

**Writing for Children and Young Adults Literature Festival
The NSW Writer's Centre, June 2005**

**Educational versus Trade Markets
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It is my understanding that a lot more children's books are published in the education market than the trade market. For authors, this means more opportunities for publication in both the fiction and non-fiction genres. In trade I believe that not only are there less books published but non-fiction accounts for 90% of what's published and fiction gets a measly 10% of the pie.

In non-fiction we see biography, politics, memoir, travel, gardening, current affairs, health, lifestyle etc. We are currently seeing a boom in that interesting hybrid between fiction and autobiography, for example, *Mao's Last Dancer* by Li Cunxin or *The Chinese Cinderella* by Adeline Shen Wah. Recently at the Sydney Writer's Festival James Moloney and I were chatting about the line-up of authors this year when James lamented that now he is almost not viewed as a proper author because he hasn't had a tragic past.

For my publisher, HarperCollins, trade fiction books are published in a global market – because of this the world pie is being divvied up, 40% of all books published by HC in Australia must come from the US market and 40% must come from the UK. This leaves a paltry 20% for Australian authors. For such a limited number of titles, competition to publish in trade fiction is fierce. I think of myself as a minnow in a vast ocean. The tragedy for Australian authors is that many British and American Publishers do not view Australia as an export territory.

Because it's rare to get published in trade fiction I believe that there are a lot more 'egos' in the trade market and I think it would be fair to say, most writers see trade publishing as much more glamorous, financially rewarding, and something to aspire to in their writing careers.

Having said that, to survive in the trade market books need an edge. The greater the edge, the greater the risk to both the publisher and the author. Big risks have big wins but they also have big losses. As an author, I know that when I write something edgy I take readers out of their comfort zone. This can result in a negative backlash from those we fondly refer to as The Gatekeepers – parents, teachers, librarians and adult reviewers.

Recently I had a phone call from a publisher having a last minute panic about a term used in the book *Team Dream*, and I remember saying to her, 'Stop panicking. They shoot the author not the publisher.' Don't laugh. It's true.

I remember going to the Sydney Writer's Festival quite a few years ago and listening to Andy Griffiths' speech. He described how a writer must go

out of their comfort zone, sometimes a long way out to the edges of existence, and that sometimes writers fall off this edge. I think this is particularly true of trade writers.

Everyone here today loves kids books and many of you are hoping to have your own book published. I'd just like to look at the process and outline what's happening in the trade market.

Slush Pile/Unsolicited Manuscripts

They say that the only thing booming in the publishing industry is the number of courses offered in creative writing and the number of aspiring authors. Ramona Koval, in a discussion with Michael Heywood from Text Publishing reported an American research study where 81% of Americans surveyed felt that they wanted to write a book. If you're a celebrity this will be a children's book. Michael Heywood went on to make the point that in Australia we're seeing what he calls a 'tsunami of emerging writers trying to break into a 'cottage industry' in publishing in Australia. The by-product of this is that there is increased competition for less and less publishing slots. Publishers are responding to this deluge by closing their doors to unsolicited manuscripts. The flow-on from this is that: 1) literary agents are now being approached in droves to take over the publishers role of screening and editing; 2) we see the emergence of manuscript appraisal services; 3) self-publishing companies; and 4) the emergence of the 'middle man' or developer who puts programs together for an educational publisher for a fee (eg Underwood).

I am a slush-piler. I believe you can still be one today. You just have to be savvy. You must learn as much as you can about the publishing industry, find the openings for new writers and target them. There are still small publishers today who accept unsolicited manuscripts.

Editorial Process/Censorship

From my experience, there is much more publisher/author consultation in the editing process in the trade market with editors using a lighter touch than in education publishing. Trade editors make suggestions and comments and place the responsibility for making these changes back in the author's hands. Education publishers cannot seem to help themselves and meddle a lot more with the author's words, often with a cost to rhyme or rhythm or alliteration or metaphor or any tools of an author's trade. They also tend to make changes without consultation and it is not uncommon to find the finished product is 'not quite' how I intended it.

A book titled *The Most Unusual Pet*, written about a small shiny black spider called Charlotte who lived in our microwave oven was delivered to me at home as a finished product (I was expecting to check final proofs) and it was with horror that I discovered Charlotte the microwave spider had

become Frank the toolbox spider. Not only that, nearly every character was given a sex-change, the little girl became a boy, the mum became a dad, even the pet-shop man became a woman. The kitchen turned into a garage. And the child character didn't solve his problem, the father did. Why? I have absolutely no idea. I could understand if they wanted a male protagonist but this editor went to the extreme. This is a book I have to say I hate.

I often think that in many ways I am blessed by the fact that I'm not a teacher. Teachers have a need for the correct grammar and punctuation, for 'niceness' in characters (especially adults) for following the rules for the different text types they must teach. As a speech pathologist my background is with disordered language and rule systems. Because my working goal for a person was for them to communicate *meaning* I am much less likely to obey the rules. This is very confronting for an educational publisher. In fact, they just can't cope. Trade publishers give me a lot more freedom.

Hardly surprisingly, education publishers censor me a lot more than trade publishers. Recently I wrote a story for an anthology being published by John Wiley & Sons for the Queensland lower high school market, ages 12 – 15 years. The editor contacted me very politely, starting with 'Dear Jeni. This seems like censorship but I have changed a sentence.' It did not *seem* like censorship – it was censorship. My protagonist, a 14 year old boy, was fantasising about a girl that he liked. I'd written. 'Sophie, with lips like hot chips to lick and suck the salt off.' It was changed to: 'Sophie, with lips like hot chips. Yummy,' which isn't quite the same.

Manuscript Selection Process

In trade, editors can't buy a book without consulting their in-house publishing committee. People from sales, marketing, accounting and maybe even rights are part of the decision-making process.

Buyers

Trade buyers are the booksellers or wholesalers who supply them, parents, grandparents, young adults. In education, the buyers are teachers and librarians. Sometimes, trade books are also sold into the education market. The Diary series published by Scholastic Australia is an example of this.

Curriculum

Demands for teacher accountability and sensationalist press about poor literacy levels drive the need for education publishers to produce books linked to the curriculum. There is often a very specific brief for the authors that details: age levels, topic, word count, literacy level which specifies types of words, sentence structure, word frequency lists. Marianne de Pierres made the comment that 'Authors writing for the children's education market will find themselves in a literary straight jacket.'

In education the English syllabus emphasises knowledge of specific genres such as a report, recount, procedure, explanation or a discussion. These genres influence the education publisher to expose children to a wide range of text types and to see to see the purpose for these styles of writing.

On the plus side, in education there is a lot more variety in what's published, for example, textbooks, worksheets, workbooks, articles, short stories, non-fiction etc.

Political Correctness

Education books promote tolerance and equality. They promote gender, racial, minority group, and sexuality inclusiveness. Trend to focus on the 'safe' books where all the characters win in the end. On trade we see a swing away from safe with more cutting edge literature eg note the emergence of the picture book for older readers. The economics of publishing also means that publishers are hoping for overseas sales, especially US sales. To a large extent the American marketplace decides what is published in Australia and this is dictated to a degree by the American bible belt doctrine with its ban on: magic, supernatural phenomena, witchcraft, ghosts, violence, no nudity of any kind. Even bodily functions are a no-go zone. In my first reader published by Macmillan Ed, reference to Maisie going to the toilet was edited out. Perhaps for YA fiction this is less so.

In Australia and overseas there is great nervousness with writing cultures that are not the authors own, especially indigenous cultures. Publishers tend to avoid publishing books with indigenous characters unless written by an indigenous person.

Sales Driven

Trade publishers are sales driven and this depends on the whim and personal taste of the buying public. An author is only as good as their last sales figures. If sales figures are down a publisher will be reluctant to publish another book with this author. Booksellers are also less likely to stock the author's next book. Thus there is a lot more 'pressure to perform' placed on the author. In Education, where the market is more guaranteed, there is none or little pressure on the author regarding personal sales.

In trade, once the book is published a second type of work must be done. The author often works very hard to promote and market the book. They may speak to sales conferences, do media interviews, school visits, book signings, book launches. This takes a lot of time and can be emotionally draining. I call it my 'flighty' stage, when I find it difficult to do any serious writing because there are so many interruptions and other things to focus on.

The plus side of this is an author gets a higher profile and it's a wonderful buzz to reach your target audience. One downside that I am only just coming to grips with is the number of requests for 'freebies'. To donate free books,

speak for free, judge writing competitions for free, read and give manuscript appraisals for free, provide advice etc. I am still struggling to work out how to deal with the number of requests.

Agent Involvement

Agents are usually concerned with negotiating contracts in the trade market. Because advances and royalties are more negotiable and because there is the potential for large sales and overseas sales, it is more worth their while. Negotiating on a \$250 advance is economically not worth their while.

Payment

Trade publishers almost always pay a royalty to authors, although I don't think this is always the case for illustrators. Often this royalty is split between author and illustrator. Education publishers often offer a flat fee, a one-off payment, although sometimes it is possible to negotiate an advance and royalty. This advance and royalty is often lower than that received in trade. A generalisation would be a 5% royalty in education compared to a 10% royalty in trade, with the possibility of rising royalties after a certain number of sales.

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