



Australasian
Association
of Writing
Programs

TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

Victoria University and University of Technology Sydney

Natalie Kon-yu and Emily Booth

“We don’t want to hear anything else from you”: Culturally “diverse” authors and the Australian literary industry

Abstract:

The past ten years have seen more attention paid towards diversity in creative industries globally. In literature various initiatives have attempted to capture the rate of publication and reviews of books by authors from marginalised communities. While such identities are contextually situated and therefore may differ between countries, some of the cohorts that have received this attention in activism and research include women, LGBTQIA+ people, First Nations groups, and those of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds. In this paper, we introduce findings from a series of interviews with First Nations and culturally diverse authors in Australia, examining their experience of the publishing industry during this time of diversity activism. We focus on the expectations that are placed on them and their creative work as a result of their ethnicity, and the personal and artistic costs this entails. Our results demonstrate that marginalised creators are faced with the responsibilities of cultural representation in ways that other writers are not. The Australian publishing industry is not unique in this but, nonetheless, we suggest that the pressure existing authors feel from audiences could be lessened over time with an increase in the number of authors from culturally diverse backgrounds being published.

Biographical note:

Natalie Kon-yu is an associate professor at Victoria University, Australia. Her scholarly research is focused on women and culturally diverse people and their connection to cultural authority. She is the co-creator of the Stella Diversity Count and the Chief Investigator of the First Nations and People of Colour Writers Count – the first study in Australia which looked at cultural diversity in the Australian Publishing Industry. She is the author of *The Cost of Labour: How Women Are Trapped by the Politics of Pregnancy*.

Emily Booth is a research fellow at the University of Technology Sydney, Australia. Her research spans teenagers’ reading practices, diversity in Australian book publishing, and online misinformation and radicalisation. In 2021 she received the Frances Henne Research Grant from the Young Adult Library Services Association

(YALSA) for her project exploring connections between teenagers’ fiction reading and online misinformation practices.

Keywords:

Australian literature, cultural diversity, First Nations, publishing

Introduction

The past ten years have seen a surge in attention to diversity and equity in creative industries around the world. Literature has been no exception, with various initiatives launched to capture the rate of publication (King, 2011; Lee & Low, 2020) and professional reviews (Gay, 2012; Stella Prize, 2018) of books by authors from historically marginalised communities. While such identities are contextually situated and therefore may differ between countries, some of the cohorts that have received this attention in activism and research include women, LGBTQIA+ people, First Nations groups, and those of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds (We Need Diverse Books, 2018; Lee & Low, 2020; King, 2011). What is most promising from these movements is that they have generated measurable progress in industry practices, leading to the greater publication and professional review of authors from their focus communities (Lee & Low, 2020; King, 2011; Stella Prize, 2018). Although the progress is gradual, it demonstrates tangible impact from the hard work of researchers and activists, as well as supportive publishing professionals which must be acknowledged.

However, the turn towards more inclusive publishing practices has not led to exclusively positive outcomes. Due to the personal nature of many of these topics to writers, publishing professionals and readers alike, social media in particular has seen a number of ‘controversies’ in relation to what authors write. This has included mass online pile-ons directed against writers who appear to breach some of the expectations from readers, with authors from marginalised communities being especially targeted. Teen fiction author Amélie Wen Zhao became the subject of a targeted campaign in 2018 which began with readers expressing disappointment that her debut novel did not feature a Chinese protagonist and escalated to unsubstantiated accusations of plagiarism and racism (Rosenfield, 2019). Science fiction and fantasy author Tamsyn Muir suffered unfounded social media accusations of being a paedophile due to some of her past fanfiction engaging with themes of child abuse, of which she is also a survivor (Muir, 2020). She became suicidal and was forced to check herself into a psychiatric institution to save her own life (Muir, 2020). Short story author Isabel Fall, following the mass critical acclaim and popularity of her debut short story about gender, was subjected to paranoid accusations that she was actually a Nazi man who had written a transphobic manifesto due to the lack of public information available about her online (St. James, 2021). Fall was a transgender woman who had just started to express her female identity and, following the harassment she received from diversity advocates, has decided to no longer transition to live as a woman (St. James, 2021). Although these responses could be expressions of the desire to be what Edmond (2023) calls a “careful consumer” – who seeks to only consume art that is perceived to be “ethical” in nature, including both its creation and final result – the form this expression took was that of Marwick’s (2021) “morally motivated networked harassment”: in other words, an online pile-on. The dark underside of diversity activism, as with most things, hits marginalised creators the hardest.

Although there have still been considerable efforts to promote inclusion in the Australian publishing industry, the climate for this advocacy is very different with some researchers facing

confused or hostile responses to their work (Kon-yu, 2018). Due to the relatively low numbers of First Nations and culturally diverse authors who are actively publishing today, their position in the industry is particularly precarious (Kon-yu & Booth, 2023). These authors often do not want to ‘stand out’ due to the potential risks they face in terms of physical safety and their professional careers (Booth & Narayan, 2021a). In this paper, we introduce findings from a series of interviews with First Nations and culturally diverse authors, examining their experiences in the publishing industry during this time of diversity activism. In particular, we examine the expectations that are placed on them and their creative work as a result of their ethnicity, and the personal and artistic costs this can bring. While these examples are not as extreme as some of those provided above, they exist on the same continuum of negative experiences that marginalised creators can face when audiences perceive them as not satisfying expectations. We argue that in order for activism for diversity and inclusion in literature spaces – and more broadly – to be truly beneficial for creators, it must not lead to the creation of new restrictions or burdens on the marginalised authors.

Literature review

Books form an important part of how Australians engage with the arts. According to the 2023 National Arts Participation Survey, 69 per cent of all Australians read books, making this the third most common form of artistic engagement after listening to recorded music and engaging with digital art (Creative Australia, 2023, p. 10). Novels and short stories are the most popular form of reading material (46 per cent), while instructional non-fiction and creative non-fiction were each read by 30 per cent of respondents (p. 152). Physical books remain the most popular format, and those aged 18–25 were especially eager to devote more time to reading at the time of completing the survey (p. 152). Separately, the 2021 Australia Reads report found that 66 per cent of respondents read a book at least once per week for leisure and, out of all activities listed, reading was listed as the most enjoyable (Australia Reads, 2021, p. 6). Out of all respondents, 92 per cent were classed as either an occasional reader (between one and ten books per year) or a frequent reader (ten or more books per year), again affirming the importance of reading to Australians (p. 6). Although surveys like these can sometimes have an inevitable bias due to people who read being more likely to complete the survey than non-readers, current research nevertheless indicates that reading books is an important activity to Australians.

Similarly, recent reports affirm shared topic interests among Australian readers. Crime, mystery and thriller were found in two reports to be the most popular genres among survey respondents (Creative Australia, 2023, p. 153; Reading the Reader, 2016, p. 11). Also identified in each of these reports was a particular interest in Australian literature (Creative Australia, 2023, p. 156; Reading the Reader, 2016, p. 12). These responses are supported by data from Civica’s library sector examining the top books borrowed from Australian libraries in 2022, in which Australian authors and mystery fiction authors both featured prominently (Civica, 2022). At the same time, there have been numerous calls from readers for more diversity in publishing in the form of both industry positions and the authors for whom publishing is accessible. These calls have seen the creation of new publishing opportunities, like the JOAN imprint from publisher Allen & Unwin for marginalised writers (Kembrey, 2020), and the dedicated First

Nations imprint Bundy supported by Simon & Schuster (Books+Publishing, 2023a). However, the figures on book purchases suggest different priorities among Australian book buyers; namely, a particular interest in international fiction and romance (Books+Publishing, 2023b). As much as public discussion can drive change in the industry, it must also be recognised that sales are, understandably, a powerful influence on industry publishing priorities.

The debates around diversity and inclusion in the publishing industry have also fuelled discussions particularly relating to the notion of authenticity. While much of this discussion has focussed on debates about craft – who can, or should, write certain stories – the question of how *audiences* evaluate and value authenticity has been somewhat overlooked in scholarship. Nevertheless, there are incidents in Australian writing history that suggest Australians do evaluate ‘authenticity’ in relation to marginalised stories. In 1994, then-named Helen Demidenko released a book titled *The Hand That Signed the Paper*. The book won major awards – the Vogel and the Miles Franklin – which catapulted the book and its author into the national spotlight. Demidenko’s book had already been categorised as contentious by some critics for its perceived anti-Semitic themes, as well as its factual inaccuracies (Alhadeff, 1995; Lenthen, 1995). Yet it was the performance of the author’s identity which ended up being the bigger scandal. Demidenko was known for appearing in Ukrainian dress (both at book events and in press photos) and she also claimed Ukrainian ancestry, which she stated was where the material for the book had come from (Sparrow, 2015). When Helen Demidenko was exposed as Helen Darville, a middle-class child of English (rather than Ukrainian) ancestry, the criticism was swift, with critics alleging that Darville/Demidenko had lied about her ethnicity to give her story authenticity. Yet, historically, many female writers have lied about their identities to achieve publication and seek a more favourable reception of their work, such as the Brontë sisters, who originally published their works under male names. Therefore, the negative response to Demidenko/Darville’s actions cannot solely be attributed to the falsifying of her identity, but specifically to her claim to a marginalised identity, and thus, insights into experience as a disadvantaged ‘Other’ that her Australian readership had believed she would provide for them.

Thirty years on from the scandal, Jeff Sparrow wrote a piece in *The Guardian* about the Demidenko affair, noting her now-public alignment with conservative Australian politicians and claims the book was a plot to destabilise the political left in Australia at the time. Sparrow cites Guy Rundle, who said at the time that Demidenko’s conduct “is perhaps the most shameful literary deception of recent times, a shameful use of the tragedy of lived history for self-advancement” (Sparrow, 2015). Its reception as an authentic account of the experience of Ukrainians reveals much about the kind of migrant stories that were deemed palatable and believable by the Australian public at that time. As Ukrainian-Australian scholar and writer Sonia Mycak (2001) has written, this was despite the fact that Darville had no ongoing connections with the local community nor conducted the kind of research one might expect, like interviewing community members. At the same time, the way she claimed a false identity – an altered surname, ancestry claims, and donning clothing that marked her as Ukrainian at events related to the book – suggests that Australian readers may have used these external factors beyond the narrative to determine the authenticity (and perhaps the *accuracy*) of the

book. That is to say, readers may have used Darville’s performance as a proxy to determine the book’s authenticity and accuracy as a possible portrait of Ukrainian experience, and thus felt betrayed when their assumptions were violated. Authenticity, when used as a marketing tool, puts the authorial voice at “centre stage”, making the identity of the author especially crucial to the reading experience (Gupta, 2000, p. 152). The Demidenko/Darville incident, while an extreme case, is revealing of the role of an author’s identity in how a book is received, particularly in the case of a (presumed) marginalised identity.

The spectre of ‘the authentic voice’ haunts the writing to the present day, and notably occurs far less often in relation to fraudulent identity claims than it does to genuine marginalised communities. For a recent example, Sneja Gunew and Wenche Ommundsen cite David Messner’s (2018) review of Tom Cho’s *Look Who’s Morphing*, which Gunew and Ommundsen characterise as “an experimental exploration of identity using a blend of reality, fantasy and popular culture” (p. 23). It is worth reproducing Messner’s quote here:

One can’t help but feel that Cho could have written a much better book, although obviously a completely different one, if he had restricted himself to the question of Chinese/Australian identity and presented it in a more conventional tone and structure. (Messner, as cited in Gunew & Ommundsen, 2018)

For Gunew and Ommundsen, this exemplifies “a demarcation of cultural territory, restricting the minority writer to particular modes and matters while reserving others for the mainstream. These are views that writers and scholars of multicultural writing have consistently sought to overcome” (p. 23). The notion of authenticity can therefore be restrictive, rather than liberating, for marginalised writers.

Although there has been much focus on the progress as a result of public attention to inequity in publishing industries, little attention has been given to the pressures that this scrutiny on identity may be having on authors: How do audience expectations of their work, which is inherently linked to their identity, affect their creative process? How has it affected their perception of the industry? And how do they view these current debates? Focussing specifically on the experiences of First Nations and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse writers in Australia, this research seeks to contribute insight into the other side of current diversity discussions and audience expectations, in terms of how these factors affect established authors and their craft.

Method

This research, commencing in 2019, involved eight interviews with Australian authors who publicly identified as part of a First Nations or Culturally and Linguistically Diverse group. Ethics approval of the research was granted by the Victoria University Low-Risk Ethics Committee (Approval number: HRE17-198) and authors were approached via email to invite them to participate. Noting the small size of the Australian publishing industry, our purposive sampling ensured we encompassed authors working in a range of genres including poetry, fiction and non-fiction; across all age groups including books for adults, teenagers and children;

and with careers that differed in length to maximise the diversity of experiences within the sample. Given that past research has indicated that only approximately 10 per cent of Australian authors publicly identify as First Nations or as part of a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse group (Kon-yu & Booth, 2023), eight in-depth interviews including only members of these cohorts was sufficient for us to achieve data saturation.

The semi-structured interviews, conducted over a period of two years, ranged from thirty minutes to over an hour depending on the participant’s availability. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed and thematically coded by both authors independently, and then consolidated and discussed. Given the small size of the Australian publishing industry – and in particular, the comparably smaller number of First Nations and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse authors – we de-identified and anonymised all data during the transcription process and participants have been assigned an identifier unique to this publication.

The interviews followed a loose guide, ensuring all participants were asked the same questions, but with the option to decline to answer if they so desired. While the questions sought to understand their perspectives and experiences in the Australian publishing industry more broadly, in this paper we particularly focus on the role of audience expectations and current calls for diversifying creative industries in impacting the artistic practice of these writers.

The interview guide questions were as follows:

1. What do you write about? (How would you define your writing?)
2. How do reviewers/critics define your work?
3. Who tends to review your work?
4. Which other writers are you most often compared to?
5. Does your ethnicity or cultural background get mentioned in reviews and interviews?
6. Who do you sit on panels with at festivals?
7. What topics are you asked to speak about at festivals?
8. Is your ethnicity/cultural background used to promote your work? How?
9. What adjectives are used to describe you and your work?
10. Are there elements of your work that are ignored or sidelined?
11. Are there certain narratives or stories that you feel the industry demands from you?
12. Which awards have you won for your writing?
13. Do you have any other comments you would like to share?

Findings

Audience expectations

The majority of authors we spoke to mentioned feeling the burden of audience expectations as a result of their success in the publishing industry as a person from a marginalised cultural community. Importantly, these pressures that we detail here were not caused by publishers or related industries, but by ordinary readers and members of the general public. This included

pressure from members of their own communities, who felt that the author was obliged to write about particular topics to “represent” their community. As Author One stated, this pressure on writers “to *explain*, or *represent*, these marginal existences and lives and realities and narratives” was just another form of “exotici[s]ation of narratives ... outside the mainstream”. Author One continued:

Something that combines those [pressures] is this idea of *anchoring*, that no matter what you write about, from what tradition, in what form, with a lot of reviewers, and I would say with the system in general, there’s a sense that you are still *anchored* to their sense of who you are, which is often identity-based.

Author One expressed that this over-emphasis on identity among readers and reviewers led to a perception that Author One was obliged to represent a particular cultural narrative regardless of their creative aims.

Author Two was similarly aware of this pressure, and the sense that some readers perceived a mismatch between their personal identity and their writing, to the extent that their work may not be considered “diverse” in the sense of modern advocacy movements:

Things like recent migration, language difficulties and things are not really in my stories. So in that way my writing probably isn’t nearly as ethnic as anyone expects it to be. When you think about a diverse book or when you see a face like mine that’s what readers are expecting to come out and that’s not really what comes out.

This had an additional consequence for Author Two who as a result had substantially fewer opportunities to speak about their craft. Instead, they were more often asked to speak about their personal history and experiences:

There’s also the pressure to talk about yourself a lot more. There is pressure to talk about your cultural background rather than your work. You don’t get to talk just about your work, sometimes. You’re damned if you [do] and you’re damned if you don’t. I do get disappointed if [I] don’t get asked the meaty questions, but I’m also disappointed if I’m not just treated as a writer who’s written a book and needs to be grilled about the work itself, regardless of my background.

For Author Two, the very fact that their writing did not contain the ethnic elements that the audience expected of a book by this author meant that their work ultimately suffered a lack of engagement instead.

This over-emphasis on identity even extended to the creators themselves. According to Author Three, authors that were perceived to have the same or “similar” cultural backgrounds by audiences were themselves perceived to have similar values, life experiences, and ways of thinking. As a result, any disagreement between authors, on any matter, could shock an audience and lead to negative consequences:

It’s the assumption that you’re all going to think alike and when you disagree people get like “oh my god there’s a problem here!” So they think you’re all going to be of the same view and you’re not. And that can work productively but tends not to because people just have this expectation that you’re all sort of a common voice.

As a result of the expectation that all authors from marginalised cultural communities would speak with a “common voice”, when disagreement arose between individuals it was perceived as being something abnormal and dramatic by the audience, and not the positive experience it could have been.

Author Four was similarly aware of the negative response that could arise if their work failed to satisfy the interests of a particular niche of their readership. As they explained, while they had not personally experienced this, they knew of authors who had:

I think ... some parts of the Aboriginal community definitely want the racism and the powerlessness and the difficult stuff written about and if you don't write about that you're seen as a sell-out in some people's eyes. But because I do write about that stuff, because I think it's important and I want to, that hasn't been levelled at me. But I know of other Aboriginal women in particular who have been criticised by Aboriginal community and/or Aboriginal men writers for stepping away from the overtly political narrative about you know colonialism and white supremacy.

Author Four understood the desire from some readers in their community to see these topics addressed, as it gives voice to struggles and issues that they too believe are important. At the same time, they were aware that they could possibly be subjected to this response if they chose different topics to explore in the future.

On the other side, Author Five felt that part of their success was due to their books being “not too diverse”. To them, this meant that audiences and gatekeepers like librarians would more readily accept their books due to the sense that they didn’t carry a political element:

That’s the thing, I think if you’re writing about something that’s safe and comfortable ... so for me I write a lot of adventure and fantasy stories. ... So I guess I’ve been kind of lucky because I make my books very diverse but because they’re not “scarily diverse” you know they are not about transgenderism ... they’re kind of palatable and there’s nothing too difficult in them for kids to deal with. I think I’ve been lucky because I’ve managed to slip through you know some of the library barriers but I think some other writers of diversity probably wouldn’t.

Author Five was therefore also aware that they had avoided negative responses by choosing a combination of genres and topics that would not elicit hostility from the audience. Their success in avoiding these responses would not necessarily be shared by authors who did not wish to write about “safe and comfortable” topics.

Likewise, Author Six attributed the positive responses to a combination of “being lucky”, timing and topic choice. They noted that some of their friends, who had written “very radical

stories about transgenderism, about you know postmodernism, [they] didn’t get the recognition they deserved” from audiences. The idea of “playing it safe” or being “diverse but not too diverse” in order to be received favourably by audiences was one way to escape their potentially negative expectations and reactions.

Author Seven, when addressing the topic of audience expectations, considered the overall publishing industry structure and the role that readers could play as consumers. While recognising that in many cases audiences were making legitimate requests for representation, Author Seven was also critical of how this desire did not often translate into financial support for the works that did achieve publication:

So because they have already paid for it, I believe they have an entitlement to see themselves represented and manifested in these kinds of cultural experiences, which I think is different to saying, “this work has started to reflect a bigger population of people so we should deal with this group of people”. They are aligned arguments but I think one is very much about productive diversity; what money does diversity bring in as new audience segments into a very precarious arts sector. ... So I think the argument is easy to make in some ways, difficult to make in others and really more that it’s slow and the amount of funding available is minuscule relative to the amount of quality work. So we have an excess of supply relative to the consumer demand even if the consumers really like entertainment products, they’re not really prepared to pay much for art products.

Through Author Seven’s eyes, a crucial part of the challenge of audience demands was that they are often made without the financial follow-through that supports the creators and enables the development of future creative works. Audience expectations were therefore acknowledged to be important, but from a practical perspective, understood to mean little compared to the support that actual financial investment could offer.

Personal and artistic costs

The majority of authors interviewed for this study expressed the view that the burdens of audience expectations came with a cost for them, which could be either personal or artistic. This could be in the form of distraction or alteration of their work, or fatigue with the surrounding debates which sapped energy from their ability to write. These impacts, which were not attributed to publishers or industry-related parties, but to readers and the general public, reveal the detrimental impact that audience expectations can have on marginalised creators.

Author One, while recognising the benefits to the current discussions about diversity and inclusion in the publishing industry, also expressed considerable burnout at having been expected to take up the role of an activist for their community in the industry. As they said:

It’s been very hard to simultaneously occupy and to reconcile ... being an artist, with all of the space and permission that you need to do what you’re doing, and also feeling, just beset upon ... by these matters, you know, and they do sort of feed into your art,

and sometimes that’s great, but often it’s just a shadow or a contamination also on your art ‘cause you’re thinking about extra-artistic matters when you just wanna actually be working out the art itself. It’s been really difficult to reconcile that with this moment where you’re also called upon to be a citizen of the industry, and ... an activist, in a way. ... it’s been really tough ... in my worst moments, I feel resentful for having to constantly deal with it, both internally and externally. But in my best moments I think that you know that’s the unresolved tension from which you know, hopefully something new or interesting might emerge.

Author One acknowledged that this fatigue had crept into their work on occasion, and that they were largely not happy about this. Author One’s acknowledgement of sometimes feeling resentful at this burden is understandable, given that it is a burden that would not be placed on authors outside of marginalised communities. The expectation that an author become an activist therefore had considerable artistic and personal costs.

Author Two revealed that their understanding of audience’s expectations had initially led them to consciously suppress any acknowledgement of their own cultural identity in their writing:

When I got my first book published ... at that time I wasn’t even conscious of myself as a writer from a certain cultural background and I wasn’t conscious of trying to position myself in any way. In fact if anything, I was trying to forget my cultural background and forget about injecting too much of myself into my work because my sense was that it was unpalatable to a wide readership, and also I just think you know it’s sad to say that I was young and I was just really thirsty for a seat at the table and convinced I wouldn’t get it and kind of desperate to be included. So you know I kind of wasn’t ready to assert myself. It’s only as my career has gone up that I have actually felt respected enough and safe enough and confident enough to even start talking about any of this stuff, like it’s just been a very gradual incremental building up and maybe it’s also just getting older and not giving a shit now.

Author Two directly linked their comfort with engaging with cultural identity in their writing with the establishment of a respected professional identity. In addition to needing to build the confidence to engage with these topics due to a sense of self-consciousness, the desire to be accepted and have “a seat at the table” had led them to make very specific creative choices in line with what they perceived to be audience expectations.

Author Three expressed the view that they had, to some extent, managed to overcome some audience expectations about their work. When discussing submitting some writing for publication, they noted that they no longer received expressions of disappointment that the art did not satisfy stereotypical expectations, which was a sign of some progress:

So they haven’t come back to me saying, “Oh! Hang on this is not Black enough” but I’m not sure if that’s what they’re thinking but, yeah ... So when people commission fiction from me I think often they are looking for an Aboriginal story and that’s what I’m least likely to ... give someone.

Nevertheless, Author Three was aware that this was likely the expectation that various parties had when approaching their work. However, they consciously sought to push back against this, despite their awareness that it could potentially cause them to lose publication opportunities.

Author Four noted that while they were not preoccupied with audience expectations, they had factored this into consideration with a recent publication “so that white readers will keep reading”. As they described:

I actually toned it down in the last book, the one that everyone thought was so terribly difficult and gut-wrenching and all that, but that’s ... I’m just writing about ordinary Aboriginal community grassroots lives and the gap in life experience is so ... huge.

Even for Author Four, who initially described themselves as someone who “didn’t really care” about audience attitudes, this awareness influenced the artistic process. However, it is notable that this is a different set of expectations to those Author Four described above, as they pertained not to members of their own community, but to those outside of it. This suggests something of a balancing act, in order to satisfy the expectations of both readerships.

Author Five revealed that their choice to write “safe” books in the fantasy genre with only a select range of topics was very much a conscious decision to avoid being pigeon-holed by audiences. As they recounted:

Well, for me like for many years I tried not to write migrant stories. So like for the first ten years of my writing career I steered away from specifically foregrounding those problems. Like I would have lots of diverse characters in there, you know disabled characters, poor characters, ... but I didn’t feel comfortable just doing a migrant story because no one would be able to accept any other story from me ever again.

Author Five described the audience response they had feared, which was of being expected to write only stories that could be contained within a “migrant box”: “It’s like ‘you can only do a memoir or you can only write migrant stories, we don’t want to hear anything else from you, ‘cause you’re not qualified ... to be an Australian; to write an Australian story’”. For Author Five, strategically avoiding stereotypical storylines that could be related to their cultural background by an audience was a means of establishing a legitimate career as a writer. In order to gain this creative freedom, however, they had to deliberately distance their art from topics they did care about because they could be less “comfortable” for audiences. Author Six was the only author who did not discuss having experienced an artistic or personal cost to their work as a result of audience expectations, however, they did state that the overall pressures on marginalised writers could be reduced “if we weren’t minorities [in the industry]”.

Author Seven’s response to the current public discussions around diversity and what audiences expected was one of frustration. Just as they were disappointed by those who called for more inclusive industry practices but did not follow through by financially supporting the creative works that *were* made, they criticised readers and members of the general public who were

unwilling to engage in constructive, informed discussions about how the industry could evolve. As they said:

I was like, when did we lose sight of ... when did we decide to become mean to individual middle-class women who we wish to treat as if they are a bit [hokey] and get less critically attuned to things like structural racism and the patriarchy. Is it ‘cause [it’s] too hard? Is it ‘cause it’s easy to make a joke at a little ladies who like to buy a lot of books and more difficult to talk about the consumption models of art; to talk about our education system; to talk about some of the structures in our language – like hard wired thinking that comes us to see women, to see other people, to see those who are racially different, as lesser. Like we don’t want to unsettle those things. We want to be mean to individual or small clumps of women who we can parody and I just think that that’s not ... I just think that it’s a really ... politically easy and ineffectual thing to do. It’s easy but doesn’t really change anything.

Author Seven felt that current public discussion around these issues was “ineffectual” because it did not truly engage with complex problems, and in fact could have a negative impact on some of the very people who *were* financially supporting the book publishing industry. Author Seven’s strong exasperation with the lack of effort from the reading public to genuinely support creators from culturally marginalised groups left them somewhat disillusioned that conditions for these writers could continue to improve.

Discussion

Based on the interviews conducted for this research and the qualitative data presented in this paper, it is clear that audience expectations placed considerable burden on the participant authors. It is reasonable to recognise that all artists, to some extent, may experience pressure to please fans of their work as an inevitable part of their occupation. Climate fiction writers, for example, have been found to be placed under pressure by their audiences to be experts about climate change (Cothren, et al., 2023). However, the particular pressures our interviewees described suggested that these expectations were uniquely linked to the authors’ own personal identities and aligns with existing research findings (Booth & Narayan, 2020). This pressure can be understood to arise precisely because of their minority status within the publishing industry on the basis of cultural background. It is noteworthy that, for example, men did not identify a need to represent their gender, and women only identified the significance of being female in direct relation to their cultural background (as in, being a female writer did not lead to represent women generally, but being a female writer who also belonged to a marginalised cultural group *did*). As a result, these writers described a kind of concentrated pressure to represent a very specific image of their community, both from readers who were also part of their cultural community, and those outside of it. Authors were therefore discouraged from making their books ‘too diverse’ or ‘too different’ from what they ‘should’ write about when writing books about their community. The pressure from audiences to present something ‘authentic’ was ultimately limiting, as *authenticity* seemed to only be recognised when a work seemingly confirmed stereotypes or portrayed topical struggles related to cultural identity.

The limiting pressure of authenticity has been most commonly recognised in the dynamic of an author from a certain marginalised community, and a reader who is not part of that community. Mycak (2001) has observed the “conflation between author and narrator, in other words, an assumption of autobiography” when it comes to writing that is identified as Other to the reader. She attributes this conflation to “a desire to witness autobiography and hence authenticity when reading such works” (p. 23). Mycak continues:

People want to experience what they believe to be authentic when they read such stories of life. They impute an authority into the textual “I”; they want the “I” of the text to speak with authority, and that authority comes from the supposed authenticity of the author-narrator. (p. 23)

This desire for texts by culturally marginalised groups to function as autobiography rather than creative and imaginative works can be seen as the same desire exploited by Helen Demidenko/Darville; her readers’ sense of betrayal that the text was not ‘authentic’ reveals the level of investment that outsider readers may put into this expectation. Yet it is crucial to note that the authors interviewed for this study did not solely attribute this behaviour to those outside of their cultural communities, but to fellow community members who specifically wanted to see their own experiences on the page, and expected this of the authors. Indeed, Mycak (2001) touches on this very point:

Notions of authenticity or truth are outdated. And yet within certain discourses (and I include ethnic or multicultural writing as one of them) there is a need for affirmation of self and origin, there is an integrity in authenticity. There is a desire to strengthen one’s identity through the act of writing or reading, and lived experience plays an integral role in this. (p. 22)

Herein lies an explanation for the burdens placed on these writers by members of their own community – burdens we can understand to have been unintentionally amplified by the current mainstream attention to issues of representation and authorship. While the participant authors understood and acknowledged these calls to represent their community as important and believed they could and should contribute to making the industry more equitable, this, too, had a negative impact on their creative process.

The majority of participant authors identified some kind of personal and/or artistic cost to the expectations that audiences placed upon them and their work. Authors One and Seven expressed a sense of burnout, fatigue and even disillusionment with current diversity advocacy, noting that it took considerable energy to contribute to such discussions – this was energy that was redirected *away* from their creative practice. Both authors, to some degree, admitted to at least occasionally having negative feelings towards audience members who expected them to step into a kind of activist role for their community. In particular, Author Seven characterised the approaches of many audience members who allegedly wanted a more inclusive publishing industry as “ineffectual”, and concentrated not on addressing systemic issues but directing negativity at targets that were within their reach of impact. This pressure largely came from members of their own communities. In comparison, Authors Two, Four and Five admitted to

being influenced to make artistic compromises in their writing, often through self-censorship of what they wanted to write in order to satisfy readers who expected a specific type of identity-based narrative. The need to make these compromises was predominantly identified as coming from outside the author’s own cultural community, as while they faced expectations from all readers, it was outsider readers who the authors believed would be more uncomfortable with reading about cultural identity in such a way as to draw attention to the author themselves. As a result, some authors had actively held themselves back from writing about their community in order to be accepted by readers not of their cultural background.

These interviews shine light on what has been an overlooked dark side to the increased attention to diversity and equity in publishing industries, in the form of the pressure it places on established marginalised authors to take on the role of a community advocate. This pressure is notable because it was *not* identified as originating from publishers themselves or other industry-adjacent bodies, but specifically from audiences, including of their own community. While these are difficult revelations to confront, particularly for those who genuinely care about industry progress and contribute to these conversations in the hopes of achieving a more equitable industry, they also point to some potential alternatives. For example, authors believed it was important for them to be a part of these conversations but expressed that it was a heavy load to carry. This suggests that if the industry had more authors from First Nations and culturally diverse backgrounds, there would be a larger number of people who could contribute to this conversation, and ideally less need for such conversations at all. In order to bring about this change, audiences have the power to play an important and effective role by actively supporting new authors from culturally diverse backgrounds that are achieving publication. Support, here, does not simply mean mere sentiment, but a series of actions, like buying the author’s book or borrowing it from a library, reading it and (assuming they enjoyed the book) promoting it through word of mouth, social media and other avenues to ensure the broader reading public is aware of it. Rather than the “ineffectual” activities described by Author Seven, a genuine public rallying around new authors to ensure their books sell well and they can have sustainable careers would not only contribute to further progress in the industry, but also ease the strain on the established authors who are currently stretched thin by audience expectations.

Conclusion

The findings of this study are interesting for several reasons. First, although much research has examined barriers, challenges and other equity issues in the Australian publishing industry (Booth & Narayan, 2018a; Booth & Narayan, 2018b; Booth & Narayan, 2020; Booth & Narayan, 2021a; Booth & Narayan, 2021b; Booth & Narayan, 2021c; Booth, Kwaymullina & Lim, 2021; Booth & Lim, 2022a; Booth & Lim, 2022b; Kon-yu & Booth, 2023; Driscoll & Bowen, 2022), the insights from these interviews do not point to the industry itself as a source of identity-based stress for authors. Rather, it was the expectations of audience members – whether of their own community, or from others – that led these authors to experience fatigue and burnout, and make artistic compromises or enact self-censorship so as to please them. This makes for interesting contrast to the case study of Darville/Demidenko discussed above: our authors who are genuinely of their own communities suffer due to the audience expectations

place upon them, whereas Darville initially benefitted from pandering to audience expectations that were predicated on a falsified cultural identity. Furthermore, the experiences of our authors and their at-times unenthusiastic participation in inclusion-related advocacy led them to express some disillusionment about the ability of these movements to truly change the industry. Thus, these findings are some of the first to examine the unintentional consequences that modern diversity and equity movements can have for those already established in the industry.

We do not suggest that these findings indicate a lack of support for these movements, and neither do we wish to discourage people from participating in related online conversations. Furthermore, we, and the participant authors, recognise why audience members wished for and expected the authors to provide representation and advocacy for their community. In light of these insights we suggest that, following the suggestion of some authors, current efforts to campaign the industry could be adjusted to be more constructive while placing less burden on the present authors. For example, enthusiastic readers could focus their efforts on promotional campaigns for existing and upcoming authors from culturally diverse communities, contributing to the marketing to achieve the strong sales record necessary to enable a stable writing career. This could include efforts like promoting books through word-of-mouth or reader groups, or reaching out to local bookstores and libraries to request the book be stocked. Similarly, ensuring this support is consistent and not dependent on an author meeting certain demographic-related criteria can help to relieve the expectation placed on authors to provide specific kinds of images of their communities.

Much of the pressure identified by authors in this article is the result of a perfect storm of expectations placed, however unintentionally, on the authors and industry as a whole. The Australian publishing industry is not unique in the challenges it faces, and many of the causes of these challenges are related to factors beyond the industry’s control, like historical government policies around immigration. At the same time, we suggest that the pressure existing authors feel from audiences could be lessened over time with an increase in the number of authors from culturally diverse backgrounds being published. Therefore, consistent audience support for existing and emerging authors is crucial to enabling the industry to evolve into a more equitable environment. In addition to lessening the burden on this author cohort, such a change would benefit all Australian readers by providing us with a wider and richer range of storytelling choices.

References

- Alhadeff, V. (1995, July 28). Expert slams Ukrainian Connection. *Australian Jewish News*.
<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/261614106>
- Australia Reads. (2021). *The National Reading Survey*.
australiareads.org.au/research/understanding-australian-readers/
- Books+Publishing. (2023a). *Heiss to curate First Nations imprint Bundyi*.
<https://www.booksandpublishing.com.au/articles/2023/03/30/228872/heiss-to-curate-first-nations-imprint-bundyi/>

- Books+Publishing. (2023b). *2022 Australian Market Overview*.
<https://www.booksandpublishing.com.au/articles/2023/02/21/226736/2022-australian-market-overview/>
- Booth, E. & Narayan, B. (2018a). “Don’t talk about the gay character”: Barriers to queer young adult fiction and authors in schools and libraries. *English in Australia*, 53(2), 40–48. <https://search.informit.org/doi/abs/10.3316/ielapa.982304369330847>
- Booth, E. & Narayan, B. (2018b). Towards diversity in young adult fiction: Australian YA authors’ publishing experiences and its implications for YA librarians and readers’ advisory services. *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association*, 67(3), 195–211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24750158.2018.1497349>
- Booth, E. & Narayan, B. (2020). “The Expectations That We Be Educators”: The Views of Australian Authors of Young Adult Fiction on Their OwnVoices Novels as Window for Learning about Marginalized Experiences. *The Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults*, 11(1), 1–21. <https://www.yalsa.ala.org/jrlya/2020/02/the-expectations-that-we-be-educators-the-views-of-australian-authors-of-young-adult-fiction-on-their-ownvoices-novels-as-windows-for-learning-about-marginalized-experiences/>
- Booth, E., Kwaymullina, A., & Lim, R. (2021). Investigating the Publication of OwnVoices Australian Picture Books in 2018. *Publishing Research Quarterly*, 37, 27–40. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12109-020-09777-3>
- Booth, E. & Narayan, B. (2021a). Identifying Inclusion: Publishing Industry Prejudice and the Lack of OwnVoices Books in Australian Young Adult Fiction. *Research in Diversity in Youth Literature*, 3(1), 1–38. <https://iopn.library.illinois.edu/journals/rdyl/article/download/1572/1280/5785>
- Booth, E. & Narayan, B. (2021b). Behind Closed Gates: The Barriers to Self-Expression and Publication for Australian YA Authors of OwnVoices Fiction. *International Research in Children’s Literature*, 14(2), 183–198. <https://doi.org/10.3366/ircl.2021.0396>
- Booth, E. & Narayan, B. (2021c). “That Authenticity Is Missing”: Australian Authors of #OwnVoices YA Fiction on Authorship, Identity, and Outsider Writers. *The ALAN Review*, 48(2), 56–70.
- Booth, E. & Lim, R. (2022a). The Illusion of Inclusion: Disempowered “Diversity” in 2018 Australian Children’s Picture Books. *New Review of Children’s Literature and Librarianship*, 27(2), 122–143. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13614541.2021.2020574>
- Booth, E. & Lim, R. (2022b). The Picture of Privilege: Examining the Lack of Diverse Characters in 2018 Australian Children’s Picture Books. *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures*, 14(1), 65–83. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jeunesse-14.1.02>
- Civica. (2022). *2022 Civica libraries Index: Australian authors another popular choice this year*. <https://www.civica.com/en-au/news-library/australian-authors-the-most-popular-choice-in-2022-library-index/>

- Cothren, A. & Matthews, A. & Hennessy, R. (2023). Author Experiences of Researching, Writing and Marketing Climate Fiction. *TEXT*, 27(2), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.90091>.
- Creative Australia. (2023). *Creating Value: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey*. www.creative.gov.au
- Driscoll, B. & Bowen, S. (2022). White, female, and high rates of mental illness: new diversity research offers a snapshot of the publishing industry. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/white-female-and-high-rates-of-mental-illness-new-diversity-research-offers-a-snapshot-of-the-publishing-industry-189679>.
- Edmond, M. (2023). Careful consumption and aspirational ethics in the media and cultural industries: Cancelling, quitting, screening, optimising. *Media, Culture & Society*, 45(1), 92–107. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221099615>
- Gay, R. (2012, June 6). Where Things Stand. *The Rumpus*. <https://therumpus.net/2012/06/06/where-things-stand/>
- Gunew, S. & Ommundsen, W. (2018). From White Australia to the Asian Century: Literature and migration in Australia. In S. Vlasta & W. Sievers (Eds.), *Immigrant and Ethnic Minority Writers since 1945: Fourteen national Contexts in Europe and Beyond* (pp. 9–42). Brill.
- Gupta, A. F. (2000). Marketing the voice of authenticity: a comparison of Ming Shur and Rex Shelley. *Language and Literature*, 9(2), 150–169.
- Harvey, M. & Lamond, J. (2019). *Stella Count 2018*. The Stella Prize.
- Kembrey, M. (2020). Nakkiah Lui launches publishing imprint Joan with Allen & Unwin. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/books/nakkiah-lui-launches-publishing-imprint-joan-20200820-p55nle.html>
- King, A. (2011). The 2010 VIDA Count. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/blog/uncategorized/59896/the-vida-count-for-2010>
- Kon-yu, N. (2018). In the Skin of the Other: Diversity and the Australian Publishing Industry. *TEXT*, 22(Special 53), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.25542>
- Kon-yu, N., & Booth, E. (2023). Who is Telling ‘Australian’ Stories? The Results from the First Nations and People of Colour Writers Count. *Journal of Language, Literature, and Culture*, 69(2–3), 107–123. 10.1080/20512856.2022.2160250
- Lee & Low Books. (2020, January 28). Where Is The Diversity In Publishing? The 2019 Diversity Baseline Survey Results. <https://blog.leeandlow.com/2020/01/28/2019diversitybaselinesurvey/>

- Lenthen, S. (1995). Ukrainian, Jewish Leaders to meet. *Australian Jewish News*.
<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/261612275>
- Macquarie University / Australia Council for the Arts. (2016). Reading the Reader: A Survey of Australian Reading Habits. <https://creative.gov.au/research/reading-reader-survey-australian-reading-habits>
- Marwick, A. E. (2021). Morally Motivated Networked Harassment as Normative Reinforcement. *Social Media + Society*, 7(2), 205630512110213.
- Muir, T. (2020). Tamsyn Muir Interview: “There is a lot of blood on my dance floor”. *Three Crows Magazine*.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20200224082907/https://threecrowsmagazine.com/tamsyn-muir-interview-there-is-a-lot-of-blood-on-my-dance-floor/>
- Mycak, S. (2001). The Authority of the “I”. *Quadrant*, 45(4), 21.
- Rosenfield, K. (2019). The Latest YA Twitter Pile On Forces a Rising Star to Self-Cancel. <https://www.vulture.com/2019/01/ya-twitter-forces-rising-star-author-to-self-cancel.html>
- Sparrow, J. (2015, July 8). The return of Helen Demidenko: from literary hoaxer to political operator. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/08/the-return-of-helen-demidenko-on-culture-war-and-the-value-of-truth>
- St. James, E. (2021, June 30). How Twitter can ruin a life. *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/22543858/isabel-fall-attack-helicopter>
- We Need Diverse Books. (2018) About WNDB. <https://www.diversebooks.org/about>