative meetings and the pressure of managerial responsibilities, impinge on a more proactive search (commission) and acquisitions role. If company structures make it difficult for editors or publishers to find the time to initiate publishing projects, how do authors, ideas and concepts find their way into the publishing house?

The following narratives offer a range of interesting stories from trade publishers about how they go about commissioning authors and texts. At the time of interview, Bruce Sims had formerly worked as publishing manager with Magabala Books and was appointed as acting publisher with the Melbourne office of ABC Books. Sophie Cunningham was trade publisher with Allen & Unwin. Margaret Ruhfus had been recently appointed as publishing manager with Magabala Books from her former publishing position with Aboriginal Studies Press:

I was told before I started with the ABC that they didn't do fiction or poetry. Margaret's Scott's book contains both, as well as non-fiction. The rationale for that book was that she had been, and still is, an ABC personality. (Brown, Sims interview)

I went to the Adelaide Festival and there was a session on the 'Future of Feminism'. There were three feminists on the panel over 50. They all said that young women were not doing enough and that feminism was dying because young women hadn't taken up the torch. I walked out in a rage. As a result I commissioned *Bad Girls* and *DIY Feminism*. (Brown, Cunningham interview)

*Grog War* was commissioned by the Julalikari Council who are Warumungu people in Tennant Creek. They were looking around for a publisher at a time when it was substantially finished. It was really through a personal connection that it came to Magabala. (Brown, Sims interview)

The *Torres Strait Islander Women and the Pacific War* collection came in as a slightly reworked manuscript based on the author's Ph.D. Some of the accounts that the author had gathered were really quite extraordinary. It had definite possibilities and was a subject area that hadn't been covered at all. So there it was – something to match a gap in Australia's published history. (Brown, Ruhfus interview)

Coser, Kadushin and Powell's American study, on the commerce and culture of publishing undertaken in the early 1980s, found that editors were largely unable either to systematically describe how they acquired manuscripts or to fully account for all the factors involved in the decision-making process (124). Because seniority plays a powerful part in the decision-making, especially within hierarchical publishing structures, editors do not necessarily take part in all stages of the decision-making and this evidence is supported in my research. The status and position of those who commission books, working within particular organisational structures and publishing cultures, are discussed in the following narratives.

At the time of interview, Jackie Yowell commissioned individual works of non-fiction for Allen & Unwin as a 'consultant' publisher (1998):

There's no doubt that you have more power when you are a publisher or publishing director. The higher you are in a publishing hierarchy the more power you have to publish what you think is worth publishing. (Brown, Yowell interview)

At the time of interview, Susan Hawthorne commissioned across a broad list of feminist titles as Spinifex Press publisher (1998). Hawthorne's narrative refers to her earlier experience as commissioning editor with Penguin Books (1987-1990) before she founded Spinifex Press with Renate Klein (1991):

When I was a 'commissioning editor' I wasn't the contract signing person but I was the person who jumped up and down and spoke loudly and generated the interest in the book being published but I didn't have the final say. Now I'm the publisher I have the final say and I sign the contracts. (Brown, Hawthorne interview)

At the time of interview, Vern Field and Kirstin Schneider were members of the feminist publishing collective, Sybylla Feminist Press (1999):

In some ways that's what is so radical about Sybylla – that you can choose to have that collective power – whereas in the rest of the world you just can't have it. (Brown, Field and Schneider interview)

At the time of interview, Bruce Sims was acting publisher in the Melbourne office of ABC Books (1999):

In the ABC you've got multiple police – I mean at the very top you've got the ABC Board which has particular constituencies who must be taken into account. All levels of publishing within the ABC are scrutinised more externally, whereas in most commercial publishing houses the culture is more self-policing. (Brown, Sims interview)

Official job descriptions do not accurately detail the work that editors and publishers carry out on a daily basis. American and British book publishing studies adopt a 'participant-observer' approach as the best research method for capturing the essence of what editors and publishers do 'in-house', through direct observation, formal and informal interviews (Coser *et al.*, Lane and Booth). It is also argued that serendipity can play a role in the book acquisition process (Poland 114). A manuscript doesn't always come directly to the publishing house. Sometimes it's the ideas or concepts, rather than the words, that are commissioned in the first instance. This is how Spinifex Press publisher Susan Hawthorne commissioned Diane Bell's consultation with the Ngarrindjeri community in the writing of *Ngarrindjeri Wurrurarrin*:

We gave her a commitment that we would publish the work although she hadn't started writing. We don't normally contract until we've got a manuscript. We were committing to the Hindmarsh Island issue and the fact that we both believed this was important for Aboriginal women and white women, for the culture as a whole, for issues around native title and our whole relationship to the country. (Brown, Hawthorne interview)

Freelance editor Margaret McDonell argues that editors and publishers bring their own personal biases, tastes and preconceptions to their work, while also reflecting those of the publishing house in which they are located, and the genre within which the manuscript is situated (1). McDonell believes that the values she brings to her editing are coming from the wider culture at the time the manuscript is edited, therefore the editing process must be understood within the context of issues that are not value-free and are reinforced by value-laden publishing and public cultures (1). Although it is in the professional interests of the stakeholders who commission texts to reflect the traditions and policies of the company they work for, their personal beliefs, values and cultural assumptions overlay the template of the publishing house.

The following narratives reveal how publishers position themselves across publishing and public cultures. At the time of interview, Sophie Cunningham was commissioning trade titles across a fiction and non-fiction list for Allen & Unwin (1998):

I felt very strongly when I started in publishing that there was the experience of my own generation. Writers who push at the boundaries are really important to a kind of rich culture. The establishment has a vested interest in thinking that their kind of polemical texts are the most interesting. (Brown, Cunningham interview)

At the time of interview, Craig Munro was publishing manager with the University of Queensland Press (1998):

We've done quite a lot of books that have contributed to the unseating of governments and books largely to do with Queensland politics – a very fertile ground for fearless authors and publishers! (Brown, Munro interview)

Although there is a lot of media attention on reconciliation, people are not reading Aboriginal writing and it's not being reviewed. I think that the level of effort going into understanding Aboriginal issues has decreased. It's partly an effect of the One Nation stuff and the current government is kowtowing to that, trying to get people who voted for One Nation last time to come back to the Liberal Party. I think that the politics of a nation affects the culture. When Whitlam came in, suddenly it made it easier for people to talk about things – with Howard it's much harder to talk and these issues are much harder to sell. (Brown, Hawthorne interview)

Alison Bartlett's study of contemporary Australian women's writing, discusses the importance of place and its impact on reading and writing practices. Bartlett argues that although the writers included in her study are shaped by the cultural conditions of living in Australia, these conditions are not homogeneous, thus the location and position of the writer profoundly effect their writing practice (2-3). This is also relevant to how those editors and publishers in my study have positioned themselves, how this has informed their commissioning practice and has enabled the culturally sensitive development of book relations. Alison Ravenscroft is critical of dominant western conceptions of the written text that assume the book carries the same relations across cultures (261). She discusses an intersection of identity, location and place in the nature of encounters between western publishing structures and Aboriginal writers where 'white readers, editors and publishers tend to apprehend Black writers' texts according to a singular notion of the book and its powers' (261). Ravenscroft's account of working collaboratively with Murri women, Rita Huggins and Jackie Huggins, on the editing of the biography *Auntie Rita*, is an interesting case study, challenging western assumptions of book relations to culture. She describes *Auntie Rita* as a text in which memory and history are produced within a space intersected by cultural and generational differences (262). The text is about familial and communal life; it is produced within this context. The conditions of its production are inscribed in its very form, where the 'white gunduburrie' is inserted into familial relations to enable the editing to take place (265). This acceptance of a non-indigenous editor was critical to the collaborative production, publication and reception of *Auntie Rita* where 'the ideas that Rita Huggins held about the book and the relations it carried, shaped her encounter with her editor and her readers' (265).

A contemporary debate within publishing circles and the wider culture is that publishers and western publishing structures have sacrificed ideas in the name of bottom-line publishing, where authors, texts and lists are no longer valued as a set of ideas (Davis 145). In discussing her rationale for commissioning Moira Rayner's

book, Jackie Yowell refers to the critical role carried out by editors and publishers in introducing ideas and debate into the wider culture:

We want to see democracy in Asia to the point where we are prepared to topple governments but here, we don't seem to mind that it's been overridden by all kinds of economic considerations. The issues and ideas behind *Rooting Democracy* was to rekindle and spark the debate about democracy, to raise awareness in the community, to create ourselves as a democracy, as an important set of ideas. (Brown, Yowell interview)

Those who commission books argue that they no longer have the time to search for ideas and authors. Editors and publishers are acquiring more projects through their own established contacts and networks, including the increasing approach by literary agents in representing trade authors to bigger publishing houses. This is particularly the case for senior editors and publishers who hold management positions and supervise other staff. At the time of interview, publisher Ray Coffey commissioned a broad list of West Australian writers at Fremantle Arts Centre Press:

To some extent publishers in Australia have vacated an area of creativity and imagination. Rather than being proactive they are responsive. (Brown, Coffey interview)

I'm not on the ground in the way I used to be – so a lot of it would now depend on those people finding me. I don't have that kind of time anymore. (Brown, Cunningham interview)

I don't think it's the case that they [editors and publishers] have less time but it is true that a lot of publishers now will not look at anything unless it's come through an agent and this was not the case ten years ago'. (Brown, Sims interview)

The catalyst for social change is a response by authors, editors and publishers to political and economic shifts within the culture, influencing the ideas that are published and circulated amongst communities of readers. If books reflect the culture at the time of production, the same must be said of cultural producers, who commission 'snapshots' of publishing and public cultures over time. Jackie Yowell and Sophie Cunningham identified particular book titles from their lists, reflecting different communities and documenting social change:

The idea behind *The Boat People* was to show these people as more than just people flooding our shores to try and get a sense of the story behind what had happened to them and then it was more complex than we could capture. The 'boat people' now has a connotation of loads of

people washed up on our shores that we have to do something with, which is unfortunate, because the whole idea was to try and give a sense of where those people were coming from. (Brown, Yowell interview)

We were both aware of wanting to challenge the reader's notions that gay men are not in long term love relationships. These were two young men who had had AIDS since they were twenty, so their whole adult lives they had been HIV positive. *Holding The Man* was one of those books that very much captured a range of experiences ... about the 70s, the explosion of the gay scene in the 80s and the revelation about AIDS decimating a community in the 90s. (Brown, Cunningham interview)

In conclusion, publishing cultures are linked to the nature of the social structures and communities that comprise publishers, editors, authors and their publics (Coser *et al.* 363). Book production cannot be separated out from other social, economic and political activities at both individual and institutional levels (Reynolds 1). If the book is embedded in complex social, economic and political conditions, the same must be said of their cultural producers. Although it is in the professional interests of stakeholders who commission ideas, authors and texts to represent the philosophies and policies of their workplace, the personal beliefs, values and assumptions of editors and publishers overlay the template of the publishing house. Value-laden public and publishing cultures are located within an increasingly transnational cultural space, where there is pressure to 'perform', as authors, editors, publishers and books are commodified in an unpredictable and less recognisable marketplace.

These cultural and commercial trends continue to impact on commissioning and acquisitions practice, and the critical ways in which cultural production takes place, within a recent and contemporary publishing environment.

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