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The Fiftieth Gate: An Australian case study in twentieth-century 'popular' publishing

On Sunday 6 April 1997, historian Mark Baker's first non-academic book was launched at Melbourne's iconic migrant portal, Station Pier. The guest list of over 500 invitees included representatives of many print media organisations, most of whom interviewed the author. His photograph was reproduced a week later in the 'Agenda' section of *The Age* newspaper. In this portrait, Baker leans on the railings beside the massive structure of Station Pier. Framed by sea and sky, he is caught glancing pensively over his shoulder past the camera and into the middle distance. He is alone. The day is bleak. Here, the reader is invited to surmise, is a man with much on his mind. In a flash of inspiration the sub-editor has prefaced the accompanying caption, 'Back to the future', linking the story with the mass media of film and television.

Baker and his publisher Harper Collins had worked strenuously towards the successful publication of his book, and their tactics were rewarded. *The Fiftieth Gate* made its debut as top nonfiction seller on the bestseller lists of both Melbourne's *The Age* and the *Australian Review of Books* during the following weeks. The book subsequently achieved several shortlistings and minor prizes and won The NSW Premier's Literary Award in 1997.

From the perspective of their intellectual creators, books are an art form with an aesthetic basis for their cultural value. Immediately upon the manuscript's transfer to a publisher, however, it becomes, via the auspices of the mass manufacturing process, a commodity to which an economic value is ascribed. The desire for publication, albeit concurrent with the writer's loss of personal control and complicity in the process of commercialization, appears to be the price writers willingly pay to engage with a reading public.

Mark Baker is one of a self-selecting group of writers, labelled in media and critical commentary as 'second-generation' Holocaust survivors. Such writers focus their skills upon stories of the Holocaust or its aftermath but consider themselves to be real writers, not merely family historians or witnesses to their parents' plight. The Holocaust is a significant driver of the second generation: testimony and memorialisation require publication, and it is through writing that members of the second generation attempt to make sense of the legacy of 'an event not personally experienced' (Berger 1997, p. 1). By publishing *The Fiftieth Gate*, Baker is following the tradition of second-generation writers, Australian and international, who strive to make sense of the meaning of the Holocaust in their own lives while fulfilling the eyewitness dictum to 'bear witness' (Levi 1987, 1989; Wiesel 1995).

The historian Inga Clendinnen argued that 'Normally we expect the magic of art to intensify, transfigure and elevate actuality. Touch the Holocaust and the

flow is reversed', rendering art 'vacuous and drained of authority' (1998, p. 185). Keeping this in mind, it is difficult to conceptualise a popular market that would justify commercial publication of Baker's memoir. The current structure of the Australian publishing industry, influenced by the conglomerate requirement for consistent and reliable profits, operates on the premise that larger numbers of fewer titles can be sold to the consumer market if the marketing package is appropriate. This model assumes a popular market for books that is largely homogenous. Closer scrutiny, however, reveals that the mass market is not a homogenous unit requiring an 'ideal' bestselling book able to cater to a single popular taste. It is, as described by John Frow (1995), a heterogeneity constructed of myriad niches, whose consumption of cultural production reflects social identity rather than class.

My paper explores the mechanisms by which the Australian publishing subsidiary of an international conglomerate, with its profit imperatives and consequent adoption of risk-averse publishing strategies, created a bestselling book from the unlikely source of a second-generation literary memoir.

Some months prior to the publication of the memoir by the then unknown academic, Baker, strategies for marketing his book as a potential bestseller were devised by the publishing company. Harper Collins used a proactive approach to influence the book's path through the marketing and sales processes from publisher through bookshop to reader. Baker, the child of Polish-Jewish Holocaust survivors, it would seem, had succeeded against the odds. Harper Collins printed and released in excess of 20 000 copies of *The Fiftieth Gate* into the Australian book trade on publication.

Signposts for bestsellers

In his study of British and American popular fiction of the 1970s, John Sutherland describes books with the potential to become bestsellers as those driven by publicity, by point-of-sale displays, by author tours and, frequently, by links to the release of movies (Sutherland 1981). Such support, he writes, turns books into an economically viable 'product' for the originating publisher. Additionally, the books are 'ideological', both expressing and feeding certain needs in the reading public by consolidating prejudice, providing comfort and 'therapy' whilst offering 'vicarious rewards and stimulus' (p. 34). Sutherland's bestselling writer demonstrates scholarly skill and research capabilities (pp. 137ff) with the aim of making the reader feel 'educated' by the experience of reading the novel (note 1). Bestselling writers also have the ability to revive history, 'to [make] a stale cliché fresh again' (p. 46). The chance of any particular title or work of a particular genre becoming a bestseller, however, Sutherland considered an unpredictable event, with even works of literature making the bestseller lists on occasion (p. 35).

When Sutherland wrote about the construction of the American bestselling novel, his definition of a bestseller was the achievement of sales in excess of one hundred thousand copies in hard cover or one million in paperback (1981, p. 11). He focused on writers who deliberately targeted an 'ideal' audience for bestsellers that, as discussed above, is a somewhat problematic, if convenient, construct of the mass-market publishers. Although Sutherland's research is specific to novels and to international markets, his categorisation of books and their marketing is nevertheless useful when considering the ways in which the second-generation Holocaust writer Mark Baker and his publisher worked to influence sales of *The Fiftieth Gate*.

In contrast with the American bestsellers of the 1970s, Australia's best selling local title in 2003, Matthew Reilly's *Scarecrow*, sold 78 037 copies (Nielsen BookScan Australia 2004). In an industry dominated by the sales success of imported titles and local gift books, locally nurtured literary writers are deemed successful if they sell 3000 copies on release, with as few as 1000 copies being typical for a first novel (Wilding 2000, p. 153). An Australian literary work achieving local release sales of more than twenty thousand copies is almost unheard of, which makes the success of Mark Baker's *Fiftieth Gate* even more extraordinary.

Strategies for stimulating media interest in *The Fiftieth Gate*

Baker was represented by Hickson & Associates, at that time one of Australia's leading literary agents, who would be expected to secure a substantial advance for their client. His manuscript was sold to Harper Collins on the basis of an initial printing of 7500 copies (a significant run for a literary memoir), which is possibly as much a comment on the need to recoup the advance payment as it is on the company's initial confidence in this first-time author's ability to generate significant sales. To the delight of its backers, the book soon impressed the Harper Collins editorial and marketing teams. It received a positive response from the company's sales representatives who enthusiastically passed the word to their clients, the booksellers. Such was the industry's response to early page proofs, the company began to believe that it had a potential bestseller on its hands, as evidenced by its issue of a press release prior to publication. The release not only described the company's growing confidence in Baker's book; in a radical step for Australian publishing, it also discussed the print run, publicly revealing that

Mark Baker's moving literary biography of his parents' journey to Australia was bought some months ago with an expected first print run of 7500 copies. After proof copies were sent to key booksellers around Australia, overwhelming support for this important book encouraged the publishing house to press the reprint button a month before publication.

Richard Parslow, Harper Collins' Sales and Marketing Director, said:

From the moment the manuscript arrived at our offices in Pymble, the quality and content of the book was evident. Everyone who picked it up and read it raved about it. Our Sales Representatives have rung to tell us how wonderful they think it is. The Publishing, Sales and Marketing teams were all very taken. Booksellers who have read it in its typescript form have written and telephoned to say how much they enjoyed it. We have decided to print 18 000 copies as a first release (Harper Collins 1997, p. 1).

In this press release the publisher provided facts that might otherwise be considered confidential, designed to stimulate interest in the book's publication as an unusual event, even as a new event—at least to industry insiders. The greatly increased first printing, from 7500 to 18 000 copies, of a literary title is tendered by its publisher as evidence (note 2).

There are several reasons for the success of this book by an unknown (in trade publishing terms) writer. Having the support and negotiating strength of an experienced agent to sell the work no doubt benefited the writer financially, as well as providing the publishing company with the incentive of

a significant advance royalty to recoup. This helped generate a climate of excitement within Harper Collins that was successfully conveyed to the bookselling community. Once a commitment to a large print run seemed possible, marketing strategies were used to consolidate maximum sales into bookshops on publication, and maximum column inches and radio exposure for the book and its author. A press release such as the one issued by Harper Collins, 'talking up' the book as a work of significance, a vehicle for quality writing and important content ('this important book', 'the quality and content...was evident'), and giving details of the projected print run, is unusual in an industry that has been notoriously guarded about divulging actual figures and where the definition of a 'bestseller' depends not on a particular numeric target but on context and to whom one is talking. Interviews with Baker and articles about and reviews of *The Fiftieth Gate* appeared in over twenty-five publications as diverse as the Salvation Army *War Cry*, the *Jewish News* and *The Bulletin*, as well as, of course, the mainstream review vehicles, *The Age*, *The Australian*, the *Australian Book Review*, *The Australian Review of Books*, the *Courier Mail*, *The West Australian* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

Prior to the book's publication, endorsement was solicited from Phillip Adams of ABC Radio National and *The Australian* newspaper. Much was made in the publisher's publicity campaign of Adams' praise for the book, which read:

It is an honour to read this magnificent book. Baker does with memory what Rembrandt does with light. He uses it to model, to imagine, to illuminate, to astonish. This is the book that has the dignity and the depth to undo the damage of Demidenko. (Harper Collins 1997, p. 1)

His quotation heads the press release as well as appearing on the book as a back-cover blurb. Linking the book's content to classical themes, Adams suggests a revelatory aspect to the work, 'to imagine, to illuminate, to astonish'. The blurb by a noted Australian broadcaster and public intellectual praises the book's ability to inform the reader while connecting the book to the controversy of the Demidenko scandal that had so consumed not only the literary media but also the opinion and editorial pages of the broadsheet presses during 1995 (note 3).

The link with Demidenko is an obvious one for the Harper Collins publicist to promote. The controversy about that author's identity and the nature of her book (fact or fiction?), as well as later accusations of plagiarism that cost Helen Darville (Demidenko) literary credibility, generated a public engagement with Holocaust history that continued for months following the book's winning of the prestigious Miles Franklin Award and the Gold Medal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature in 1995 (note 4).

The audience before whom the debate was enacted in the broadsheet press and on ABC radio and television, considered as consumers of high culture within the traditional class-based dichotomy between high and low culture, is perhaps more aptly defined by John Frow's (1995) model, which perceives high culture not as the dominant culture tied to the providers of capital but as a 'pocket within commodity culture' (1995, p. 86). Frow's paradigm, based on social identity, provides a more useful representation of the operations of the Australian publishing industry. Furthermore, Frow suggests that the coherent maintenance of such social identities only exists within 'the constant process of their reformation' (1995, p. 12), allowing the possibility for any individual to have multiple identities across a number of social groupings, thereby

explaining not only the different valuing of a cultural artifact (a book) within diverse social groupings but the transfer of such value from one group to another. Frow's paradigm explains the existence of significant niche markets fuelled by common interest groups, allowing that a book published with a particular readership in mind (those interested in Holocaust memorialisation, for instance) may be read by others for different reasons (an interest in memoir, perhaps.)

The selection of Adams's reference to the ability of Baker's book to 'undo the damage of Demidenko' for particular focus links the work inextricably with the moral high ground of Holocaust remembrance. Adams endows the book with the power to undo the damage, described during the controversy by Robert Manne (1996) as cultural and moral revisionism, exemplified by the poet Tom Shapcott's fears of a 'new generation which is distant from the Holocaust, who see it as something they want to question, or to challenge or to set aside' (Manne 1996, p. 133). One might speculate also about the nature of the healing process and its importance to the bruised egos of a media duped by the performance of a bogus Ukrainian writer, the same media to whom the press release setting up *The Fiftieth Gate* as a popular news item was addressed.

Included with the press release were an explanatory statement, 'Writing *The Fiftieth Gate*' by the author, and a two-page primer, 'An Interview with Mark Baker'. These documents suggest an attempt by the publisher to assist the media to recognise that the book's difficult content and self-conscious literary style were in fact accessible to a general audience and worth discussion and review. The Demidenko references remind the Jewish community where their loyalties should lie and, by suggesting a cause célèbre in Holocaust remembrance, seek to engender some sympathetic response from critics for whom the Demidenko imbroglio still rankled. The tactic worked, with reviews almost universally sympathetic to the author. Many reviewers invoked Demidenko as the spectre of Holocaust denial to which *The Fiftieth Gate* provided an antidote.

In the first attachment to the press release the author provides information designed to prime the media to enable a swift assimilation of the book. This document, entitled 'Writing *The Fiftieth Gate* by Mark Baker', seeks to amplify some of the more obscure references, such as the meaning of the book's title, as well as Baker's understanding of his writing process and the reactions of his parents to his research and to the publication. Having dealt with what he considers to be the controversial and difficult aspects of his story (his 'bullying' of his parents, his 'stealing' of their memories), Baker contextualises his book globally and locally, focusing on the genocide in Rwanda, the plight of refugees, and the family - the 'new narrative' that is built with the telling of family stories to his children. There is much here with which the journalist can conjure a profile and with which readers can identify. From the Holocaust and intergenerational trauma, Baker has constructed a framework for hope.

The second attachment to the press release, 'An interview with Mark Baker', contains further information about the book and its author presented in a question and answer format. The author responds to questions by an anonymous interviewer, intended as a primer, perhaps, for the unimaginative or time-stressed reviewer or feature writer. Baker's researched family history explores issues of memory and family relationships. Memory is altered, revised, Baker suggests, through interrogation.

Baker's original intention had been to write using historical research intermingled with his parents' testimonial memories - a combination of two 'distinct' voices. 'This was the deal,' he confirms. 'I would give them my knowledge of history; they would give me their memory' (1997, p. xi). Yet the writing is not a dry historical account tempered by eyewitness testimony. A third voice intrudes: his own. The work became a personal story of a son's struggle to discover his role within his survivor family. Where his detailed research uncovers unsatisfactory gaps in the record, he includes a first person, fictionalised account that dramatises his paternal grandmother's last moments in the gas chamber. His researched work, it seems, has been subverted during the writing to accommodate creative fiction and poetry.

The author and publisher ensure through the provision of ancillary documents attached to their press release that journalists are assisted to understand key issues in the book - especially those issues that relate to the story and the author's motives - that might prove interesting to a reading audience. A number of the issues raised in these documents correspond to those identified in Sutherland's (1981) description of the bestseller and its intended influence on the reader. Baker's book, for instance, is well researched and intended to educate; the author is an historian. Despite his parents' trauma, in Baker's telling, the reader experiences a measure of comfort. The story is one of the triumph of good over evil, of regeneration over genocide. Issues pertinent to a wider public than Holocaust survivor families are encompassed. The author draws from his personal pain an empathy with others who suffer - with the implication that one must assist all survivors of genocide, through the provision of aid perhaps (Baker had established *Keshet*, a Jewish humanitarian relief organisation, in 1995 in response to the crisis in Rwanda), and offer succour to refugees. Here the reader may gratefully move from the intolerable dimensions of the Holocaust to the manageable and humane dimensions of aid, caring and kindness. The book is understood to provide comfort: it is a corrective to the horror of the Holocaust. A type of closure is implied by the mock interview's final question: 'What do you plan to do next?' (Harper Collins 1997, p. 5). Baker has commenced a novel. He is able to return to 'normal' life.

The media response to Harper Collins's tactics

The topics synthesised through the press release and its attachments found their way into review columns and profile articles providing, as was intended, points of identification for the reader. Baker, as presented to the media, is a man not afraid to disclose both good and bad about himself and his family. Family secrets are revealed: imperfections, conflicts and difficult relationships abound in his memoir.

While being aware of difficulties inherent in his subject matter, Baker and those associated with the publication of *The Fiftieth Gate* seek an audience broader than that usually associated with either scholarly memoir or Holocaust memorial. *Sydney Morning Herald* reviewer, Richard Guilliat, writes of Baker's success:

Baker himself says the book is not about the Holocaust but about families, an observation that gets to the heart of the book's remarkable commercial appeal. In digging up his parents' secrets, Baker sets out on a journey that many middle-aged baby-boomers are contemplating - a journey to reach across the generational divide, to know their parents more

intimately before it is too late. He was prompted to write the book after his father underwent heart surgery (Guilliatt 1997).

Baker, the reader is told, has succeeded in creating a book with wide appeal and in particular to Australia's numerically largest generation, the baby-boomers. Rather than the specificity of the Holocaust, the reader is reminded about the vagaries of illness that can cut short a life at any time, but which Baker's father has survived.

In her review of *The Fiftieth Gate* for the *Australian Book Review*, Felicity Bloch (1997) makes an initial appeal to the Jewish readership of the magazine. The number of Holocaust survivors living in Australia, 'proportionately, the largest number of Holocaust survivors outside Israel, most of them living in Melbourne', she finds significant. She comments on the ageing survivor communities and the importance of recording their stories, emphasising the significance of the work of the second generation. Bloch mentions specifically writers Lily Brett, Arnold Zable and Ramona Koval in this context. For potential readers, Bloch confirms that the Holocaust is again a 'fashionable' topic, stressing, no doubt to the delight of the publisher, that although the book's content is sophisticated and complex, it is pitched towards a more general audience than is perhaps apparent:

Baker's 'journey through memory' is a collage, criss-crossing decades and continents, interweaving voices from the past and present with dreams, documents, and poetry. In case that sounds too arty for popular consumption, I should add that comedy and suspense keep the reader glued to the page. The intergenerational battle is a perennial source of Jewish humour...scholarly endnotes provide useful tips for anyone researching Eastern European family histories (Bloch 1997, p. 21).

With such blandishments, Bloch conveniently summarises the essential features of *The Fiftieth Gate*. The reader is encouraged to see the book neither as an addition to the scholarly material on the Holocaust nor as further testimony, but as a work that would enlighten and educate whilst entertaining. Through Bloch's review, the book is associated with 'popular' culture. Her readers would be well acquainted with Jewish humour through film and television (Woody Allen, Jerry Seinfeld, Ruby Wax), and the 'scholarly endnotes' are presented as a bonus for the amateur genealogist.

***The Fiftieth Gate's* appeal to readers**

The appeal of Baker's *Fiftieth Gate* to the reading audiences defined by Frow (1995) can be mapped using various characteristics associated by Sutherland (1981) with bestsellers. Those of particular relevance to this case study are the demonstration of authorial scholarship, the book's provision of therapy and comfort for the reader, the newsworthy nature of the writing, and ideas associated with refreshing the 'stale cliché'. Baker's book is not merely accurate historical reportage; it is a narrative story of literary yet popular merit. Baker, Harper Collins wishes the audience to know, is a (real) *writer*, not simply a family chronicler. His second book, a novel, is already underway. The attributes of bestselling books conveyed via the press release were largely accepted by the journalists, who explored them in review and during interviews with Baker.

Numerous reviewers mention Baker's meticulous scholarship and his career as an academic and historian. 'Their son grew up to earn an Oxford PhD and become a Jewish scholar' (Guilliatt 1997). 'A Melbourne academic historian, Baker adroitly reconstructs [his parents'] story from conversations and interviews supported by a daring use of documentary investigation' (Gerster 1997). 'Baker illuminates his parents' testimonies with primary sources thoughtfully left to us by the perpetrators' (Coleman 1997). Through scholarship Baker establishes credibility with his readers.

Readers of nonfiction and memoir require well-researched, factual information, as was confirmed by the removal from sale of Norma Khouri's *Forbidden Love* when it was discovered that Khouri was deceiving the public about her identity (Knox & Overington 2004). Though they may have benefited from the media hype surrounding the controversy in the short term through sales to the curious, publisher Random House was acutely conscious of the longer-term benefits of credibility in their market. Sutherland (1981) sees credibility as an important facet of the bestselling author's work practice, feeding the desire of many readers to feel they are being educated through their reading.

The Fiftieth Gate is also promoted as a story of intergenerational tensions. Highlighted in the press materials is the family's conflict during the writing of the book. The fact that Baker does not resile from the implications of his treatment of his parents - implicit in his relentless pursuit of their history is his selfishness in not sparing their feelings - helps engage the reader who can identify with a son's insistence that his parents' trauma is part of *his* story. The therapeutic nature of Baker's project provides a point of identity with a market acculturated to therapy through media representations. His parents' obvious suffering (depression, denial and phobias) has impinged upon Baker's own childhood. In an interview for the *Sydney Morning Herald* he says:

One of the things I'm tapping into is this search by many children, and I guess I'm one of the first to explore so deeply what it means to return to the beginning. What I needed to know was: what was the silence about, what was the sadness about in our household? How could my parents mix sadness and laughter at the same time? (Guilliatt 1997).

The reader sees Baker, the child, struggling to find his own truth and has empathy with his plight.

The publisher also encourages prospective readers to perceive a 'happy ending' for this book. The back cover copy proudly proclaims *The Fiftieth Gate* to be 'A love story and a detective story...a journey from despair and death towards hope and life; the story of a son who enters his parents' memories and, inside the darkness, finds light'. The emphasis here is upon the comfort of the reader, through presentation of what Holocaust scholar Laurence Langer has termed a 'manageable version of the Holocaust' (1995, p. 9) rather than on the nightmares, or the unresolved nature of Baker's parents' grief, for instance.

Harper Collins endeavoured to make their new book 'newsworthy' in the literary press and within the industry through the release of hitherto confidential information in their press release. Like later worldwide campaigns surrounding the bookshop release of the Harry Potter stories, the publicity campaign created a frisson around the size of Baker's print run which was unusual for a first-time literary author in the Australian market. Again, their plan succeeded. The *Australian Book Review* highlights the

achievement of 'this first-time author's dream run, with over 20 000 copies...taken up pre-publication, and enthusiastic reviews followed by top ratings in *The Age* best-seller list' (Bloch 1997). The *Sydney Morning Herald* is similarly impressed, running as a lead to their review:

The publishing world has been astonished by the success of *The Fiftieth Gate*, in which Mark Raphael Baker...lays bare his parents' Holocaust secrets. Richard Guilliat looks at the book's remarkable commercial appeal (Guilliat 1997).

Within his review Guilliat chronicles details of the print run (22 000), the book's status as a bestseller (a debut at the top of *The Age*'s list) and the positive response from major booksellers (Angus & Robertson selected the book among their top five orders for the month.)

Nor was the reference to Demidenko overlooked. *Time Magazine* used it in an effort to draw lines of equivalence between the stories, suggesting two very different imaginings of the Holocaust and casting the authors as binary opposites. A disingenuous Demidenko resorts to a 'fake Ukrainian heritage - and name'. Baker is authentic: 'My only credential is that I'm a son of these survivors' (Fitzgerald 1997). Peter Richardson in his *Sunday Age* review describes the work as 'an unanswerable coda to the intellectual dishonesty and moral shallowness that typified the Demidenko affair... Here is the real news' (Richardson 1997). Potential readers are reassured that the damage done by the unsettling media debate that surrounded publication of Demidenko's *The Hand that Signed the Paper* can be healed by Baker's appropriate and genuine voice from the second generation. This was a message with substantial appeal to the large Australian survivor community.

Baker's writing is made newsworthy by association with big print runs and the Demidenko controversy but, importantly, the book itself has the ability to provide a different kind of Holocaust memorialisation. Sutherland (1981) describes this as making a 'stale cliché fresh again' (p. 46). Following the critical debate over Demidenko's book, Robert Manne had feared a growing 'expression of jadedness with the Holocaust' (Bloch 1996). When David Bernstein was asked to review *The Fiftieth Gate* for the *Australian Jewish News* he was apprehensive about reading 'yet another worthy, undoubtedly well-written but ultimately - dare I say it - boring addition to Melbourne's lengthening Holocaust memorial bookshelf' (Bernstein 1997). The similarly jaded reader may have been inclined to think that not only is the Holocaust an unpalatable topic for a literary subject but, like Bernstein, one which had been repeated many times. Alan Jacobs, former director of the Sydney Jewish Museum responded, 'Oh God, another Holocaust memoir', when requested to review the book (Guilliat 1997). Having read the book, however, these reviewers and others encourage readers to suspend judgment. This book, they enthuse, is different. It has the power to make history new. Richard Guilliat (1997) quotes Dr Suzanne Rutland, senior lecturer in Jewish studies at the University of Sydney: 'I have read a lot of Holocaust memoirs... This book is unique in the way it integrates the present with the past. It really does add a new dimension'. *Herald Sun* reviewer, Zelda Cawthorne, is equally enthusiastic: 'Innumerable words have been written about the Holocaust but *The Fiftieth Gate* provides a unique perspective' (1997). In explaining the popularity of the book, reviewers directly and indirectly reference the publisher's prepared material. The publishing success of the book becomes part of the review or feature article generating more interest in the book and its author.

Marketing pragmatics and a touch of serendipity

Mark Baker's *The Fiftieth Gate* was written at a fortuitous time for its author. He was not the first of the second generation to write a family memoir about the Holocaust experience. Arnold Zable had already published his prizewinning *Jewels and Ashes* in 1991. Lily Brett had published her Holocaust poetry during the 1980s followed by her first novel, *Just Like That*, with Pan Macmillan in 1994. She would release her collection of essays, *In Full View*, the same year that Baker's *Fiftieth Gate* was published by Harper Collins. Given that there are simply not enough 'bestselling' local titles to be sourced by Australian commissioning editors and publishers to fulfill local budgets, editors must focus on the next best thing: significant niche markets, dictated by the discrete reading habits of communities of interest. Historical confluences had delivered a receptive audience of such communities of interest to which Baker's book could be marketed.

Although Baker wrote as others of the second generation had done, from a need to make sense of his own story, the book contains a number of features that the publisher could identify as potentially audience broadening. In Australia in the 1990s, younger people of many ethnicities and cultures were becoming increasingly interested in discovering their cultural roots, encouraged by Australia's policy of multiculturalism and the increasingly exotic mix of the migrants, their food and their customs that had become a visible part of the Australian urban landscape. The interest provided an audience able to identify with a wider search for meaning encompassing Baker's exploration of his life as a second-generation survivor growing up in a leafy suburban Melbourne.

The Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, established in 1993 by Steven Spielberg with the aim of videotaping Holocaust survivors' testimony worldwide, has been actively recording testimony in Australia since 1996 (Jerums 1999). The sense of urgency for recording the past created by the ageing of the survivor community has also inspired the Melbourne Makor Jewish community library's 'Write your story' project, in which members are encouraged to record their memories. The Makor project has resulted in the publication of 40 volumes and two anthologies since its inception in 1998. These projects are indicative of the mood towards conservation of memory that assisted in the reception of Baker's book, first by the publisher and then by the public.

The Fiftieth Gate is a book reflective of its time. Baker desires to testify, motivated to bring his story to a wider audience not only by Elie Wiesel's 'imperative' of testimony (Wiesel 1995, p. 320) but by his need to make sense of the effects of his family's experience upon him and his children. His association with literary agent Hickson & Associates suggests a savvy individual, understanding that good connections will assist him to negotiate the industry's requirements of an author. By combining a personal voice with his research technique and his parents' testimony, he repositions the work within the burgeoning search by Australian (and other) multicultural societies for cultural/ethnic identification. His publisher, having received positive feedback prior to printing that suggested this book could outsell their projections, undertook an extensive publicity campaign to fulfill the vision. This support is not usually provided to first-time writers.

Baker was lucky, but his success was based on more than luck. His book, its content, the writing style, the author himself, appealed first to an experienced agent and then to the editorial staff at Harper Collins. Later, during production, his manuscript generated that indefinable buzz that permeates

publishing companies once they believe that a title conceived for a healthy niche market has the potential to become a 'breakout' book, ripe for the marketing processes that will magnify its appeal to encompass the 'pocket within commodity culture' (Frow 1995, p. 86) that is the popular audience.

Notes

1) Within the context of Inga Clendinnen's comments, the idea that the educative qualities of Sutherland's 'bestseller' could be encompassed by Baker's memoir appears problematic. How can his text educate when 'drained of authority' by the enormity of the Holocaust? (Clendinnen 1998, p. 185). Yet it is evident from the comments of reviewers Gerster (1997) and Coleman (1997) that Baker's memoir was indeed perceived as educative. Though acknowledging that historians 'have much to learn from word-artists created inside and by the camps' (1998, p. 204), Clendinnen seeks to privilege 'secular professional historical writing' above the 'art' of testimonial writing as an appropriate vehicle for interpreting the forces driving the perpetrators and facilitators of systematic Nazi genocide. Historians, she argues, may assume 'the large liberty of speaking for the dead', but only 'under the rule of the discipline' (p. 204). It is the patient, sceptical curiosity of the historian, she adds, that will 'represent the actualities of past experience' (p. 205). Clendinnen champions the objectivity of the historian and provides clues about making Holocaust representation new for a continuing audience. The dimensions of the Final Solution, she writes, are too grotesque for human credulity. It is in the reduction to a human scale via the artful creation of the individuals in the stories of writers such as Primo Levi that the 'moral and intellectual energy' is awakened, which will assist readers to begin to understand that the world is never far from disaster. Baker is an historian and while, perhaps, his memoir is not satisfactorily defined within Clendinnen's 'secular professional historical writing', in the telling of his family's experience, he does attempt to reduce the grotesque dimensions of the Holocaust to a human scale. Return to text

2) A number of figures for the initial print run have subsequently been published. Felicity Bloch (1997) writes that it was in excess of 20 000 copies, while Richard Guilliat (1997) states it was 22 000. These discrepancies suggest that the print run was further increased following the media release. Return to text

3) A chronology of the media coverage of the ensuing public debate is provided in *The Demidenko File* (Jost et al. 1996). As well, the relative merits of Demidenko/Darville's book have been argued by Robert Manne (1996) and Andrew Riemer (1996) and other contributions were published in the *Australian Humanities Review* and are available online at <http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/demidenko/home.html>. Return to text

4) *The Hand that Signed the Paper* was published in 1994 as the 1993 Vogel prizewinner. Reviews following publication were substantially positive and major controversy did not ensue until June 1995 when the book won Australia's most prestigious literary prize, The Miles Franklin Award. Return to text

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