

THE FLIGHT OF THE MIND: WRITING AND
THE CREATIVE IMAGINATION
Conference Paper

The Midwife's Tale

Aviva Tuffield

Presented in Session 7: The Creative Critic
Sunday 25 October 2009

This is a strange panel for me to be on because, since I returned to book publishing a few years back, I no longer feel able to review or critique books in public for, despite my impeccable ethics, others will consider me biased towards one publisher and against the others.

So my talk today will consider how the role of publishers and editors can be seen as creative critics in terms of discovering, selecting and nurturing new writers, and spurring on their creativity, in order to ensure a vibrant literary culture.

Publishers are seen as the gatekeepers, who choose what gets to be read in book form in the public domain—and we're often considered very conservative and risk-averse, especially by disgruntled or rejected writers.

In some ways, publishers are the first critics: the ones who decide what the critics will ultimately get to read, review and judge.

Today I'd like to have a look at the ways in which publishers can use their critical skills creatively—and certainly this is what I hope to do in my role as Fiction

Acquisitions Editor at Scribe—to take risks with new books and authors that enrich our culture and ensure that the Australian literary ecology thrives. Two areas that are particularly threatened and are in need of creative assistance from publishers at the moment are literary fiction and the short story and I'd like to speak to each of these in turn.

Literary fiction is the area that I am most concerned about and that needs an infusion of creativity from publishers as well as writers. What do I mean by literary fiction: well, it's a tricky definition to nail down, but certainly fiction where the writing is as important as the story or plot—so not genre writing that follows formulaic conventions; fiction where the writing is satisfying in itself—where striking metaphors or tone or style are employed such that familiar and everyday places, landscapes, objects, emotions, relationships etc. are revealed to us afresh by the ways they are described—and literary fiction can reveal to us things we don't know about—other people, times, places and worlds—and even things we don't know we don't know—not to get too Donald Rumsfeld about it all!

I do think Australian literary fiction is important because it shapes our collective sense of self, shows us ways to live and exercises our powers of empathy and our moral compasses, challenging us to understand others and ourselves better.

And as Miles Franklin reminds us: 'without an indigenous literature people can remain alien in their own soil'.

I was hired by Scribe in 2006 specifically to build an Australian fiction list, with a focus on literary fiction. In fact, if you looked at the environment into which I was

entering, you would have said it was a bit of a folly to be starting an Australian literary fiction list then at all.

At that time, sales of Australian fiction, especially literary fiction, were falling. We don't have accurate recent figures because the Australian Bureau of Statistics stopped collecting data on the Australian publishing industry in 2003–04 but at that point we knew that sales of Australian fiction fell from \$125 million in 2001 to \$73 million in 2003.

And there was also evidence of a shift from fiction reading to non-fiction reading, such that non-fiction used to outstrip sales of fiction two to one, and around 2006 it was four to one—although I think, looking at bestseller lists, that might be shifting back.

So why is there this decline in sales and reading of Australian fiction? Many people have made mention of the death of the novel but that seems rather extreme and premature to me. But it's certainly true that there are more competing media nowadays and there has been much research into the decline of literary reading, especially among young people.

And maybe many people do get their entertainment and their story narratives from other forms than novels these days, such as movies and TV series. Or they're using computer games or Facebook or their iPhone to pass their leisure time.

One thing that certainly hit book sales was the introduction of the GST in 2000 and fiction sales in particular still don't seem to have recovered. If you love a sports star or a celebrity chef, or you're already a reader of James Patterson or Dan

Brown, an extra 10% on the price won't put you off buying their new book, but for a debut novelist, who you've never heard of, the fact that the price has now been pushed over \$30 might just be the deciding factor against buying it.

At the same time that sales of Australian novels were declining—and probably in response—Australian publishers were cutting back their Australian fiction lists, especially the multinationals, and focusing on their international stars. So, for example, Simon & Schuster announced that they would no longer publish local fiction and Penguin and others slashed their so-called midlist authors. In 2006, one of the biggest companies, Random House, published only one debut Australian novel.

Further evidence that fewer Australian literary novels were being published was provided by a significant drop in the number of entries to the Miles Franklin prize, falling by a third from 1996 to 2006. [84 in 1997 to 43 in 2005.]

Whatever the reasons, it is a certainly a difficult market for debut Australian fiction and for those trying to start lists in that climate. And it should be noted that fiction is inherently more risky for publishers than publishing non-fiction because, with non-fiction, at the outset you can imagine a guaranteed group of readers for, say, Ricky Ponting's *Captain's Diary* or Peter Cosgrove's memoir or a military history account—and hopefully the book's sales will expand beyond that core niche market—but there are some people who will buy a book on a certain topic, which is their particular passion, almost without fail.

But in fiction, you have no guaranteed reader for each debut novel (except perhaps the author's mum and grandma—and they'll probably want a free copy),

instead you have a pool of fiction readers—75 per cent of whom are women—who may choose one of many, many fiction titles. With fiction, it really does seem to be a winner takes all market—every six months there will be, say, 30 or so novels published and there will be one book that absorbs all the media attention and takes off and the other 29 will languish. Novels do tend to get published to resounding applause or resounding silence; there doesn't seem to be much middle ground.

The only consolation for fiction publishers is that if a novel does take off, it can build and build and have a much longer shelf life than non-fiction which is often more time-sensitive and goes out-of-date. Great novels endure. If you think about the books that we still read from the nineteenth century, they are almost all novels.

So this is the environment into which I was plunged to start an Australian fiction list.

But still that is what I want to do: find and nurture new writers, help shape their work to make it the best it can be because the next Tim Winton or Elizabeth Jolley or Gail Jones or Peter Carey can't arrive without having had a debut novel that someone has taken a risk upon and has edited carefully to prepare it for publication.

Last year, I published five Australian novels, all debuts, which is a sign of something, perhaps madness, but hopefully commitment to Australian writers and ultimately readers.

Once I acquire a book, much of my focus is on editorial work because I truly believe—perhaps naively—that good writing will find an audience and that marketing hype will only get you so far. A great story, well-written and perfectly cast, is the key to word-of-mouth success in my view.

So most of my critical skills are devoted to editing—and I will make numerous suggestions to my authors. I would never sign up a book and then announce to a writer that they have to completely change their work, or that they have to kill off a character or completely alter the ending: that would be unfair on the author. When I acquire a book I feel passionate about, I will have a vision for that book and how to make it the best it can be, and will discuss that with the author so that we're both on the same page. I will challenge the author to improve and polish their work until it gleams; I won't insist on changes that an author's not comfortable with, but often in raising something with a writer about some aspect that I feel isn't working, it provokes them to rewrite it so that it's improved or to change it in some fundamental way.

Editors are the invisible menders: ultimately our fingerprints on our authors' works should be removed. You won't find a footnote from the author on the book's first page explaining that the book starts here because their editor advised them to cut the first 30 pages—nor will you find some bracketed note in the middle of a book that explains that an envelope in the story can't be opened now because their editor said it would be much more suspenseful to reveal the letter's contents at the book's end!

There is no template for how much work a book needs—it varies book by book. Certainly sometimes my role is hands-on from conception through each trimester,

while at other times I'm there solely for the final term and to make sure the baby comes out looking pretty.

With new and emerging writers often I'm around from the very early days, motivating them to keep writing and giving extensive feedback along the way. It's a very satisfying role and a productive relationship can develop.

And this commitment to new and emerging writers is something that a smaller independent like Scribe can do because we can think creatively about print runs and what the market will bear, without being beholden to some multinational head office in the US or Germany.

Independent publishers have lower overheads and so can afford to do smaller, often more realistic print runs for this market. Larger publishers will often say they can't print fewer than 5000 or even 7000 copies so reject a manuscript on that basis, saying they can't see it selling a large-enough quantity. Well in the Australian market, many, many novels that get published don't sell 7000 or even 5000 copies Even those that are shortlisted or win literary prizes.

And there's nothing to be embarrassed about those level of sales; we're a small market with a small population.

In the UK at the moment, with a population three times our size, average sales of a literary novel are around 2000 copies.

And we shouldn't view small print runs as a negative. As Gabriel Zaid wrote in *Too Many Books*: 'Book people ... have a habit of feeling sorry for themselves, a

tendency to complain even when all is well. This makes them see as a failure something that is actually a blessing: the book business, unlike newspapers, films or television, is viable on a small scale.'

We at Scribe can afford to do smaller print runs because our overheads are low and we don't have to offset high operating costs with every single book we do. Obviously some books on the list need to be highly profitable, but we can actually make a profit on a small print run of, say, 3000, often with sales of around 2000 copies, if we keep our costs under control and do much of the work in-house. This allows us to take risks with unknown writers or with writers who have undoubted talent but may take time to find their readership—and once their books are in print we can build their reputation and name and hopefully reprint or certainly do a larger print run for their second book.

We all know examples of writers whose breakthrough book came after three or four books—think of Jonathan Franzen who had sold meagre numbers of his first two novels before *The Corrections* came along, or right now Christos Tsiolkas, whose *The Slap* has pushed him over into that land known as bestsellerdom.

So if all publishers had that benchmark rule of 5000 or 7000 print run, we would be depriving Australian literary culture of much of its richness.

I do see it as an important role for publishers as critics to give unknown, first-time authors their break and the opportunity to get their first book published. In this culture that values celebrity authors and marketing hooks over quality, debut literary fiction is particularly disadvantaged, and this leads me directly to another

area where I think the publishing industry is failing new writers and that is short stories.

It has become a truism that short stories don't sell and that just becomes self-fulfilling when everyone agrees that the market for stories is small and shrinking and so booksellers stop stocking them and the media stops reviewing or giving them much attention and magazines stop including them so that readers can't find them or buy them and aren't used to coming across them in the pages of their magazines and broadsheets. Well, guess what: then stories don't sell. And then publishers worry about publishing them and so then the spiral continues downwards.

People often ask me—often short-story writers, it must be said—why short stories don't sell, telling me it feels counter-intuitive to our time-poor society that short stories are out of vogue—surely they are the perfect form for our time-pressed, attention-deficit society or for those commuter journeys to work on trams and trains. But as I've already mentioned, more and more people aren't spending their leisure time reading but on new media—updating their Facebook page or Twittering etc—and people on trams and trains and buses aren't reading something short. In fact, they're often not reading at all: they're on their mobile phones or they're texting or surfing the web on their iPhone and the like.

And, counter-intuitively again, when they do read they often want a tome such as Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series and to be immersed into a whole world or Stieg Larsson's *Milennium* trilogy or some other 'crime series', because if they do commit to a book/character/story they want it to keep going—perhaps that's because we're influenced by visual media so much like films and TV series, which

are all ongoing, never-ending, such as the *CSI* franchise or *The Wire* or *The West Wing*.

So it seems the short story is becoming marginalised as a form and that really worries me as both a reader and as an editor

Firstly as a reader, short stories can be so satisfying. They are all about compression and distillation, with not a word wasted. The best short stories are so much more than the sum of their parts: they are such rich reward for something that can be completed during the time it takes for your coffee to cool.

Flannery O'Connor once wrote that:

A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is. You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate. When anybody asks what a story is about, the only proper thing is to tell him to read the story. The meaning of fiction is not abstract meaning but experienced meaning.

And I also love short stories as a reader because they are often more open-ended than novels; they leave much more room for the imagination, so that you can go on thinking about a story for days, pondering its meanings. Stories often kickstart your imagination, whereas a novel gives you the whole flight path.

As an editor I worry about the decline of the short-story market because stories are an important training ground for our writers. Stories allow writers a flexibility and scope to experiment with an idea or a character or a style—to perfect something in

miniature—in a way that a longer work does not. If the audience for stories disappears, I fear for future writers who will not be able to hone their skills *and* acquire some publication record at the same time. There are not that many writers who launch straight into a novel and stories for me are a vital part of the Australian literary ecology.

It used often to be the case that a writer's first published work would be a collection of stories and then a debut novel, but that trajectory seems less and less available and only if you've written a novel, and it's sold well, and perhaps another novel are you now allowed the luxury of a story collection. Consider some of our leading writers today, who forged their careers with story collections—such as Kate Grenville, Gail Jones, Peter Carey, Joan London, Peter Goldsworthy.

Finally I also worry that if we neglect and undervalue short stories, we will deny ourselves the future masters of that form—those writers whose best or only work was in the short form—think Chekhov, Raymond Carver, William Trevor, Alice Munro.

This is particularly interesting to consider in light of Alice Munro's recent win of the International Booker for a writer's body of work. And Munro herself has claimed and I quote:

I haven't read a novel that I didn't think couldn't have been a better story.

So I do think the short story is an important form and one worth saving and one where publishers have to be brave and lead the way. And the short story is not sick in terms of quantity or quality. I read many wonderful stories each year that I

fear, given the limited opportunities to publish short stories these days, may never be published in print form at all, and certainly never in book form—and so part of the impetus of Scribe's anthology *New Australian Stories*, which will be a biennial release, was to offer another outlet for book publication of short stories—and one that places new and emerging writers alongside more established ones.

So I certainly see a role for publishers to lead the way in shaping the Australian literary culture. You can't wait for readers to demand certain kinds of novels: it just doesn't work like that with original fiction. I'm not saying we can publish literary forms and books that endlessly don't make money—and that people don't want—but it's important to take risks and make investments in writers who you believe will go on to write the great books that will shape the Australian imagination in the future.

And by making a long-term commitment to those new writers now and establishing a relationship with them, I hope they will stay with us, and that's something that so far has been rewarded. Next year two of my 2008 debut novelists are publishing second books. And one of the first books I published was Cate Kennedy's much acclaimed story collection, *Dark Roots*, and now we've just released her wonderful debut novel *The World Beneath*, which I truly believe will win prizes and become an Australian classic that will be taught in schools.

And as readers we all know that the importance of books shouldn't be measured by profits or sales, and that some books can come into our lives at certain times and have a disproportionate impact on our lives. We can all cite books that have literally changed our lives—and these are the works of literature, often literary fiction, that really speak to us. Not the generic crime thrillers or celebrity

cookbooks or sports biographies that fill so much of the shelf space in bookstores these days.

My desire is to find that transformative fiction that will take readers on a journey and make a difference to their lives, if only marginally.

Hopefully I've demonstrated that I'm employing my critical skills to think creatively about Australian literature—and without that discovering and nurturing of new writers, which it does seem the bigger publishing houses are more and more unwilling to do—we will lose the richness and variety of Australian literature. And I hope I've made you believe, as I do, that publishers can—and in my view should—be creative forces in our society and not just followers of fashion.

Thank you.

The Flight of the Mind: Writing and the Creative Imagination was a major National Library of Australia conference supported by the Copyright Agency Limited (CAL)'s Cultural Fund, the Ray Mathew and Eva Kollsman Trust and Alison Sanchez.

*You can hear the full text of this paper at
<http://www.nla.gov.au/podcasts/talks.html>*